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On December 14th & 15th, the International Center of Photography in New York hosted “Memories Can’t Wait”, a two-day symposium jointly organized by the ICP-Bard MFA program and the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College (CCS Bard). It investigated different artistic strategies used to rethink the ways to produce, document, and archive.

Memory is intricately linked to forms of documentation, from news journalism to handwritten letters. Yet, the 1980s postmodern critique of representation has shattered the myth of documentary veracity and a singular authoritative history. This merciless critique of documentary has created fertile ground for new and meaningful ways to engage with the idiom.

As Marita Sturken asserts: “We need to ask not whether a memory is true, but rather what its telling reveals about how the past affects the present.”

Arts’ critical responses to remembering and recording play an important role in engaging with the turbulent contemporary social landscape. Contemporary artists, writers, curators, and archivists reinvent documentary to reclaim, reenact, and resurrect forgotten, ambiguous, traumatic, or marginalized memories.

This publication is a continuation of the symposium. We invited all of our guest speakers, presenters, audience members, and other interlocutors to contribute to the “Memories Can’t Wait” book. In keeping with the conversational format of the symposium, many contributors have continued their dialog in reworked transcripts, new conversations, interviews, or made new work in response to the symposium.

We look to artistic strategies as our leading question. It is driven by a desire to be able to look across imagined boundaries of context and concern and learn from each other. Many of our panels throughout the symposium had a certain topical focus, but each panelist brought a different perspective. Common for all was a sensitivity to where one speaks from and that this place is never a singular authoritative narrative, but one among many. For many of our presenters this question became even more urgent because they are of a generation marked by a past event they did not experience. Across these generational lines vital strategies and concerns can be formulated of how the past affects the present and appears urgent today. This created a dynamic conversation in the individual panels and at the symposium at large.

The publication is in keeping with this dynamic aspect. It might appear as a sprawling read, but between the pages of each contribution are the same questions of how, why, and where we speak from. In many of the interviews and conversations these questions are directly asked and in the new works made these are implemented into the very method and format of the contribution. This requires a reading in many directions and for many desires. Let’s become better at just that.

Enjoy,

Malene Dam, Bridget de Gersigny, and Kate Levy
MEMORIES CAN’T WAIT

JESAL KAPADIA: INTRODUCTION

Jesal Kapadia was an integral part of the planning of “Memories Can’t Wait”. Her views on pedagogy as a collective process helped inform the structure of the small-group presentations followed by discussions; many of those participants are contributors to this volume. She introduced the two-day symposium with a short, lively discussion of ways to interpret and interrupt the archive. The following text consists of excerpts from the conversation.

Jesal Kapadia: I am really honored to be here because you, my students, have invited me to be here, and what more can a person who is interested in pedagogy want—to be called for and hailed by her audience! I have very little to say, as most of the work I do is performative and will be performed, so I don’t want to hold up anybody. We should all be uncompressed! How much time do we have? Twenty minutes—OK.

I wanted to talk about some ideas, and also thank everybody at ICP enormously over the years, because it’s not about just one event; it’s always the event-in-making—as some of my dear ICP friends are also here. I want to talk about the words that I associated with for this event-in-making. Some of them are words that we avoid, and I am going to write them down because I would like us to think about them both today and tomorrow.

The word that I like is: Interruption. My thought with the title for the conference “Memories Can’t Wait,” which probably means different things to everyone, was more like, oh, memories interrupt, and it has now become a death drive. It’s about re-connections, the contexts that are broken and the relations? That is what I am really interested in talking about, but I am not going to talk about it any more—we should all perform it. It’s about re-connections, the contexts that are broken and the contexts that can be linked or connected.

As this is a room filled with people interested in making images, and in archives and memories, I was wondering if there was a way to open this space up to hear what “archive” really means to people. Is it worth discussing the archive as a death drive? In a sense, an archive is repressed, or closed—it is compressed and housed, already captured and placed in an institution, in a folder or in a space not easily accessible unless one encounters it in some material form; or unless a memory haunts and interrupts it.

So what would be the ethical response to something that is already, from the start, a form of compression or a repression? I say repression for two reasons—that state or any bureaucratic archives are repressed, and not made accessible to us. What would be the ways to unpress these archives? What is our relationship to these kinds of archives? Do we have a sensibility to even encounter an archive? Let me write this word down before it leaves me—repression—as a way to connect with what is below. The archive as debris. Death-drive. Debris and repression as a way with which we associate the matter of the archive.

And we wouldn’t even get to the image at this point because we are still dealing with the unconscious ways in which we get to an archive: Can it have an emancipatory purpose? Purpose is a terrible word, but can it have an emancipatory opening?

From this idea of repression I would like us to jump to the lure of an archive, to the word desire, but here comes the idea of double-repression, which is what I really want to talk about the myth that the archive gives us hope to be able to, you know, to emancipate ourselves, because we think that we are going to liberate ourselves when we see something, as if the search is to see something that is not visible. And usually what happens is that what we find or see in the archive is not something that actually liberates us or emancipates us, but instead only ends up double-repressing us!

So the question is: What are the different ways in which we could talk about archives, images, or any ephemera that are collected, and think about them as ways of connecting with the missing links? How can this practice bring us closer to the context that is lost, or help us develop a sensibility to connect with those materials and ideas from the past, because we don’t have that sensibility left anymore, or even that alterity, we are losing it every day. We keep collecting images, compressing them in folders and fetishizing them, putting them in institutions and basically the archive becomes a death drive or debris waiting to approach life. In a sense, our lives are constantly in movement, while the archive is frozen in time and space. We have lost any connection to it, and it has now become a death drive.

What might be the ways for us to develop a sensibility of reactivating and recognizing these power relations? That is what I am really interested in talking about, but I am not going to talk about it any more—we should all perform it. It’s about re-connections, the contexts that are broken and the contexts that can be linked or connected.

I see hands rising, thank you for rescuing me; does someone want to make a connection?

Audience Participant #1: I was wondering about this double-repressing of the archive. What do you mean?
INTRODUCTION | JESAL KAPADIA

MEMORIES CAN'T WAIT

Absolutely. The things that are mediated are already charged with the drive, or the intention of knowing that there is something separate, immediately moving in the moment, and you have immediate but they are, as you said, an encapsulated archive, that is, kept from growing on that point, and you moment to demand change, versus looking at an artifact. I find it important to look at those artifacts, versus an immediate experience that would be actually moving with the people around you in the movement that is seeking life. I see it as debris because it is a set of relations, stories out of context—it could be violent stories, it could be pleasurable stories, whatever it is, we don't have a connection to it and therefore we are seeking that connection. Instead of turning it into a fetish, is it possible to unfold from this dynamic in a way that does not put this debris back into the same place or economy of exchange where it came from? So that it doesn't do the double-repression? Can we create a new liberated form—of collective visualization?

It's not just about making visible what's invisible, that's easy. It's a double move—it is also thinking about what to make visible in the first place. Why was it invisible, and then how will we now make it visible, given the current conditions? With this kind of an inquiry, we can make sure that we don't about what to make visible in the first place. Why was it invisible, and then how will we now make it visible, given the current conditions? With this kind of an inquiry, we can make sure that we don't unconsciously put the new forms of knowledge or the sensibilities we create together back into the same system of control or state or corporate repression. That would be an interesting technique for us to consider—how to liberate or open up an archive collectively. Maybe somebody should give us another word?

Audience Participant #2: I will be looking at the difference here between relation and immediacy as far as we can project this on anything. Looking at archives is a mediated experience, with the movement versus an immediate experience that would be actually moving with the people around you in the moment to demand change, versus looking at an artifact. I find it important to look at those artifacts, but they are, as you said, an encapsulated archive, that is, kept from growing on that point, and you know that there is something separate, immediately moving in the moment, and you have immediate experience versus the mediated ones.

JK: Absolutely. The things that are mediated are already charged with the drive, or the intention of who is mediating it. You know, there is no way to escape mediation, so you have to work with the negotiations; you have to negotiate with the mediation. By the time you get to the “Real”, which is what you have been avoiding all along—it could be many things, it could be pain, it could be fear, whatever it is, it’s something repressed.

For us, here, the idea is to not think of an image as a complete thing, as we all, I’m sure, are well aware. Such as revolutionary films, that at one time were part of life, then taken out of context because of time-compression and power relations, edited and housed in a particular form, such as an archive, which becomes a temple for us to go to, in a sense. The idea is to know this relationship, the power relations in it, that’s what I want us to deconstruct. Somebody mentioned in the introduction earlier—what was the other possible title for the conference? The Art of Forgetting? Well, I think that would be an interesting conference, because it performs this thing that we will forget and therefore it (something) will interrupt!

So again, what would be the ways in which we could interrupt something, which could have the potential to not double-repress us, which is, not put us back into the satisfying, comfortable place which is, you know, how we really deal with stuff every day.

Audience Participant #3: I think this is interesting, with the notion of interruption and specifically, in relationship to a memory. I have always felt that one topic that doesn’t get talked about in relationship to memory—and this word reminds me of this—is the idea of mis-remembering, and that thought could be a way of interjecting this interruption, and the notion that mis-remembering is also something with an estimate value just as real as any kind of factual artifact or any housed image or what-have-you in the archive. I think that mis-remembering something and housing it within that archive is almost its contaminant, and I think there is a lot of potential there.

JK: Yeah, I love that slippage—you go for something and you get something else!

Audience Participant #4: I am just thinking about this model. I think there is something that’s encouraged me differently about as we shifted from it as a written or oral archive to a photographic one. There is something in the photograph that embodies this kind of avoidance . . . we look to the photograph to provide us with the evidence of what happened, but that looking removes us from the action of that photograph being taken, or that photograph being looked at. And so that sort of entrance in an archive is a very familiar trajectory, right? You go to this place wherein there is a mysterious town in the past that is somehow going to provide you with the answer that you need, as you say, to liberate yourself, or finally get to a real story. And being on that trajectory sort of stops you, or being part of that narrative stops you, from looking at the actions that you are taking, or the actions that you could take, the other actions that you could take in the present. That’s the avoidance one could think of.

JK: Yes, absolutely.

Audience Participant [Nayland Blake]: And a sort of analogous model that I can think of is from Blade Runner, where there’s both the myth of this endless photographic abundance, when Deckard sits there and has like a magical photo-viewing machine that allows you to go enhance, enhance, move left, move right—this particular photograph is supposed to have everything in it, everything that he needs to know. But he’s sitting there on the couch, you know, drinking booze. And the
idea that there’s this other set of photographs in there, photographs that he gets from the other replicant that are of all the false memories, pictures of a woman that no matter how much he enhances them, they are not going to reveal any truth about her. The thing that needs to happen is that—

JK: —he needs to stop drinking!

Audience Participant [Nayland Blake]: Right! And he/she actually needs to take action.

JK: Absolutely!

Audience Participant [Nayland Blake]: And I think that’s—

JK: —the disconnect.

Audience Participant #5: Yes. But that’s very different in the photographic than it would be in the written, where you have the actual trace of the physical action, where you would have these sort of layered stories of that bureaucracy.

JK: Yeah, through the text or a narrative. The connection I was thinking about earlier is exactly how you described it—this big disconnect, I mean this is the “Real”. And folk tales or conversations or storytelling do have the emancipatory power. The thing is that, of course, they are ephemeral. And with images—even failed images of an event or a moment—at least you have the process of the recognition of the self—“here is my disconnect.” So the idea of connecting to the archive is already that of your own repression, your own disconnect. It is an attraction of repression. Hopefully, one can get to a process of turning that into a projection, an outward projection, but the connections would have to be through dialogue, through collective visualizations and not private visualizations. How can archives be made collectively? And I am not talking about crowd-sourcing here!

Storytelling as a form of archive—that’s what’s really poetic about this conference, from the descriptions of presentations I’ve read so far—this idea of inserting an alternative narrative that not only joins the one to the two, but also makes something other, which actually erupts and makes people stop drinking, so to speak (as in the way of the death drive, like the character from Blade Runner!). I mean, one can drink for fun, just do not go back to the death drive!

I think we should move on because there are people really waiting to unzip and unfold.

Thank you everyone, this was a lot of fun.
Memories Can’t Wait

Ann Butler in Conversation with Ulrike Müller

Ann Butler and Ulrike Müller held a public conversation at ICP, where they discussed Butler’s work as former senior archivist for the NYU Fales collection and current role as director of the Library and Archives at CCS Bard and project director for Art Spaces Archives Project. They also talked about Müller’s recent exhibition Herstory Inventory: 100 Feminist Drawings by 100 Artists at the Brooklyn Museum. The following is a transcript coedited by the interlocutors.

Ann Butler: My interest in the areas mapped out by this symposium stems from years as an archivist working with contemporary art-related archives, at the Guggenheim Museum, Fales Library & Special Collections at NYU, Center for Curatorial Studies, and AS-AP or Art Spaces Archives Project. I have a fundamental and longstanding interest in how archives of any shape or scope are built, described, activated, and used, and how they serve as source material for the production of new work in any format.

I am particularly interested in artists who find ways of engaging with and activating objects and components of archival collections as part of their artistic and intellectual practice, as well as this type of incisive and productive engagement with existing collections. Within that, I include all types of cultural repositories, museums, libraries, and archives. Supporting this type of engagement is exactly why those of us who build research collections do so. What I have been doing for the past four years at the Center for Curatorial Studies as director of the Library and Archives is exactly that, attempting to build a definitive contemporary arts research collection devoted to the study of international curatorial practices.

To establish a context for a discussion about archives as an artistic gesture and a cultural form, and how artists engage with existing collections in the production of new work, I am going to present some general opening comments.

Specifically in terms of archives, why do we collect, why do we build archives, what’s the value of age, and what do archives say about us? Archives are the physical and increasingly digital traces of human activity and experience. They remind us of what and who has come before.

Writings on the archive often set up a binary, positioning the archive as either an inert repository filled with historical objects, documents, and artifacts or as a regulatory discursive system. True archives, those bodies of material that exist as residual layers of a life lived, group or collective engagement, commercial endeavors, and forms of creative enterprise, are the focus of this symposium.

It’s easy to generalize about archives in a simplistic way. It’s difficult to discuss archives with any depth because for the most part each archive is invariably unique in shape, depth, scope, texture, tone, and character.

How are archives established and how do they become part of the historical record? Archives are the byproduct of human exchange, communication, intellectual and artistic labor, and creativity. As a physical body or a corpus of material produced, used, edited and retained over a period of many years, archives are either saved or neglected and destroyed. The physical organization of the material, records, documents, objects, and artifacts reflects how these elements, these archival components, were initially produced and used. Saved, they are usually donated or sold to collecting repositories that take on the ongoing management and preservation of the material. The archives are then processed, cataloged, and preserved, referred to by a colleague of mine as a process of domestication—the labored construction of an inventory that describes the physical contents of the archive through language, a whole other problem. The collection is then opened to researchers who can be scholars, academics, curators, artists, students—the list goes on.

I bring up this fundamental component of archiving because it’s very much also about how archives serve in the formation of historical and personal narratives. When archives are made accessible, people come to them, they consult the material and engage in the interpretation and construction of narratives about some component of the archive. By making the material available through a larger collecting repository, archives enter the realm of public discourse—through publications, exhibitions, and any other form of public address.

Activism can function as one of the central dynamics of building a collection of archives. Some archival repositories set out to collect only what they perceive as the cultural high points, and others collect more from the margins, so as to make the invisible more visible.

As the project director for the Art Spaces Archives Project, I made one of the central goals of the initiative raising awareness about the historical research value of archives, specifically the archives of alternative and independent art spaces. When AS-AP was established in 2003, there was an urgency, as funding sources for alternative art spaces waned and the threat of spaces closing increased; not only were the spaces at risk but so were their archives and the unique cultural and artistic record they represented.

Likewise, ten years ago there were also many longstanding spaces, particularly in New York, that were not operating under the threat of closure but instead had amassed unique and extensive archives documenting their exhibition, performance, and programmatic activities over several decades. For the most part, many of these archives were languishing in storage, inaccessible and unused.

AS-AP was established to provide a means of documenting—not collecting but documenting and surveying these archives so as to capture information about them including their extent, condition, scope, and risk as well as advocating on behalf of making this material accessible to scholars, researchers, and anyone who wanted to access the material.

Another component of archives is that they are never fully representational or complete. They are fundamentally fragmentary and yet they serve as the cornerstone for the construction of historical narratives.

So, how does one account for the gaps inevitably found in archives between what’s present and what’s missing or absent? In an interview with Julie Ault about the formation of the Group Material...
archive, she refers to the violence of history writing and the formation of archives as a form of history writing. This is a central dynamic of archives and of archival engagement.

One of the central questions we want to get to today is, do archives have a form? There is at the very least a twenty-year history of artists engaging with concepts of the archives as an artistic gesture or cultural form. Many of these works play upon and incorporate aspects of the found object—the photographic or documentary, history and temporality as a mode of visual analogy or metaphor for a concept of the archives.

And yet, I often find these works limited and superficial, lacking critical engagement or insight. Too often these works represent a predictable visual trope of the archive as old, aged, and found. I am always on the lookout for works and practices by artists who find modes of original and critical engagement with archives, works that have the capacity to function as works of art and at the same time convey insight and new interpretation of archival modes and materials.

I was very excited to be invited to hold this conversation with Ulrike because I think several of your projects have a level of critical engagement with archives.

Ulrike Müller: One other thing that I want to say in relation to this conversation about archives is that I never set out to do work about archives. A more adequate way for me to think about it is that I’ve always been searching for things, and archives happen to be a place where that search can materialize in ways that are—that have to do with absence or presence of history and self. This is the reason that I’ve turned to archives. This is true for retracing the feminist art program, my project with former students in the Feminist Art Program at CalArts in the early 1970s, as much as for the work I am presenting today.

This last point actually becomes clearer in retrospect: The search that motivates me as an artist is less driven by a scientific interest and more by what I like to think of as a search for the self, whatever that means, and archives, I think, can be a terrific place for that.

So the project I am presenting today is titled Herstory Inventory, with the descriptive subtitle 100 Feminist Drawings by 100 Artists. I want to acknowledge that several of these artists are in the room here today, which makes me extremely happy: Marjet Long, who presented this morning, and Sowon Kwon, Meyra Davey, Gregg Bordowitz, and I should also mention Ann Cvetkovich, who has been such a great interlocutor throughout this whole project.

Let’s see. I am starting with an image that I assembled from a number of drawings in the project, a drawing by Nancy Brooks Brody, a drawing by Robin Hustle, and three objects that I picked from the Brooklyn Museum’s collection. This collage came about as the museum asked for a “signature image” for the project, and I realized that no single drawing could serve that function and that something composite had to happen. Then I also realized that I felt solid enough in my collaboration with people and in my understanding of the museum objects I had selected to actually intervene in this kind of way and put together an image like this one [see page 23].

It might help to backtrack and speak briefly about the project—and I should maybe also say that even though it has been exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum and earlier last year also at the Kunsthalle Bregenz in Austria, I am very much in a space of reflection right now. Herstory Inventory is an ongoing investigation of sorts, but it is not a research-based project in any traditional way—not a lot of research precedes the making. It’s not a conceptual artifact but rather unfolds from a simple initial idea that kind of grew, and as it grew it presented me with problems. I’ve also been using it to produce problems that I then try to make attractive and offer up for collective forms of engagement.

The project originates in the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Park Slope, Brooklyn, a particular institution, a great self-organized archive, community-run since the early 1970s, and dedicated to the documentation of lesbian lives and lesbian feminist culture. For those of you who aren’t familiar with it, I would highly recommend that you look it up.

The Lesbian Herstory Archives comprise collections not only of printed materials of all kinds but also ephemera and objects such as T-shirts as part of lesbian feminist movement history. And what I was especially drawn to was the inventory list of this collection of about 500 shirts. The list was compiled by a volunteer, and it is very lovingly and with a lot of attention to detail describes all the graphic elements and images on the T-shirts. There was a moment where this text was engaged as a performance piece and an audio piece. Out of this came the idea—the simple idea that I referred to before—that these found descriptions could become the basis for new images. I started giving out individual descriptions to artists to respond to in drawings. Now they appear as titles for the drawings made in response to them: ‘four women’s heads together making a cloud formation with a feather coming down from one woman’s hair is Faith Wilding’s drawing.’ And this is Marjet Long’s drawing, ‘Nude woman holding up the scales of justice,’ JD Samson’s ACT UP logo, Mariah Garnett’s A caricature of a woman with large breasts and wild hair inside a circle with words, And this is MPax’s rendering of Avenger Bomb as a globe. And then this is the drawing from which I lifted one of the hands for the collage that I showed you earlier, Robin Hustle, Black and white hands reaching across a pink triangle.

What I think becomes apparent in the selection of drawings is in how many different ways these acts of translation and reinterpretation were approached here and how inventive that process really is. I’ve been interested in the shared root that the words inventory and invention have, etymologically, and I’m interested in invention and imagination in relation to archives.

So, how would this collection of feminist drawings encounter the Brooklyn Museum, which, of course, also houses a collection, albeit a quite different one? The museum was founded in the 19th century as an encyclopedic institution that could collect and catalogue everything.

As I was thinking about how to bring these 100 drawings to the museum, I was also interested in engaging the collection at the museum, and I started to think about what the encyclopedic offered and what it didn’t, but also what contemporary search engines offer and what they don’t. When one enters terms like gay or lesbian or homosexual in the online search database of the Brooklyn Museum, very few results come up. I think the search term lesbian produces three entries; one is Judy Chicago’s Dinner Party, one is the Cindy Sherman photograph, and the third I can’t remember. And I was like—in a museum that houses literally ten-thousands of objects, that just can’t be it. So I had to come up with different ways of searching. I ended up gathering museum objects around recurring terms in the descriptions from the Lesbian Herstory Archives: hands, triangles, flowers, double-bladed axes (labryses), and rainbows. I was trying to stage a conversation between the drawings and the objects in the museum’s collection.
All drawings from Herstory Inventory, 100 Feminist Drawings by 100 Artists (2009-2012), a project organized by Ulrike Müller, part of the Raw/Cooked Series, Brooklyn Museum

Top Left: Faith Wilding, 4 women’s heads together making a cloud formation with a feather coming down from one woman’s hair
Middle Left: Marjet Long, Nude Woman holding up the scales of justice
Bottom Left: Mariah Garnett, A caricature of a woman with large breasts and wild hair inside a circle with words
Top Right: MPA, Avenger bomb as a globe
Middle Right: Robin Hustle, Black & White hands reaching across a pink triangle
Bottom Right: JD Samson, Act up logo
In the triangle case, the flag on the wall is from the museum’s collection. Here is a close-up; it’s a Fante flag from an African country, late 20th century. And then in the case you see three further objects, salt and pepper shakers by Elsa Tennhardt, who was a 1920s industrial designer here in New York. A Lucy Martin Lewis ceramic bowl from the 1980s and then an Alma Thomas watercolor with a prominent zigzag line.

This particular category was especially challenging to put together because triangle is not a keyword in the museum’s database. I had to be very inventive as I went looking for my triangles, and I had fun coming up with subcategories. In this triangle selection, every object was either made by or for a woman—the African flag is made for a woman chief.

This is the flower vitrine; the flower that I focused on is the white lily. There is a fourth flower object that, again, was on the wall, a botanical watercolor by Fidelia Bridges, from second half of the 19th century.

These are the hands—hands of different scales, very different locations in time and space. All the objects in the rainbow category were by artists of colonial or Native American origin. I learned in this process that the rainbow is not a traditional Native American motif, that its use in these Peruvian ceremonial cups from the late 16th century already marks by colonial influence. The history of the Native American objects in the museum is so difficult and charged that I ended up picking only objects that were made for non-native viewers. And then here are the axes.

I focused on the vitrines because Ann had mentioned that she was specifically interested in talking about what I did with the collection at the museum, and I am really interested in that too, because to me this was a very speculative aspect of the exhibition, and it’s not a part that I have talked about much before.

AB: I am intrigued with your use of language, which you seem to be using as a kind of foil. I’m also interested in your methodology of setting up a problem and then looking for a way to solve it as part of your artistic practice. With the Brooklyn Museum project, you found ways to explore how language operates within a museum context in relation to the institution’s own descriptive practices for its collections. With the Lesbian Herstory Archives project, you explored how descriptive practices mediate an understanding of the archives. Could you speak about your exploration of language, how you find ways to problematicize the relationship of language to objects and your methods for both these projects?

UM: That’s a great question. The language aspect is interesting as a translation process, an unfixing, rather than a fixing through description. Along these lines, new versions or new relationships can be imagined and tried out. I am interested in the archive not only as the material that is present and that one can touch and look at, but also as a collection of things that one might sometimes need to take distance from. The collaborative process I set in motion tries to give form to the complex relationship of my extended queer feminist community to the history of identity politics that shape the Lesbian Herstory Archives. I couldn’t have told you that when I set out to organize this project, but retrospectively, I think the question was how to build a relationship in which to acknowledge one’s being a part of that history and also make space for a critical relationship to it.
I think that layer of language actually made this possible because of how that language functions in relation to objects. This particular descriptive language is more transparent in some places and opaque in other places.

In handing out these descriptions as drawing assignments, I was quite aware that the more transparent moments amounted to the more complex challenges. Think of the image I showed of the ACT UP logo: I thought that was a really, really difficult assignment because it’s not possible, not for us here in New York anyway, not to know what it actually looks like. Another example that I showed, Robin Hustle’s drawing of black and white hands reaching across a pink triangle, is a textual description of where my own imagination absolutely blocked, because to me it so stably linked to a certain naïve idea of racial politics.

It was amazing to see how, by engaging those problems and questions collectively, other minds would go down a different path and come up with solutions that are intelligible to me, but they’re not solutions that I myself could have come up with.

AB: Exactly. I think the practices are very much related, and I think what’s interesting in your mention of the Lesbian Herstory Archives project, and the descriptive cataloging they compiled of lesbian imagery and visual motifs, is that not all archives would set about attempting to describe those attributes through language, because their meaning is essentially open, and not something that can be adequately captured through text.

UM: Yes.

AB: This type of descriptive practice by the Lesbian Herstory Archives seems very earnest and committed in attempting to describe this type of activist imagery through language. It foregrounds the problems of language and representation.

UM: Well, some professional archivists feel critical about these practices of radical archiving because they produce inconsistencies, they’re done by amateurs—and I mean amateur in the true sense of the word, a lover of something. I was very intrigued by the poetic space that this opens up.

AB: Sure. I think what’s so illuminating about that example is whether it was done more systematically and in a more standards-based way, or in more of a homegrown and amateurish way. With either scenario you come up against the problem of language, which is always going to be there to some degree. What’s interesting to me is to consider what other forms of access this textual layer provides—for instance, another means of indexing the content. I think this issue of language is something we could go on and on about, so I’d like to ask you another question.

UM: Okay.

AB: In preparing for this conversation, we talked about your work in terms of its relationship to form, and form and language, form and narrative, form and performance—it goes on and on. So I was struck by the publication that was produced this past summer by Dancing Foxes Press, Ulrike Müller: Franzí, Fever 103 and Quilts. The introduction to the book describes your practice as having a critical engagement with form. Can you speak about what constitutes a critical engagement with form?

UM: That’s a huge question, and it’s probably one of those questions that keeps me going as an artist, and as such it has to be essentially unanswerable. But the book that Ann is referring to is a book about my paintings. I am painter, and I have been figuring out for myself how my paintings—in their obsession with shape, material, and color—and this collaborative practice that we are talking about here both relate to ideas of form. It’s been rewarding to think about how these two strands of my work influence each other and feed off each other. The way in which painting figures most directly within the Brooklyn Museum show is obviously the wall painting and its particular shape, resulting from a process. I didn’t walk up to the museum and say: I am going to paint a giant question mark on your wall. Rather, I connected the available walls and was thinking through that spatial constellation when I saw that with very few small interventions I could inscribe this question mark over four floors of the museum, and I could do that in a way that remained mostly hidden. I don’t know if any of you who saw the exhibition were aware that the parts of the wall painting connected to form this shape. There was too much to talk about in the wall texts already, and we decided not to mention the question mark; it was more something that, you know, was a formal device that helped me.

But, you know, my formalism has always had to do with social relations and with thinking about how we do things and how we do things together. How to say we and how to say I can be such a problem, especially for feminists. This is one of the questions that I find myself returning to now. At this point in Herstory Inventory, the materiality of the drawings collection is not resolved. I don’t know where or how the drawings are going to end up. I don’t consider myself the owner of the drawings, even though I asked all the artists to donate them, and I asked them specifically for works on paper or physical objects, rather than digital images. In some ways those are all questions of form to me—forms of sociality and forms of pushing up against standards and expectations and certain assumptions. I guess I am trying to see where stable forms can be challenged. One thing that came up repeatedly around the exhibitions was that people thought it was neither a group show nor a solo show, and I am really interested in that because it does something to that idea of we or I and asks, what is that entity that is acting and producing conversation and culture?

AB: In terms of the question of critical engagement, what’s essential there is the term critical. There are many ways of just adopting forms as they are and not establishing a critique or transformation of them in any way. But to take them on and turn them into something new is the critical component, and to me that’s something that you very much engage with fairly consistently.

UM: Yes, but then this question has to include thinking about what criticality is or what critique can be and, how—where in that process oneself is situated and what is one’s perspective. I am not sure I am putting this right, but it’s great when a project like this ends up functioning as critical, as something that engages things and institutions critically. But my intention wasn’t to be critical in the first place, unless we define criticality as engagement and curiosity and, you know, wanting to play with other people and kind of pushing things around a bit.

AB: Yes, it’s not the initial intent. It’s an outcome.

UM: I am learning from the process as I am pushing it along and develop the terms of engagement. This really sounds so simple in a way, but it has begun to resonate in a much larger scale within my practice. It leads me to such basic questions, like at this point I am asking: What have I done? And: How far can we go? And then what is this I and what is this we, and how
can things continue to unfold from this place . . .

**Audience Member #1:** We’ve been talking about archives these two days, and I just wanted the opportunity to ask Ann if you could speak a little bit more about what you are asking Ulrike about the difficulty of language and the daily pragmatics of archives?

**AB:** In terms of descriptive and cataloging practices within the field of archives it’s called description. Within libraries it’s called cataloging, and within museums it relates to the work of registration. All three practices are different in that they have different sets of rules, practices, and vocabularies, but they are all fundamentally related in that they involve establishing textual descriptions of physical objects for the purposes of inventories, classification, taxonomies, et cetera. The purpose of cataloging and description is to come up with a formal description of a thing—a book, a manuscript, an object—primarily in terms of its physical attributes and characteristics and some subject analysis. Inevitably, there is some interpretive layer that you bring to the object, but you try to focus on just the physical attributes of the artifact that sits in front of you and pull back from establishing your own subjective and interpretive analysis.

Which is why I think it’s so interesting that you would have these sets of five terms [hands, triangles, flowers, double-bladed axes (labryses), and rainbows] that you would then try to search within the museum’s collections management system looking for specific iconography, even though that’s a layer of information about objects that they may not have captured and included. In terms of exposing a problem that arises from language and representation, that’s a wonderful problem to expose within a museum context.

**UM:** For me the question was, if visibility doesn’t register on that first layer of searches, are there different ways of looking that produce different kinds of relationships, and different kinds of knowing or desire for knowledge? But I am also curious about what you said earlier about the form of the archive. And I just have to play this question back to you, because I am interested in how this question of form presents itself within your practice?

**AB:** I don’t believe there is a form for archives. I believe there is a practice, but there is not a form.

**UM:** Truly?

**AB:** Yes, I don’t think one can generalize—

**UM:** Because form is just static for you? Is it the concept of form that does not fit?

**AB:** It’s not so much static, prescriptive, and known. To me those are not characteristics of the archive.

**UM:** This is not how I would think about form! To me form is much more relational and open-ended and something that needs to be reestablished in practice and interaction. I don’t think that form just is.

**AB:** I guess I am thinking of whether or not it is possible to generalize about archives. And it’s a term that’s so overused; we all do it. So, I think if there is a relationship of form to archives, it’s through practices and engagements.
MARVIN HEIFERMAN IN CONVERSATION WITH ERIN BARNETT

Marvin Heiferman and Erin Barnett spoke together during the first day of the symposium, Friday, December 14. They discussed recent curatorial projects concerning the archive—Barnett, the assistant curator of the collection at ICP and Heiferman as a photography curator interested in the ways photographs function culturally.

Marvin Heiferman: One of things I’m fascinated by is the difficulty in constructing photographic history—the thought that there is a photographic history or even a single story to tell about the medium. Photography is used by so many people for so many reasons, there’s no simple narrative you can construct about it. The more I’ve looked at the way the cultural institutions represent photography, the more I think they’re off-base and miss the true story of the medium’s impact on our life, which is why I so often work out of archives.

In 1990 I did a book called I’m So Happy. It was, in a small way, meant to interject a different story into conventional histories of photography. In it, Carole Kismaric and I wanted to look at how stock photography has been used to represent values in and issues around everyday life. We knew that stock photography has been used to represent values in and issues around everyday life. We knew that stock photography has been used to represent values in and issues around everyday life.

The book was structured like a photo-novella about happiness and presented outdated stock photographs that picture agencies couldn’t get anybody to pay for anymore. Geoffrey Batchen has written a lot about the history of photography and its limitations and remarked, in his 2005 lecture, “When This You See:—

I was fascinated by the material. Here was a guy who was a solid photographer and businessman. These were not pictures made by an artist. And so we decided to show and represent him for what he was, a prolific and talented image maker, a guy who would wake up on Tuesday, get a phone call to take a photograph of the opening of a super market and, later in the same day, photograph Ms. Texas, and later in the evening photograph a car accident. How do you make sense of, and pay homage to that guy’s life? How do you make sense out of how photography functioned in his life and does in ours? What would, or should photographic history make of a photographer like Bill Wood?

Photography is a business, but we don’t talk about this: we talk about images as if they are divorced from having a life in the real world. I think part of what happens when you start going through archives is you have to think about the real world that caused those images to be made and saved, and to be made available or hidden away and repressed.

Kate Levy: I think nostalgia and exoticism plays a role in it. The images in the “Still Life” project I did with Diane Keaton in the early 1980s [based on earliest surviving color photography shot for Hollywood Studios made by still photographers on movie sets of movies and used for publicity purposes] were incredible to look at because they were large format and vivid Kodachrome transparencies. That kind of color doesn’t exist anymore. You don’t see that; you can’t make that. So that’s another aspect—it’s not a nostalgia for a technical thing that’s gone, but it’s nostalgia for some kind of experience that you’ll never have again. I was talking recently to a photography collector who is also a musician, about the difference between looking at things as prints and looking at things on screen, how, to a certain extent, as photographic technology changes, people will forget what it was like to look at, say, Cibachrome prints from the 1980s or black and white prints made in the 1930s. And he said, “well, its like music, if you’ve only heard music as an mp3 file, you have no idea what vinyl sounds like. That kind of sensory, auditory experience, and whatever neurological, intellectual stuff that triggers off it disappears.”

KL: You mentioned before that these images were deemed useless after the initial marketing run of the pictures. But you found cultural stories and narratives in them. What can you find in these useless still

been written out of its own history, because the history of photography is largely controlled by art historians, who tend to limit what’s admissible into that history and what’s not.

Bill Wood’s Business, another exhibition I curated from archival materials, and was presented at ICP in 2008. Wood was the most successful photographer in Fort Worth, Texas, in the postwar period, and he photographed everything. When he died in the 1970s of cancer, the hundreds of thousands of photographs that he had taken over the years were still filed away in his studio. His wife and daughters, concerned with taking care of him, decided to sell off the studio and everything in it to people who eventually ran Bill Wood’s business into the ground. And as they did, hundreds of thousands of negatives documenting the everyday life of some of the communities of Fort Worth, Texas disappeared. One fairly large group of his negatives, 20,000 of them, resurfaced and was bought by Diane Keaton, who I’ve collaborated with on a lot of archive-driven projects. We tried to make sense (and an exhibition and book) about what survived.

I was fascinated by the material. Here was a guy who was a solid photographer and businessman. These were not pictures made by an artist. And so we decided to show and represent him for what he was, a prolific and talented image maker, a guy who would wake up on Tuesday, get a phone call to take a photograph of the opening of a super market and, later in the same day, photograph Ms. Texas, and later in the evening photograph a car accident. How do you make sense of, and pay homage to that guy’s life? How do you make sense out of how photography functioned in his life and does in ours? What would, or should photographic history make of a photographer like Bill Wood?

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KATE LEVY IN CONVERSATION WITH MARVIN HEIFERMAN

Kate Levy followed up with Marvin Heiferman in the spring of 2013. This conversation footnotes some of the points Heiferman and Barnett touched upon during their initial conversation at the symposium.

1. Kate Levy: The idea that something was once useless has a gravity to it now, there is this strain of nostalgia I’ve noticed in which what was quotidian in one era becomes an object of fascination, a novelty in another. Objects and ideas expire, and become useless and then are reanimated years later in the form of a facade of a functional object, such as a kitchen object that looks like it did in the 1950s, but now functions completely differently. One way to think about that is to consider how these images can function today when the meat of them is getting carved out—to think about what they can say about that time, vs. what they can say about the craft of image making. Another question is, how do we fetishize vernacular, useful, now useless objects? Do you think that your approach to archives involves nostalgia? How do you deal with your own nostalgia—your own love for these images—when you are thinking about archiving?
Erin Barnett: Marvin had a very different experience than I did. Marvin was going to archives and putting shows together. My experience at the ICP collection is that we have over a hundred thousand objects. One of my tasks has been to organize exhibitions and publications out of things that have already been collected. So, a very different experience from Marvin's.

One of my projects was Take Me to the Water: Photographs of River Baptism. There are over two hundred images in ICP’s collection and I decided to focus on the postcards. In all of these pictures you will see hundreds, sometimes thousands of people witnessing the baptism, and the photograph itself is another version of the witnessing. A lot of these images are from the turn of the nineteenth century. There is this rise of evangelical Christianity at the time, which is in part caused by economic depression, and industrialization. Many people are looking for some sort of salvation. They are moving away from families.

It’s also the time of the rise of the picture postcard. So you are not so close to your family anymore and you want to send pictures of what you’re doing, or your family wants to send you pictures of important events. Many of the pictures are souvenir postcards. It was really, really easy for people to buy postcard cameras. You could make your own postcards. Kodak would print a bunch of them for about 10 cents each. Like Bill Wood’s photographs, these pictures were made by work-a-day photographers who were going around post-carding everything. The town hall, the river baptism, openings of shops, things like that. People would go and sometimes see the river baptisms.

A lot of the text on the back of the postcards is really disturbing. This is part of what’s interesting about having the actual artifact, rather than just seeing that front image. One says that “Trying to sell furnaces among the niggers is the same thing as trying to push an automobile uphill without gasoline;” that’s on the back of a picture of a baptism postcard. The use of the image was ultimately very different from the religious aspect. Another one says, “This is the way the negroes get baptized and white people go to see them, because they say such funny things. One sister said, I saw Jesus, and somebody said, no, you didn’t, that was a crab.” It’s fascinating to see the way people use these images, why were images that you won’t find in the films themselves?

MH: It’s the difference between being able to look at things in still photographs and look at things in movies. In film stills and publicity images you can pay attention to makeup, costume, sets, in ways that you can’t see when you watch the movies. You get an idea of what people thought the most dramatic moments were. You have to look at cultural tropes around narrative, and what’s important to narrative. You can study the details of the sets and you can understand a little bit more about acting, and performance, and tableaux. That was particularly interesting to us. We were interested in the stillness of the posing for large-format photography. The self-consciousness of it.

KL: There’s a huge difference between the photograph and the moving image. I think that a lot of—especially now, when the still photograph is at stake, what it has to offer the world is in question—that division between posing and acting, constructed to look normal, versus constructed as offering itself as a construction, is an interesting distinction to make. Do you think it’s important to discern between nostalgia and resurrection and reclaiming of history, or salvaging history, and what is the difference between nostalgia and the latter? Luc Sante has written a bit about nostalgia—have you read Low Life?

MH: Not the whole thing, and a long time ago. An issue that comes up a lot for me recently is that it’s not simply about nostalgia vs. some other perspective. History gets written in ways that reflect the knowledge and information available to and the experiences of the person who gets to write history. So, for instance, I’m writing a piece for the New York Times blog this weekend, about Garry Winogrand. I knew Garry Winogrand and worked with him. I’m also reading a book with essays written by people who knew him, and by people who didn’t know him. The people who didn’t know him, who didn’t live in the time that he was making those pictures, have a response to the work and make suppositions about him that are based on the written records of the time. The people who knew him make different assumptions and have different responses to the work. For me, that’s interesting. There are different kinds of nostalgia—you can have a nostalgia that’s based on firsthand experience, or you can have nostalgia for an idea of something you’ve never experienced.

2. KL: I think what’s interesting about photography, and maybe what’s interesting about this Winogrand thing, is that the reader of a text or a photograph who wasn’t there, or who didn’t know Winogrand, enters into a relationship with the writer of the text who did know him, or the maker of the photograph. The person looking at the photograph is more in relationship to the photographer than they are in relationship to the event that the person is photographing. So, I guess there is a lineage of subjectivities in history.
Unidentified Photographer, [River baptism, Pibel, Nebraska], 1913, Gelatin silver print postcard, International Center of Photography Museum Purchase, 2005 (440.2005)

United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Physical Damage Division [Distorted steel-frame structure of Odamasa Store (Building 52), Hiroshima], November 20, 1945, Gelatin silver print, International Center of Photography, Purchase, with funds provided by the ICP Acquisitions Committee, 2006 (2006.146)
Levy learned that this whole collection was kept by Robert Corsbie. He was a Civil Defense expert and an architect and also part of this Physical Damage Division. He had all of these photographs and took them back with him to the United States, because his job was to figure out how well the bomb had worked and how the United States could build better architecture, so that if somebody tried to bomb us, how we could avoid the same fate.

He had all of these photographs and was putting together a classified government publication that was published in 1947. Corsbie, his wife, and son died in a house fire. The firefighters came to their house to try to stop this fire and Corsbie had fortified it using all of these lessons that he had learned from Hiroshima. There was extra slate on the roof. There was thick plate glass on the window. So the firefighters couldn’t get into save them. Almost all there was left was this huge trunk of photographs that his daughter, who is the only surviving family member, saved. She hired some guys a few years later to clean out her house. These two guys took the photographs. One of the guys liked the box that had the photographs in it. The other guy took the photographs because he thought they were interesting, but he didn't know what they were. He saved them in a suitcase. He moved a number of years later, and somehow this suitcase got left out on the street corner and a dumpster diver thought the suitcase looked interesting and so took the suitcase.

The pictures were eventually purchased by the ICP Acquisitions Committee. The National Archives has a set also. For the installation itself, we started out on the corner we designated as “Ground Zero,” and as you travel around the room in these circles, you could see just what kind of damage had been done radiating outward. We wanted to stage a very different idea from what the government had intended it to be. And we hope that we liberated the images.

MH: A few years after the I’m So Happy book, Carole Kismaric and I did another book called Love is Blind, which surveyed the many ways love has been depicted in photographic imagery. We were researching in The Bettmann Archive, which was started when Otto Bettmann fled Nazi Germany in the 1930s with a suitcase full of photographs and prints. His picture agency eventually grew and had 14 million photographs in it. When it was purchased by Corbis in the mid-1990s. I’m interested, with regard to archives, what survives, what doesn’t, and the materiality of photographs. We were there when a team from Corbis started going through those 14 million pictures to decide which 400,000 of them to scan and what portion of the information from the labels attached to the backs of them would be condensed into 50-word descriptions. That was one of the eye-opening moments for me, in terms of how archives survive and operate. A huge and historic archive got whittled down in terms of what could be monetized and what was currently believed to be relevant and what wasn’t. And if you want to go see the original Bettmann stuff…

EB: You have it, right?

MH: I wish, but it’s buried under a mountain out west. This notion about what images are available and which are not is interesting and it’s a huge issue in terms of the Internet. How and what we save is changing. When I was consulting with both the Smithsonian Photography Initiative and the Smithsonian Institution Archives, one of the first things I was taken to see was the room where they stored every kind of computer and hard drive known to man in case they needed to access digital images from the past that hadn't been upgraded. The challenge for archivists is, and will be, the costs and labor needed to decide what images to save and how to keep bumping them up to be readable by whatever kind of technology evolves in the future. I heard stories, for example, about how NASA was no longer able to access photographs made on the first Apollo missions, because the hardware to do that no longer functioned or existed. Archivists and librarians are no longer like the geeky people who deal with the past. They’re the people who control our history, its future and our access to knowledge. How archives operate will constantly need to change, it is a huge issue that people are just beginning to grapple with. I was reading a study couple of weeks ago about how the Internet is changing memory. What was learned was that people don’t really need to remember things so much anymore, they just needed to remember where to find them.

KL: Continued: Pieter Paul Pothoven spoke at the symposium, and he is contributing to the publication—I just got through reading his interview with someone who was also at the symposium. Peter’s work is about a spoon that his mother held onto. His mother’s father was a Dutch resistance fighter in World War II. The spoon was the spoon he ate with in a prison, in a camp. The mother in exchange for the artist, Pieter, never asking her again what the story of the spoon was, said she would give him the spoon. I thought that was fascinating. His whole direction with the piece, his interview, was trying to position his mother as the recipient of this trauma, because the whole history of men as resistance fighters was a highly misogynist history, an exalting of the male, and he wanted to find a female figure who was influenced by this. I think this resonates with what we are talking about, this point of entry into history as being a subjective one when it’s a few generations removed. I think that’s pretty interesting in respect to the Winograd, and in terms of nostalgia. I don’t think there is anything wrong with nostalgia if it serves as a point of entry into further inquiry. Looking at these photographs from the Still Lives project, they serve to do just that. There is so little information behind them, aside from the pose, which is so obviously a pose, and the mise-en-scene, which is so curious, but clearly a movie set, and the eroticism of the Kodachrome.

KL: Define vernacular.

MH: That’s a good one. What’s vernacular? Vernacular describes every photograph made that people, museums, or collectors haven’t paid money for yet. What does it mean? Vernacular is a sort of nasty, privileged way to describe pictures not made with sanctioned art’s self-consciousness. It’s not a helpful word.

KL: Was it invented by art-historical institutions as a method of differentiation?

MH: Maybe. If you look at collections in some museums, there are photograph collections and then there is the study collection, where the vernacular photographs are. There’s a big premium placed on makers, on a certain kinds of maker.

KL: Never the supporting evidence, just the magical creation that appears out of nowhere. Note how now we are glorifying the non-self-conscious photograph as more pure, less evil, than the art object while
MEMORIES CAN’T WAIT

EB: They just need to know how to search for them!

MH: So you can outsource memory. If you outsource memory like you outsource jobs, the question is, what is memory for? One of the things that I’ve been interested in the last couple of weeks is Facebook’s introduction of this new feature called Photo Sync which asks users, when they sign on for the service, a yes or no question, “Do you want to sync up your photos to an external storage cloud?” If you say images are processed with facial recognition software for the GPS information attached to them. How is all that being achieved? So, there are the kinds of archives we know about and the archives we don’t know about.

EB: What do you actively participate in without knowing?

MH: Our notions of memory keep changing, as there is more and more information and there are more and more images to deal with. In a similar vein to the exhibition that Bill Ewing did in 2007 in Switzerland called We Are All Photographers Now, we are all archivists now too. Issues around archiving information, memory and histories are things that everybody is grappling with on a daily basis.

EB: But even that Take Me to the Water show was about using people’s personal photographs in ways that they never imagined that they would be used. Many of those images were in personal albums that had been taken apart. The rise of the collecting vernacular photography in museums, all of these images that people were making for personal consumption—not public—consumption, then got swept up into the archive and used for variety of purposes.

Audience Participant [Nayland Blake]: It was a good decision not to include the standard victim imagery in the Hiroshima photographs, because the notion of people—of the people sitting around will go, okay, we’re going to drop the bomb, how can we make the best use of it, how can we derive this additional benefit from it. It’s the story that’s told of the clear-headed bureaucratic ranking and organization of these pictures. And to me that’s similar to this way in which these companies are using discussing the frustration of institutions drawing the boundary between the two. Is this what the conceptual artists were dealing with when they picked up the Instamatic?

MH: This notion that they are not constructed, they may be lucky, they may be wonderful, but they are not serious. They don’t tell us enough. In fact, they tell us more complicated stories. Vernacular is a weird expression. I wonder where it applies outside of photography. It’s unpedigreed.

KL: That is also the language—you can talk about it in terms of how we articulate ourselves through various social classes.

MH: We’re image breeders, and people decide that this genus, or this species are worthy of certain types of support and others aren’t.

KL: Those vernacular things that aren’t worthy of the same type of dissection, scrutiny, attention, maybe end up becoming the things that are nostalgized in a way that prevents investigation. That type of nostalgia, whether you’ve experienced it or not, relegates it to a place of cute.

the parasitic information attached to the photographs, that the technology includes in the files—the location, the time. That has become this whole other narrative. In many senses, the photograph is self-archiving.

Audience Participant #1: In 1970, Michael Lesy created a book called Wisconsin Death Trip, for which he looked at a very specific archive in the State of Wisconsin. Again the content and his intent were two different things, but he wrote information out of that and took people to a very interesting exploratory dark place in American cultural history. I think it’s actually about intent versus content.

MH: I think you are touching on an interesting point, and I think we are both referring to it. There is the content of archives with their limits and parameters. Then there are reflections upon archives and questions about who collected the content in them, and why. For me, it is a kind of playground when I get to work with images that people don’t care about and reuse them. When you look at Michael Lesy, or look at what Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel did with Evidence, there’s an incredible kind of impulse to do that. People talk about the fluidity of photographic images in terms of their content and how it’s used and understood, but archives are fluid too.

I was just talking about archives in terms of how, like memory, you manage them, maintain them, upgrade them, and share them, but what’s also great about archives is that you can go in there and create completely different narratives from them. If Erin had done the Bill Wood show, she would have done a different show than I did. If I had done her Hiroshima show, I would have done it differently too.

Another issue is accessibility. How accessible are these images and objects in the first place? Looking at the finding aid for a photographic collection is a really different thing from having access to those eleven hundred pictures.

MH: Or it’s just a different audience. The vernacular doesn’t necessarily mean author-less. It could be that there is an author whose identity is just not noted. The kind of photographs you won’t see in an art museum, you will see in a history museum, a culture museum, or in the collections of people collecting cultural history. What’s vernacular? It’s just an exclusionary phrase.

KL: Although photography can say a lot about a time and a place—especially, as we’ve seen, through vernacular work—it says more about the image use, about when historical information seems to conflict with what’s present in the pictures. How do you deal with historical facts that are interesting but don’t support a curatorial or artistic intent in mining an archive. We’re not historians, per se. What is the line between curating an archive and looking toward an archive for historical information? How do we balance information with curatorial intent? I think one of the best things about ICP collections is that they work—especially Erin, in particular, works—to dismantle that division, which, maybe, begins to answer the question of how you maintain historical veracity and a curatorial intent at the same time.
I think our expectation that we are always going to see things and have access to them makes going through a finding aid seems like a nonproductive use of time. Also, does our reliance on conveniently digitized photographic imagery mean that we are not going to go to the physical archive for the stuff that is not made available in the form in which we are now most comfortable seeing it? Who is going to go through the bother of researching and finding the inconvenient images and physical objects? One of the articles I’ve read recently, Seeking a Better Way to Find Web Images, describes the work of a researcher at Princeton University, who has created the world’s largest visual database. He’s got 14 million photographs. They are labeled with code words and all the coding is outsourced to a group called Mechanical Turks, who then subcontract the tagging to people who get paid per item to do this, but don’t or can’t see all the content that might be extracted from an image.

ER: Being a curator gives me a lot of anxiety because I feel like I can’t save everything, I can’t show everything. How do I make that methodological impulse clear in a physical space? We can have conversations about it here but that rarely goes into an exhibition catalog; it doesn’t go into a wall text. It doesn’t go anywhere that people can understand why we made the decisions we did. How else do you tell that story?

4. KL: There is an interesting connection here to the out-dated stock photo images, where instead of useful marketing images going out of style, banal personal photos are now endless sources of marketing information. And, instead of photographs telling a consumer culture what it wants, photographs can tell companies what its consumers desire. Amateur photographers, that is, all of us, are making their own advertising photographs before the products are conceived.

5. KL: How can text work in lieu of images? I think of all these newspaper clippings in Lesy’s book.

MH: They contextualize the images, they give you information, whereas the Evidence project was purposefully taking meaning away, obfuscating.

KL: In a way, Lesy’s book was mystifying to look at. It’s startling to see these newspaper clippings in the pages of a book, smashed together. You don’t really know what’s going on. The words are functioning as images. Maybe there’s a difference between describing an image because an image isn’t good enough, and then having text that functions as an image.

6. KL: The whole convo about the anxiety of archiving was a main thread of your conversation with Erin. The other one was, and Jim sure, in many ways linked to the anxiety of archiving, was this idea that the internet whitewashes the uses of these photographs as objects. We think about River Baptism ones are a better example—there are postcards. There’s something to the use of these objects that say as much about the time that the objects were used as much as what’s depicted and the vantage point of the images. There seems to be some sort of a conflict. If I understood the conversation correctly, your answer to this anxiety of archiving is that on one hand the internet does absorb some of this anxiety—there are these user generated platforms that enable people to preserve more and more and which alleviates this anxiety. But at the same time, the internet is responsible for the depletion of how these images function as objects. This is such an interesting conundrum to me.

MH: We’re in a transitional moment. The dematerialization of images and how that effects archives and images, is something we’re just in the middle of. So I think people are happy for now to have access to this material and these images. I don’t know about the objectness of them—this is going to go away. Whatever got saved, got saved. Just as objects that get saved will become more and more unusual.

KL: Maybe this is one way to circumvent this issue of not being able to inscribe the use of the object in an online based archive. I think that in some ways, the whole notion of describing the image—there will there being words, albeit poetic, instead of pictures, I think that seems like the written word and the spoken word is maybe a photographic objects best ally.

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ER: And that’s just as subjective as anything else.

KL: It reinforces the notion of that singular history.

MH: People liberate material. They find stuff and repurpose and reuse it and make it available. Wikipedia or WikiLeaks takes information and de-privileges it, which is possible up to a point, but again, you are going back to the photographic image. Every image you see is already privileged in the first place.

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We are no longer quite ourselves. As we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six, we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one’s own room. […] Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others.

Virginia Woolf, Street Haunting: A London Adventure, 1927

Walking across the city, I make up stories about the people I pass: the dog walker, the blind man, the young couple giggling in front of the photo booth. One afternoon I find an envelope on the sidewalk. In it is a pile of black and white photographs. Pictures looking like stills from a film. A woman’s face shot from different angles.

A year later, I contact five psychics and ask them about the woman on the photographs.

What are the woman’s best qualities?

Worst faults?

Deepest secret?

What does she want?

What is getting in her way?

Does she ever wish that she were someone else?

What was her route through the city that day?

What book did she carry in her bag?

Who gave her the heart-shaped necklace?

Will we ever meet?

Do you have any advice for my project?

This is what they told me.
She had a secret life. Outwardly, she seemed like the nice girl but . . . she was . . . very mean. She had been put aside. She had been hiding in a cupboard for a long time. She had been very afraid. She had promised herself that once she got out of the cupboard it would be time for revenge. But she forgot to punish only the ones who had hurt her.

What I get is that she at some point was chasing someone. She wasn’t looking for someone else. That is your story. She was looking for herself.

She had broken glass in her eyes. She couldn’t see herself.

She didn’t wish to be someone else. You are making up stories now. She was trying to find herself. But I don’t think it happened. Actually I get suicide at some point. Or attempts.

She caught other people’s attention with her heart-shaped necklace. People would ask her about it. She would start talking to them and then find their sore spots. It makes me . . . it is VERY uncomfortable.

It’s a family member who had the pictures, an old lady who is moving out. The pictures fall out of a box. Why do they do that? I get an aunt.

I am told to tell you that you have to be careful. You are becoming obsessed by these pictures.

Now they say that you have to look deeper into your own roots, dare using your own story and not be so . . . so secretive about your own life. I also hear laughter . . . you are laughing now. They say that your appearance should match up your art. You should use more color. Oh yes. Dare showing your true self. Work more with your expression. Not that you are not serious, but . . . I am telling it, as it is . . . the way you dress has to be serious, if you want to sell. Try to dress so you appear both serious and feminine. I don’t know if it makes any sense what I am telling you? You could use some lipstick or lip-gloss.

And when you are done with the photos you must GET RID of them. You must burn them.
I get the name Susan. I get the place Illinois.

She is ambitious. She is fearless. She wants a lot from her life at this moment.

I get some things about the medical world.

I get the number 73. It could be the year the pictures were taken.

She is not a complicated woman. She believes in the good in other people.

She was raised well. She is not a woman who walks alone at night.

She is very romantic and her deepest wish is to be loved, to be successful. But there have been ups and downs in her life.

At some point she realized that her talents didn’t match her ambitions. However, she has a great talent for working with people.

The woman has a sister who is related to her heart-shaped necklace. I am told that she borrowed it from her sister.

I am also told that her family had a dog. A black dog.

It seems like she is a tourist in the city where the pictures are taken.

A guess would be that on this day she was carrying a book on medicine in her bag. But also some magazines of a more popular nature. There is this duality in her character.
She is deep and secretive. She doesn’t allow everybody to get close to her. She is a good listener.

She took the photographs herself. That’s my immediate impression.

She really enjoyed this day.

She prefers to cross town on foot. I see flat shoes. She walks fast but enjoys the walk. She takes the subway or a cab only if absolutely necessary.

On this day she was surrounded by many people but saw no one.

I don’t think she carried a book with her, but she is someone who reads a lot. She is eager to learn. She reads non-fiction and crime novels.

I think the necklace was carefully chosen, a gift to herself. I see her holding it in her hand, feeling it and saying, “This is mine.”

She likes dressing up. I see her wearing a bear costume.

It’s a strong inspiration that you have picked up here. You could make such a photo series of yourself. In black and white.

[...The phone connection is cut off...]

Hello. I have experienced this before when doing energy-work by phone. Electronics and the spiritual don’t always match. They run on different frequencies.

As I was saying, inspiration for you to make a self-portrait. You should definitely keep the pictures.

I get the number 45. You will meet when you are 45 or when she is. She will have her hair put up.
I am sorry to tell you that I don’t really receive any information on the pictures. On the other hand I keep having a feeling that you are looking for a mother. Does that make any sense to you???
She… she is a bit of an actress. She can be quite bold and assertive, but I do feel she has a shy, hiding side. She was that girl in school who would be a really good friend. She likes looking at people. She likes being an observer.

Secrets… yes, ehm, they feel very private, perhaps intimate. There might be a sensitivity there… sexually. The origins of that might go back to a young age. But I don’t think this is in the way of anything.

I think she may be looking for a primary lover, you know, a woman’s desire to have a partner in her life.

But she might be hanging out with people who are not partnered up but who maybe wouldn’t. It is a resigned acceptance. There is an atmosphere of acceptance as the story is unfolding.

The time when the pictures are taken is a time of promise for her. I would describe this day as bright with a sense of anticipation.

In her bag she carried a very thick magazine. About boys and girls and goth. Something that was not her. A fantasy world.

I don’t feel that your paths will cross. No, no. In fact, I don’t think you will be in proximity at all.

You may go through your own moods with this project. There is a feeling of dissatisfaction juxtaposed with satisfaction in the process. There is an element of repetition. There is a lot of discussion.

The pictures are intended to get her in different modes. This is her saying, “These are the different sides of me.” Yet, there is a conservative tone to the whole thing. For someone who is saying these are the different sides of me, this is not a very wide arch.

The glasses are very interesting as a fashion choice. She clearly wants to be noticed and be original. Yet, there is something kind of not original about her expression in the photos.

In a certain way this girl is invisible.
MARGET LONG: MATHEW BRADY’S SKYLIGHT

Marget Long gave a narrative talk about her project, Mathew Brady’s Skylight. Excerpted here is an edited version of the presentation and the audience conversation that followed.

I want to begin today with a basic question. As artists, writers, curators, and archivists, how do we know when we’re finished with a project? It’s a simple question, yet one that keeps me up at night. The act of archiving is often rooted in an obsessive need to learn what we can and cannot know about the past. In the words of queer theorist Heather Love, archival practice is fueled by the desire to “feel backwards.” And so we feel our way—we gather our materials, organize our ideas, our feelings, our pictures, our texts. But how do we know when it’s time to stop?

There are sensible end points: an exhibition, a writing deadline or even an artist’s talk, such as this one today. But what if after we adhere to these deadlines, we still don’t feel finished? What if we never do finish? On my hard drive, I title folders with increasing levels of finality. [Last_of_the_Last]. [Final_Final]. [Final_Final_Final]. My nomenclature grows more severe as time passes. The prospect of never finishing often haunts me even more than any deadline. For in a hyper-professionalized art world, to not finish is to risk being labeled as someone who doesn’t get their work done, or worse, a failure. I’ll return to these questions, but before I do, let me back up a bit.

In 2009, I gained access to the vacant building on lower Broadway that housed Mathew Brady’s portrait studio between 1854 and 1860. Brady opened this new studio at the height of New York’s daguerreotype craze. In 1854, seventy photo studios lined lower Broadway, but Brady’s was one of the biggest and most elaborate. He ran what amounted to a large-scale showroom and photo factory, housing over 25 workers—camera “operators,” technicians, colorists, framers, and clerks.

I spent five or six days in the Brady building taking pictures when, suddenly, I lost my means of entry. Losing access to the space, ironically, helped me re-conceptualize the project. In a way, it gave me permission to work more experimentally: I felt freer to use abstraction where traditional documentary methods were expected, to bend and expand the archive in ways that accorded with Brady’s own roomy notion of authorship, which I’ll get to in a moment. In the end, I spent two months in the Brady building, many darkroom composites, like this one of a discombobulated-looking congressional committee. The members in the picture were clearly never seated together in that room. These composites were time-consuming and money-losing ventures for Brady. They took so long to put together—requiring individual sittings for all the parties—that they were often of little interest to the public by the time they were completed. My attachment to borrowing and multi-temporal pairings, as you’ll see, characterizes my core response to the Brady building and his archive.

I made my initial rounds of 359 Broadway with a small digital camera and then later used a view camera. The building was ridiculously photogenic, in a classically dilapidated, urban-ruin way. But if I were to photograph peeling paint on a wall, what exactly would I be pointing to? Except for the skylight and the staircase, the building has no material trace of Brady and his workers. Anything that had happened there during Brady’s time was now an idea, a feeling, an abstraction.

How does one represent such things? How can a photograph begin to describe what we experience when we step into a historic space? And to compound the problem, how does this pursuit change when so many iconic photographs had been produced inside Brady’s studio, like the photo of Abraham Lincoln on the five-dollar bill. Another question loomed as well: Why photographs at all?

When stuck, I head to the library. I read everything I could find on Brady and looked at as many of his photographs as possible. In one of the junkier, more obscure books at Cooper Union’s Library, I found this quite amazing set of cartes-de-visites. Cartes-de-visites were calling cards with peoples’ portraits on them, introduced in France in 1859. They were produced and printed as multiples. These inspired me to make my own set of visiting cards while inside the building. I built temporary still lifes under Brady’s skylight using household stuff left behind by the building’s last tenants, mostly artists, who were cleared from the space about 10 years ago.

In Walk-In (Portrait Under Mathew Brady’s Skylight), I was thinking specifically about Brady’s large glass negative plates. And the drooping, off-kilter plant as a sort of ringleted Victorian hairdo, or the magnificent tassels that Brady sometimes used as props in his pictures.

My time in the Brady building made me keenly aware of my limitations as a photographer. Or, if I want to be a kinder judge of myself, I was confronted with the possible failure of what photographs can actually do to represent the experience of history.

I decided to take some of the pressure off—to think small. I photographed a portion of a single pane of the skylight. I later enlarged the negative and then digitally degraded the negative’s tones to the point where the skylight’s window leading and glass appear cross-sectioned, something like growth rings on a tree.
MEMORIES CAN’T WAIT

My scanner was on its last legs and behaving erratically when I scanned the contact prints of Brady’s skylight. The glitchy file the scanner produced was a happy accident. It’s a record of a failed transmission, a faulty photographic process attesting to a history that can’t be reliably output or translated.

While in Brady’s building, I found a piece of skylight glass covered in gooey tar and stuck to the floor. I pried it loose, brought it to my studio and soaked it in solvent to remove the tar. Then I took the glass’s portrait. I used all the care and latest digital embellishments, just as Brady would—as you can see, the Photoshop faux-flare is put to use here. A Victorian scholar visited my studio and when she saw this print she insisted that she saw Queen Victoria’s frizzy head of hair reflected in the bright spot of the glass. I found this loopy observation thrilling because it suggests a kind of hallucinatory relationship to the past that seems so full of possibility. My friend’s willingness to take a temporal ride inside this photo opened up some key questions as well: When we visit so-called historic spaces, where are we trying to go? And whom do we want to see?

Anyone who has tried to photograph a daguerreotype knows that it’s a nightmare. But quite an interesting one. Everything turns up at once in the mirrored surface—your camera, the room, your own body. The past and present touch in unexpected ways. My series Blanks I grew out of this struggle to photograph Brady’s daguerreotypes. When you look at a daguerreotype from a side angle, the image blanks out, it totally disappears. I decided to emphasize this unique materiality by photographing the daguerreotypes from an oblique angle. To deliberately record them in their failed, empty states. I’m very attracted to daguerreotypes, their varied and shifting appearances—to their capacity to delineate things with such fine detail and their other tendency to fade away, to elude us, to refuse our historical gaze. For me, this is a lot like the flickering in and out of history as we experience it in everyday life.

The series Blanks II also plays with the idea of the simultaneous absence and presence of the historical referent. These pictures are Brady daguerreotypes found in the Library of Congress online catalogue. I selected the images for the series based on the archivist’s notation: “Image Deteriorated Beyond Recognition.” The online “daguerreotypes” were downloaded as 12 megapixel tif files and reprinted without alteration at Adoramapix.com, where their motto is “priceless pictures printed for less.”

I’m drawn here to the archivist’s impulse to preserve—to digitize—a portrait that no longer performs its proper function as a portrait. The archivist’s desire to value the ruined and the decayed suggests that lurking alongside traditional narrative forms are other, messier, less legible kinds of historical experiences available to us. My other interest here is in the new digital status and mutability of the daguerreotype itself: the fact that a one-of-a-kind, 19th-century photographic object can be re-materialized through a routine, de-skilled consumer process.

The fact that Brady went bankrupt had an important bearing on the way I came to think about this project. At the same moment that I had access to his studio, the United States was suffering a deep financial crisis of its own, the prolonged capitalist implosion that still hangs with us. In late 2009, I went to look at Brady’s bankruptcy papers at the National Archives. I poured over his dusty legal documents, as well as the hundreds of invoices from photographers, painters, lawyers, hatmakers, you name it. It felt quite intimate. I was probing his excesses and his failures, feeling backwards.
Insolvency was in the air: around the time that I was poking around in Brady’s bankruptcy papers, this full-page ad appeared in the *New Yorker* magazine. I’m not sure I’d yet heard of Annie Leibovitz’s financial problems. But what I do recall is being struck by the total weirdness of this image when I first saw it: What was with Annie’s awkwardly crumpled body? Her abject positioning at the gnarled feet of Baryshnikov? The glamorous sepia-toned photo studio to match the globally coveted sepia-toned handbag? And Leibovitz’s oversized photo books are stuffed inside the oversized bag. What is this a picture of?

I began to think about Brady’s bankruptcy in the context of that advertisement, and I built a piece around it. These photomontages, titled *Rearranging Canon Balls*, combine archival materials from Brady’s bankruptcy papers, newspaper texts, Brady studio photographs, fragments of iconic Leibovitz photographs, and photos I took in a failing commercial portrait studio in Upstate New York.

What are the ties between photographic culture and economic life? And, more important, where can we locate the links between photographic production and financial excess? Sometime in 2009, around the release of the Louis Vuitton ad, Annie Leibovitz came forward with news of her staggering debts. She defaulted on a $24 million dollar loan and nearly lost her entire negative collection (and her town houses) to the Art Capital Group, bankers to the art world. Brady was pushed into involuntary bankruptcy in 1873. He had always struggled to keep ahead of his creditors, but during the Civil War he grossly over-expanded his practice, to the tune of around $100,000. He hired teams of photographers to document the war and expected the government to buy his negatives after the war, but that big purchase didn’t come about soon enough to save him.

I want to end with this portrait of a father and son made at 359 Broadway in 1854. Seated on the left is Henry James Sr. On the right is future novelist Henry James, 11 years old at the time of this photo.

In his autobiography, written in 1911, James vividly recounts what he called “the day of the daguerreotype.” He and his father were out and about when on a whim his father decided that they should have Brady take their picture as a surprise for Mrs. James. The young James recalls being pretty freaked out by what he was wearing, as he described it “a sheath-like jacket, tight to the body and adorned with a row of embarrassing shiny brass buttons.” Worst of all, it was the same jacket that one of his father’s important friends had ridiculed him about at home a few days earlier.

In the autobiography James conflates that uncomfortable moment when teased about his outfit with the exact moment his picture was made at the Brady studio. “It has been revealed to me in a flash that we were somehow queer and though not exactly crushed by it, I was aware that I at least felt so as I stood with my head in Brady’s vise. I remember the exposure on this occasion as interminably long.”
These are the long-lasting effects of a photographic encounter. James didn’t really like photography—he barely ever wrote about it; he thought it too mechanical, un-artistic, and shallow. Yet he cherished this daguerreotype enough to put it on the cover of his autobiography. Looking at the photograph nearly sixty years later, James felt both the burn and the caress of the camera—the bodily discomfort of exposure, the slow-motion experience of shame, the (maybe slightly pleasant) vise grip of the handsome Brady. The hidden metal stand that was used to keep sitters motionless during the long exposures is the vise grip that James refers to.

And as for the grip of Brady, his hold on me has been strong; on rare occasions even a vise grip on my head. But mostly I feel Brady more like the flash described by James. A flash of light that set me in motion. Standing under Brady’s skylight propelled me to explore other photographic places—to visit the studio in Hudson in Upstate New York; to consider Annie Leibovitz, a photographer whose trajectory seems upwardly and downwardly in sync with our ongoing capitalist crisis.

My immersion in this archive has changed the way I think about work that engages the past. I know now that this kind of project needs to be constantly in motion, needs to be active and responsive to the present moment. It also must be shared and remain unbracketed—forever open and unfinished. This Brady building is (and was) social, and any representation or engagement with it needs to draw on, or expand, its social-ness.

For those of us working with archives, it’s particularly important for us to expand what it is that we are willing to show others—to reveal a fuller version of our work and of our selves. For when we disclose our detours, our mistakes, the contents of our dead folders, we offer small new points of entry into the often hegemonic and closed space of the archive. That’s the kind of roomier history and roomier present that I’d like to make.

This project has also altered the way I think about photographs. Despite the illusion of immediacy, many photographs are still, just as they were on “the day of the daguerreotype,” the product of a slow assembly of real people and materials, as well as an ongoing set of negotiations, both social and economic.

My hope is to temporarily open Mathew Brady’s skylight to the public—at the very least, some kind of séance or hothouse reading series underneath that skylight should take place. There are many, many more ways to engage this iconic studio space. It needs to be kept alive as an imaginative space, an open folder. This should be a collaborative effort. And, as of right now, I’m officially looking for collaborators. Fellow artists, curators, other interested parties, please feel free to get in touch.

Audience Participant #1 (Jorge Alberto Perez): I wonder what your diagram would look like of all these connections that you’ve explored. It seems like your filing system is very concise, so I do wonder what that diagram would look like and would you be inclined to do it.

Marget Long: The folders on my hard drive are a version of that diagram. As with most digital spaces, it’s probably far more chaotic and less transparent than it appears on the surface. Folders, subfolders unrelated to the outer folder, and empty folders too! I’m a little bit bored with seeing the crazy, complex diagrams used by artists as a strategy for critiquing the hegemony of archives and other power relations. Underlying these diagrams, of course, is the notion that any given diagram hides as much as it reveals. But when a diagram is so complex as to be basically illegible, I think it can also tip
over into a kind of show-offy or gimmicky way to demonstrate an artist’s own smartness or, and this is a quite cynical, to market oneself as a “research-based” artist.

Audience Participant #2: I think there is something about the term research going into the project, where you take it to this other level of creativity.

ML: I’m not sure I would want to make a distinction between research and creativity, if that’s what you mean. Those two modes are intertwined, I think, for many artists interested in working with and critiquing the power embedded in archives. But you remind me of another point—more to do with the photos that make up this project—that may be implicit in your use of the word creativity. It’s possible that you’re responding to my turn to abstraction and digital re-combinations in a realm that might lend itself more readily to traditional documentary practice. I definitely questioned this choice along the way. As I started making singular images, like the one of the skylight, I began to question the function of abstraction, what it can do and what it can’t. Did I really want to present something that refers to nothing outside of itself? The short answer is “no” and is one of the reasons I made the piece Rearranging Canon Balls. That work sprang out of my interest in photography and bankruptcy, but it also came from wanting to give my viewers a point of entry and historical context. It’s always important that my work be accessible without specialized knowledge of art history or contemporary art discourse. So that piece became a balancing act between providing some so-called facts about Brady while leaving it open for speculation about the relationship between photography and excess.

Audience Participant # 3 (Ann Cvetkovich): I am thinking about the question of research-based practice, which I think is so important to this work betwixt and between photographs and archives. I was struck by what you just said about these kinds of presentations being in their own way one mode of transmission of the work. I’d like to hear you talk about that a little bit more in terms of how it plays out—this ongoing relationship between photography and text. The problem of captions, the problem of titles within the potential of different ways of working with text in relation to photographs. I think the lectures you’re giving are so beautiful in themselves as ways of articulating and presenting the work, and I wonder if the transitions or relays between what you say about the images and showing us the images is itself another version of this practice, where you continue to manipulate and reproduce images, or blow them up, take an object make a photograph of it, and so on.

ML: Those are great insights, and I think you’re right that these kinds of presentations can take on a life of their own and become a very powerful form. A lot of artists have a really vexed relationship to PowerPoint. The materiality of the image gets lost, projectors wash things out, the interface itself is built on a corporate model, et cetera. But for me those flaws are probably outweighed by the way the platform—that first blank slide hanging there—begs me to reshape, rearrange, and reconsider any given project. And for sure, the PowerPoint presentation can be a kind of art form in and of itself. And all of the little considerations that you mention—labeling, integrating text, the use of voice, audience response—really matter in any public conversation about art.

Audience Participant #4 (Kate Levy): It seems that one of the ways you can abate the anxiety of compiling the archive is to retell it over and over again.

ML: Yes, I think you’re right. Archives can seem monolithic, set in stone or, to use a better metaphor in this case, fixed like a photograph. But as we’re witnessing in many of these talks, archives are best utilized in the hands of someone who’s willing to reshuffle the deck, someone who will mess with the archive’s authority. The conversation that we had leading up to this symposium had a role in how I framed this presentation. The idea about finding value in never finishing or retracing one’s steps came out of that meeting. So thanks, Kate and Bridget, for that bit of new thinking.

Audience Participant #5: You started the talk by asking how do you know a project is finished, and it seems that you are ending by saying that it doesn’t.

ML: I suppose that’s where we’ve end up. I’m not really a poster person for completion. And that’s not such a bad place to travel from because sometimes we benefit, I think, from going backwards.

MEMORIES CAN’T WAIT

TED KERR IN CONVERSATION WITH DAVID DEITCHER

“Let the record show that there are many in the community of art and artists who chose not to be silent in the 1980s.”

—Bill Olander (1950—1989)

Stitched into the panel of the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt that artist Mary Lum created in memory of her friend and mentor Bill Olander are his own words, which seem to hover over the following conversation between David Deitcher and Ted Kerr, recorded on May 4, 2013 at Deitcher’s apartment in Lower Manhattan. Olander—Deitcher’s close friend throughout the 1970s and 80s—was senior curator at The New Museum of Contemporary Art from 1983 until his death in 1989. He was a cofounder of Visual AIDS, the organization where Kerr works, which supports artists living with HIV, deploys art to provoke dialogue and action, and works to preserve artistic and activist legacies, because AIDS is not over.

Deitcher and Kerr participated in a panel at the ICP-Bard and CCS Bard Symposium, “Memories Can’t Wait”. Each of their presentations addressed AIDS, art, and memory in different ways. With the encouragement of symposium coorganizers Malene Dam, Kate Levy, and Bridget de Gersigny, Kerr approached Deitcher to record the following conversation about his ongoing book project, tentatively titled Once More, With Feeling.

Deitcher is an art historian, independent curator, and critic whose books and essays often consider the relationship between art, memory, identity, gender, and sexuality. Kerr is an artist and writer whose work focuses primarily on HIV and queerness. The conversation begins with a discussion about the way emotion affects memory, as Deitcher recalls his first encounters with art by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and then moves on to address the difference between affect and emotion and their implications, both personal and political.
David Deitcher: For many years I’ve been convinced that the first time I saw Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s work was in San Francisco in 1989, where I’d gone to deliver a paper at that year’s College Art Association convention. Upon the recommendation of my friend Hudson, whom I’d met through Bill [Olander] in 1982, I left the convention site to meet Nayland Blake at New Langton Arts, the nonprofit where he then worked as program director. This being my first visit to San Francisco, I hoped that Nayland would invite me to join him after work for drinks and/or a meal. He didn’t. But he did suggest that I visit Terrain, an alternative space on nearby Folsom Street, then run by Armando Rascoe, to see a group show, Matter/Anti-Matter: Problems with the Model. There I saw three works by Felix that made a lasting impression—two small, framed, black-and-white Photostat dateline pieces, and one wall-mounted photographic transfer (Double Fear, 1988).

Ted Kerr: So it’s not true that this was your first time seeing Felix’s work?

DD: It still feels true, but it can’t be. There’s too much evidence that that lingering impression is more like a dream than a memory. For example, I’d become close friends with Julie Ault during the later half of the 1980s. A full year before my San Francisco visit, the members of Group Material [then consisting of Julie Ault and Doug Ashford, and eventually Felix and Karen Rambach] were immersed in realizing Democracy, an ambitious project for the Dia Art Foundation. That same year, at Bill’s recommendation, Laura Trippi, a curator at the New Museum, saw Felix’s work at the Rastovski Gallery, and then worked closely with Felix to organize an installation of his works for the Workspace project room at the far west end of the New Museum’s lower Broadway location. Felix’s installation opened on the same evening as Impressario, Paul Taylor’s exhibition about Malcolm McLaren and punk style. I clearly remember attending that raucous opening, and would certainly have climbed the two or three steps to enter the Workspace to check out Felix’s installation—if for no other reason than that I already knew him (slightly), and, knowing myself, would have sought shelter from the manic socializing throughout the rest of the museum. Let’s just say that I looked but did not see—didn’t connect with—Felix’s work at that time and place.

TK: Why not, do you think?

DD: My first encounter with Felix’s art—whenever and wherever it occurred—was bracketed on all sides by personal and political turmoil. While working on Democracy, Julie asked me to step in at the last minute to write an introduction for the book that accompanied the three installations and “town hall meetings” that together comprised Democracy [Brian Wallis, ed., Democracy: A Project by Group Material (Seattle, The Bay Press, 1989)]. Group Material had long since commissioned that essay from Bill, whose condition had deteriorated to such an extent that he couldn’t deliver that assignment. I agreed, albeit with intense misgivings that are apparent—to me—in my choice of a title, “Social Aesthetics,” which I borrowed, and credited in my essay, to Bill, who had coined it as the title of his introduction for Art & Social Change, U.S.A., a prescient group show he organized in 1982 for the Allen Memorial Museum at Oberlin, where Bill was acting director.

To this day, I find it difficult to read what I wrote for Democracy. To me it reads as a desperate attempt to reconcile art criticism and political reportage, to address Group Material’s project within the context of the AIDS crisis, Bill and I had both joined ACT UP/NY during the summer of 1987. We’d already lost friends to AIDS—the first and most lingering shock being the death of our mutual friend, the Puerto Rican-born artist Rene Santos, in 1986. We didn’t even know that Rene was infected, much less that he was contending with so-called full-blown AIDS. Just prior to the opening of Democracy’s third and final installation, AIDS and Democracy: A Case Study, Julie asked if I could escort Bill from his apartment on 20th Street to the Dia space down on Wooster Street to see what they had done. She and her cohort had jury-rigged a ramp so I could wheel Bill, who could no longer walk and could barely talk, into the Dia space. When we entered, Bill and I began our tour at the beginning—with the dedication to Bill that the artists had posted on the south wall near the entrance. The sight of that dedication reduced Bill to tears, which then opened the emotional floodgates in the rest of us. To this day, that remains among my most painful memories from those terrible years.

I also need to add that when, a few months later, the CAA convention ended in San Francisco, I didn’t return home to New York. Instead, I flew to Minneapolis. Shortly after visiting the Democracy installation that moved him to tears, Bill decided to return to Minneapolis—his hometown—to die in the care of his brother, sister-in-law, and niece. I spent one night in his mom’s overheated house, tossing and turning across the hall from Bill, next to the room where his older brother, Rob, spent the night. The next morning, Bill and I said our good-byes and I flew home to New York. Three weeks later, I heard from Rob that Bill had died. Marcia Tucker (The New Museum’s founding director) and I went to Minneapolis to attend Bill’s funeral. Shortly after returning home, I got a call from Bill’s friend Jeff Weinstein (then art editor at the Village Voice), who asked if I’d be willing to write Bill’s obituary. After publishing what I wrote, Jeff invited me to write art criticism for the Voice. As a result of all of these incidents, I now think that what I’ve considered my first meaningful encounter with Felix’s art is more likely what Freud called a “screen memory”—the tolerable mnemonic residue of painful experiences, the details of which Freud found sufficiently unreliable to require analysis, like dreams.

TK: I can see how that context for those first encounters with Felix’s art could have distorted your memory of them. What about your first meetings with Felix?

DD: Those memories are pretty screwed up too. But one thing I know for sure: I became friends with Felix in a more active way after writing my first review for the Voice, which was also my first essay about Felix’s work—a piece about the untitled design he conceived to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Stonewall riots, which appeared on the larger of the two billboards above the Village Cigar store at Seventh Avenue South and Stonewall Place.

After my review appeared, Felix invited me to write the introductory essay for the modest catalogue that accompanied his 1992 project at Magazine 3, Stockholm. As I began work on the text, I called “The Everyday Art of Felix Gonzalez-Torres,” Felix sent me—or read me (I can’t remember precisely how in those days before e-mail)—a single sentence by Carl Andre. A suitably brash-likeminded appreciation of his sculptural method, Andre’s sentence would ultimately, years later, prompt me to address the difference between “affect” and “emotion.” Here’s the Andre sentence: “My sculptures are masses and their subject is matter.” I remember being struck by the total absence of emotion, of even the potential for signification, from that formulation. “My subject is matter” is such an elegant, laconic play on the phrase “subject matter,” but what an airless—and emotionless—formulation! I sketched out a couple of sentences in response, which Felix did not like. Did I fax them? Or read them over the phone? Possibly.

TK: But not a face-to-face conversation?
DD: A fax machine may have been involved.

TK: I didn’t know friends faxed each other.

DD: Oh yes. Fax machines were quite a popular novelty at the time. One of the sentences I’d drafted noted the formative influence of André’s art on Felix’s. The other proposed that, inasmuch as Felix’s minimalist-inspired art had subject matter—sometimes very poignant subject matter—it constituted an implicit critique of minimalism’s obdurate materialism. Felix’s subjects included, among much else, life and death, pleasure and intimacy.

TK: Wait, I want to go back. What do you mean when you say that you may have “looked at” but not seen Felix’s work before your 1989 encounter with it in San Francisco?

DD: I mean that one can look at something, but not see it—truly see it. Since so much of art’s meaning is contingent on circumstances particular to the viewer, it makes sense that one has to be ready for meaningful encounters with it. My inability to “see” Felix’s work until I was 3,000 miles away from New York suggests that the context that I’ve been recounting anecdotally was overwhelming. I couldn’t deal with such excesses of affect and emotion.

TK: It’s also interesting to consider why we ever do trust memory.

DD: At the end of the day, our memories are all we have—along with the objects, sights, smells, tastes, and sounds that trigger memories—that connect us with our past. We may know via Freud not to trust our earliest memories—that being the screen memories he found so compelling, yet unreliable on their surface, so to speak. My book looks at art that was created in the arms of the AIDS crisis of the mid-to-late 1980s and early ’90s. And that means it includes discussions of work by artists who died too young to be widely known, and that corresponds with aspects of the mission of Visual AIDS. Is the Archive Project still active?

TK: Yes. As you know, an ad hoc group started by David Hirsh and Frank Moore came together in the summer of ’94 to figure out what could be done to help artists living with HIV/AIDS. It was informed by the feeling that such artists die twice: first, their career ends; then, they die. Since Frank was already involved with Visual AIDS, it soon became one of the organization’s projects and it continues to this day. It’s the largest image archive of work created by artists living with HIV/AIDS, with over 17 thousand images. Last year we started getting all the images online, which has been interesting because it has changed the politics of joining the archive. It’s hard on people, especially women, to know that their HIV status is just a Google search away.

DD: You remind me that I also intend to look at affecting work created by women who were not, to my knowledge, living with HIV/AIDS—except, of course, in the sense in which we all did, which is to say as friends of people with AIDS, as caregivers and activists. I’m thinking now about a couple of works I saw in a small group show that Michael Jenkins organized for Wooster Gardens in 1992. The show was called Yours, as in “sincerely yours” or “yours truly.” I was quite taken by the premise, and by the show as a whole. One enigmatic work that made a particular impression was by Siobhan Liddell. It consisted of a single large piece of sturdy, heavyweight paper, roughly six feet tall, which she folded over itself to form a partially open, vertically oriented cylinder. She
left the outside of this paper piece unpainted, and used string or more likely wire or fishing line both to suspend it from the ceiling and maintain its large, rounded fold. But the inside she painted a golden yellow, so that the piece emanated a glow from within—not unlike a no-wattage, unusually warm and vaguely figurative Dan Flavin.

The yellow made me think of Nancy Shaver’s Italianate color sensibility, and in fact, the show included a remarkable work by Shaver. If memory serves, it was a shallow, boxlike relief that comprised painted cardboard cracker boxes held together with ACE bandages. The piece implied vulnerability, injury, and healing—less likely a reference to AIDS, perhaps, than to the critical assault on painting mounted by certain critics throughout the early 1980s.

TK: How would that fit into the book?

DD: I want to remember this daring, because richly sentimental, exhibition, and works such as these that otherwise would be forgotten. I’m drawn to the ways by Liddell and Shaver evoke their meanings through the use of specific materials. They deployed this, as opposed to “subject matter,” to generate oddly expressive effects; but unlike Carl Andre, these artists clearly were interested in the associations triggered by the use of such materials as bandages. This is not unlike Felix’s conviction that even a box by Donald Judd evokes subjective associations—something beyond the associative emptiness implied by “specific objects.” It makes sense to discuss such art in terms of what interests me—the emotionally evocative art that in other ways remained consistent with minimal and conceptual formal precedents. Emotion, that is; not affect. I’ve been thinking about a proposition that I want to develop in my book: “Carl Andre is to affect as Felix Gonzalez-Torres is to emotion.” At this point, we could get into a lengthy discussion about affect. There are at least two different approaches to the difficult concept of affect. There’s the philosophical approach, which centers on Gilles Deleuze’s writings, which are informed by early 20th-century writings by Henri Bergson and 17th-century writings by Baruch Spinoza. But there’s also a psychoanalytic approach to affect that is the route preferred by most of the artists and writers that I know with an interest in “affect theory.” The psychoanalytic approach is largely informed by the British, “Object Relations” school of psychoanalytic thought, as developed in writings by, among others, Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott, and André Green. The philosophically based affect theorists insist that the scholarly “turn to affect” should in no way be mistaken with a turn to emotion. They identify emotion with what Patricia Clough refers to as the “expressive subject”—a term implying the centered, self-determining, individualistic model of subjectivity that has been condemned for its association with humanism, and more recently with Cold War ideology and its neoliberal legacy. Brian Massumi writes about affect in terms of “intensivity,” a kind of intensity that animates matter and remains distinct from narration, which he associates with emotion.

TK: What do you picture when you say all that?

DD: When speaking about Massumi’s “intensivity,” I think about works by Carl Andre.

TK: For example?

DD: I’m thinking about the huge, yet anti-monumental floor installation that Andre calls Thirty-seventh Piece of Work (1970). As pictured from above, looking down on its installation on the floor of the Guggenheim’s rotunda, it’s an unusually large and lavish grid consisting of 1,296 metal plates. That very large square is the eponymous 37th piece of work in the sense that it itself consists of 36 smaller grids, each comprising 36 squares of aluminum, copper, steel, magnesium, lead, or zinc plates. The piece is a tour de force of mathematical patterning of differently colored and textured metal plates. And as you know, Andre conceived such metal-plate works so that people may stand or walk on them—an innovation of more than passing interest for Felix, whose conception of stacks of offset prints or masses of candles find antecedents in Andre’s more measured gesture to interactivity.

TK: So with all this talk of Felix, why not just write a book about him?

DD: That’s a difficult and not necessarily interesting question. I know that my friend Mivon Kwon is working on such a monograph, and there’s no way that I’d want to compete with that. Besides, I want this book to be about much more than Felix and his art. I want it to function in certain ways like a memoir, one in which I can at least partially reframe and reprint some essays that I’ve published over the past twenty-five years, and also revisit unpublished works. For example, in 2008 I wrote a text to accompany my second exhibition at the ICP, Alan B. Stone and the Senses of Place, which looked at the work of a little-known, Montreal-based photographer who was active throughout the 1950s and 60s when I was a kid growing up there. I want to expand on what I wrote. That essay doesn’t pertain directly to the AIDS crisis, but it has a lot to do with gender, sexuality, the law, nostalgia, and on what we mean when we speak about “place” and on what, and how, we remember and misremember. But most of the previously published material that I want to reframe relates to what happened throughout the latter half of the 1980s and into the early ’90s, my most productive years as a critic and an activist.

TK: What does that mean?

DD: Let’s say, for example, that I want to reprint “Drawing from Memory,” an essay I wrote for the catalogue that accompanied Bill’s New Museum show, The Art of Memory/The Loss of History (1984). I’d want to frame it by writing about Rene Santos, one of the most important artists who died too young for his work to become more fully developed and widely known. I’d also want to frame it by addressing the tension between aesthetics and politics, which I tried to reconcile in my catalogue essay. I’d have to redefine how my attempted reconciliation between the two actually produced a rift between Rene and me. That’s how seriously we took such issues during the first half of the ’80s. I’d also want this contextualizing framework to include an account of the morning when my then partner answered the phone while I was in my morning shower; how after I got out he insisted that I sit down. He wanted me seated because Rene Santos’s partner, Brad Baker, had called to tell us that Rene was dead.

TK: Are you familiar with Paulo Friere’s phrase “the practice of everyday freedom”? In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, he describes that practice in terms of “the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.” When I think about what life was like for people dealing with the AIDS crisis in New York in the ’80s and ’90s, I think about the practice of everyday freedom.

DD: I wonder, however, how much we were able at the time to acknowledge the importance of daily life in its more quotidian details, which tended to be subordinated amid the social turmoil of communities fighting to survive. As a community under siege, we tended to focus on the bigger matters—including ACT UP actions like Target City Hall (1989), when thousands marched on Ed Koch’s City Hall to protest the incompetence of both the mayor and his health commissioner,
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Stephen C. Jacobs.

TK: What kind of moment was that for you?

DD: I was excited to be part of that action; proud to feel part of a large, vociferous, articulate and angry community. That day began for me, as most of my days did: walking my dog to the nearest newspaper vending machine. That morning, I had the wonderful surprise of finding my copy of The New York Times wrapped inside Gran Fury’s phenomenal decoy, The New York Crimes. At the action itself, however, I was aware of a certain ambivalence regarding the limits of my participation within the action. I’m referring to the fact that I was afraid of being arrested—not only because I feared police brutality—reasonable though that would have been. There was another reason.

TK: Because you’re Canadian?

DD: Yes. If I’d been arrested, I would likely have been deported. On the one hand, that limitation left me feeling like a less-than-fully committed member of ACT UP. I never took the nonviolent resistance training because I thought I had to avoid arrest. That intensified a feeling of separateness from the group that I already felt—a feeling that I could attribute to my relatively privileged economic circumstances, although I didn’t feel detached from “real life” circumstances. Consistent with that sense of feeling apart in the company of others, I also must have felt relief at not subjecting myself to police violence, the legal system, and a night at the Tombs. I’m not sure which is worse, the feeling of apartness or the fear of such violence.

TK: Their relationship together is what is powerful.

DD: Like lots of other ACT UP members, I had tense relationships with certain members of the group, but I’ve come to accept those interpersonal dynamics, and don’t intend to write about them in my book.

TK: So we now know some of the reasons why you might now feel stuck in the process of writing. This book is hard, on many levels.

DD: Looking back, that entire period remains as fraught today as it was momentous within the context of my life then. Like all of us who were around and got involved, I’ve experienced a good deal of loss in my life.

TK: But not like everyone. You are part of a time and place in which you experienced more loss than others. The panel we were on at the ICP was very emotional. Much of the emotion involved is now historical; it feels retrospective, and yet remains powerfully present. Or am I wrong?

DD: No, I think that’s right.

TK: How can this emotion be both historical (because losing people you love in the past to a painful, debilitating illness is horrifying), yet ever present in the sense that the horror lingers in and distorts memories, even if one isn’t always conscious of that process.

DD: Yet many people speak of their longing for closure...
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DD: You see it as a placeholder for something more real? Something like emotion?

TK: Yeah. Writing this book is going to be difficult because you have to work through so much unresolved stuff. It doesn’t mean it’s going to make it into the book, but you are going to have to get the emotional out . . .

DD: One of the more difficult problems I’ll have to deal with concerns the potential political instrumentality of emotion. Consider the current debate about gun control. The NRA has preyed brilliantly on the fears of gun owners that Obama wants to take away their guns. Or the many ways Bush/Cheney exploited the toxic combination of American fear and anger after 9/11 to justify an unjustifiable war in Iraq. Or, within the context of the AIDS crisis, the way that reports about Rock Hudson’s sickness and eventual death induced widespread AIDS panic within the so-called general population. This too can result in the kind of impasse you mention. When I get stuck, sometimes resorting to journal writing is helpful. I’ve never been particularly good at keeping journals, but some time ago, while working on some personal issues, I started using my computer’s iCal application to stay present in relation to emotional discomfort. At the point when I’d feel myself wanting to escape, I learned to refrain from hitting the eject button immediately, and to write notes about my understanding of the emotional uneasiness. The American Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön advocates “refraining” from quick getaways to remain with the discomfort long enough at least to grasp the centrality of pain throughout life.

TK: I think that’s where we are at with AIDS, culturally. Maybe.

DD: Lingering with the difficult emotions?
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TK: We're in the moment of refraining. I hope.

DD: At the panel you described the recent proliferation of AIDS-related documentaries and exhibitions in terms of a “revisitation”; no? So from what are we refraining? Hopefully, neither sex nor intimacy.

TK: In progressive Christian scholarship there is this idea called “the middle.” This way of thinking, as articulated by Shelly Rambo, suggests that it is neither the Crucifixion nor the Resurrection that's the big deal. It's the space between them. For me, the current AIDS crisis revisitation feels like such a middle. I used to think we could achieve closure if—as is suggested by armchair trauma theorists—if we could just get everyone who experienced the trauma of the early AIDS crisis to tell their stories; then get others to actively hear those stories; then finally make new stories together. If we could do that, we could heal some of the effects of AIDS.

But of course the AIDS crisis is ongoing; it’s not just this thing from the past. So that model doesn't work. I realize now that we have always to be encountering AIDS as now. That’s starting to happen. We see younger people who are interested in AIDS and activism, and we can see that young queers will now go through their AIDS phase, learning about a time when queers fought back and effected change. The fact that we are going through an AIDS Crisis revisitation, as exemplified by the documentaries United in Anger (2012) and How to Survive a Plague (2012), and the museum exhibitions (Gran Fury, General Idea, Frank Moore), hopefully means that we're beginning to go through such a “middle” in relation to AIDS. But in order for us to stay in the middle, those like yourself who were there need to step forward and process that time with us. It’s been held in suspension for too long.

DD: It was difficult even to acknowledge the emotion back then. There was such urgent pressure to redirect sorrow into rage, into “direct action.” And that troubled me early on.

TK: You were aware of that happening?

DD: I had a sense of being confronted with a binary. There was activist art that could save lives, but as if we all live in a zero sum universe, some maintained that activist art was in conflict with the idealist conception of art. In his essay “Mourning and Militancy,” Douglas Crimp acknowledged that, while we were necessarily united in anger, we were also united in our grief, and that grieving—honoring our sadness and working through it—was also necessary if we were to survive, both individually and as a community.

TK: Did you ever let yourself be sad about it?

DD: Of course, but I’m not comfortable with public grieving.

TK: How?

DD: Felix. His art is rigorous and formally tough enough to temper its discrete sentimentalism. I don't doubt that Felix would have been appalled by my use of that term in relation to his art, just as I expect that the notoriously protective keepers of his legacy would be outraged. That's how powerful the injunction against the sentimental remains, and there's no end in sight.

TK: Who?

DD: Regarding autobiography, I’ve tended to include autobiographical details in much of my work, certainly in my book, Dear Friends (2001). Regarding the sentimental, I’m interested in following up on what Eve Sedgwick began in her Epistemology of the Closet, where she addresses binaries in general, and the sentimental in particular, which she understood became the ultimate term of cultural derision as part of the construction of modernism as a sexist and hetero-normative enterprise. To demonstrate this point while teaching, I sometimes draw a vertical line on a blackboard, and over one side I write the word good, and over the other, bad. Virtually all of the negative terms (sentimental, intimate, domestic, modest, decorative, etc.) are encoded as feminine, just as the laudatory terms (heroic, pioneering, monumental, public, risky, unsentimental) are encoded as masculine. And here’s another contextualizing moment: it was the late Craig Owens, who turned me on to Eve Sedgwick’s writings, especially her analysis of the sentimental. This was two years before Craig died of AIDS in 1990. I was excited by passages in her book in which she proposed the rehabilitation of the sentimental as a cultural project for women and gay men. One artist I can easily name succeeded more than most in realizing that project.

TK: In thinking more about this, how do we talk about such things? What was some of your thinking behind your presentation at “Memories Can't Wait”?

DD: I have given talks before and this time I wanted to de-emphasize the telling of stories that underscored my position in relation to loss. At the ICP, I had a hard time keeping it together while reading Bill’s words off his quilt panel, and reading Felix’s remarks in response to seeing Roni Horn’s Paired Gold Mats, for Ross and Felix. I realize that my state—my affect, which I controlled as best I could, was also affecting audience members. I wasn’t trying to make people sad. But, given the nature of what I was showing and addressing, and the emotional present-ness that I tried to maintain in my presentation, that result came as a welcome surprise.
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TK: Tell me more about the part that activism has played in your life.

DD: Activism became a more comfortable part of my life toward the end of the 1970s. At the dawn of the Reagan/Bush era, in 1979, I remember attending the huge “No Nukes” march on Washington as well as others a little later in New York. Those protests dovetailed with others against U.S. intervention in Central and South America. But for me, the most galvanizing march of all remains the National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights [October 11, 1987], which I attended with Bill as part of a large, energized ACT UP contingent. The two of us rode down to DC on one of the many ACT UP buses, and the march was exhilarating. But by the time we converged on the Mall for the post-march rally, Bill was exhausted (by then, AIDS had seriously depleted his stamina), and I had to get us both quickly to the airport to catch the next shuttle home so he could rest.

After participating in a few of the many ACT UP actions throughout 1989, I could neither deepen nor sustain my level of commitment, such as it was. Early in the ’90s, I consulted on a four-part ITVS-funded documentary series about post-Stonewall lesbian and gay politics in the U.S. Produced by the activist video collective Testing the Limits, production extended over a four-year period, roughly from 1991 to 1995. I agreed to edit a book to accompany the series, working on the book with a very intelligent young activist, Ioannis Mookas. When the book was complete, Ioannis asked if I’d work with him to co-produce an hour-long experimental documentary—a video intended as a resource for HIV-prevention educators. I must have been mildly nuts, but I agreed to work on the video, which we called Only Human: Being HIV Negative Gay Men in the AIDS Epidemic. Like all film and video production, the process, which lasted for two years, was very hard, and in this case it ended in disappointment. By the time we completed production and postproduction, I’d developed a serious health problem and withdrew from any further involvement. Ioannis, meanwhile, decided that instead of working with a distributor he would self-distribute our video. If he put any effort into doing so, nothing ever came of it. I don’t believe that the video was ever used for its intended purpose, and thinking about it still gets me steamed.

After I recovered, I chose to direct my energies to an altogether more intimate project that I could realize more or less on my own, with the support of friends. That project became the exhibition and book both known as Dear Friends: American Photographs of Men Together: 1840–1918 (2001). I was so relieved to be working on my own, and that project came to feel like a refuge of sorts.

TK: Do you consider Dear Friends as activism?

DD: I guess it marked such a contrast in relation to what preceded it that no, I haven’t.

TK: Honoring the fact that men have sex with men, and that intimacy between men exists, and has a history, strikes me as a form of holistic health care. It is HIV prevention.

DD: I never thought of that. The project started because I have friends who loved to peruse flea market stalls where they found old, anonymous, abandoned photographs of guys together posing with a kind of intimacy that we all wanted to believe could serve as visual evidence of the gay past that conventional histories denied us. If writing about that—if honoring the collectors’ yearning for visual evidence of a past with which they could identify as gay men—is activism, then it’s a form of activism that challenged and sustained me generously.

TK: For me it goes back to the practice of everyday freedom. These contributions that may seem small add up to flash points. We haven’t really talked about it, but I think one reason there are strong feelings about United in Anger and How to Survive a Plague, as well as the proposed AIDS monument in New York, is that people feel like the work they did in the early days of AIDS, the work they did in their 20s and 30s fighting for their lives, is at risk of being forgotten, and the films and the monument can act as a testament to the contributions they made—proof that their actions mattered.

DD: It’s exciting to see this wealth of new documentaries about AIDS and AIDS activism, but the memorial design looks inadequate—like a futuristic bus shelter. It certainly isn’t anywhere near as powerful as The Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. Although many intelligent people gripe about the kitschification of the Quilt, and although it’s only visible online when it’s not being shown in part or in full, when I think about the potential forcefulness of that anti-monument, it’s a deeply moving memorial.

TK: What does memorial mean?

DD: I think memorials entail historical inscription—or in the case of AIDS, they convey a historical counter-narrative, since conventional histories tend to cater to, and reinforce, the status quo. Lighting a candle can be meaningful, as demonstrated by the ad hoc memorials to Mark Carson that sprang up on the corner of 8th Street and Sixth Avenue after Eliot Morales allegedly shot and killed him. But the historically counter-narrative aspect of the memorials I’m envisioning explains partly why I viewed Felix’s billboard on Sheridan Square as such a remarkable invention. It offered a different conception of what a monument and/or a memorial can be—notable not only for avoiding the elevation of heroes, but also for its impermanence, its limited duration as a public sign rented on privately owned commercial space. Although Felix’s billboard was admittedly gay male-centric, this antimonument was antipatriarchal in its rejection of phallic verticality. When I look at pictures of Carl Andre’s Thirty-seventh Piece of Work, its scale is certainly monumental, yet rigorously flat, but its purpose is anything but memorializing. His subject, after all, is matter. But when I think about a work like Felix’s “Untitled” (Placebo, 1991)—its enactment of disappearance and reappearance (rebirth through replenishment)—I’m moved by the capacity of such a deceptively simple gesture to give affecting poetic shape to the most fundamental, emotionally charged fears and longings related to life, love, and loss.

TK: One can gain access to public feelings through personal feelings.

DD: I try to do something like that in my work too. But as you know, I’ve got my doubts at this juncture. One has to be a seriously good writer, with a formidable poetic gift, to realize such goals.

TK: Or the work can come across as self-indulgent?

DD: Or schmaltzy—or, god forbid, sentimental.
Between apocalyptic apprehensions, and dreams of deliverance is a slide lecture. A script is read aloud as a slide carousel clicks through images and documents of a pilot’s experience in the U.S. Air Force during World War II and the Korean War. The work grapples with military inheritance and historical narratives created by familial photographs. What is at stake is the facilitation of a discussion about the line between war and its representation. “Memories Can’t Wait” symposium organizer Malene Dam spoke with Heather M. O’Brien about her work, the classroom, and the archive.

Malene Dam: Maybe we could speak to the process of your developing this work. I’m curious if you engaged with some of the conversations we were having over the past year, relating to art and war, while you made this slide lecture piece.

Heather M. O’Brien: Yes, the project started during a class that we both were part of in the MFA program at CalArts—The Work of War in Times of Art, lead by Michelle Dizon. We were a diverse group of students who were grappling with how war is understood within the frame of art in the classroom. There were many different perspectives in the room, and we all came to the subject matter with strong cognitive dissonance. War can be difficult to speak about, particularly when you are conversing within a privileged academic frame, far removed from physical conflict. We were trying to find a shared language together. I was looking at war from a place of personal memory, while dealing with family military inheritance. My grandfather was an Air Force pilot in World War II and the Korean War.

MD: The cognitive dissonance came from a similar place for me. I entered our classroom setting with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in mind. I was engaged in demonstrations and activist work around those wars for a number of years while I lived in Copenhagen. When I came to CalArts I felt very removed from the immediacy of my prior work. How could I bring a larger theoretical and artistic conversation about war together with these very intimate, emotional feelings I have around Denmark’s involvement in war? I was living in a new country that was spearheading wars that I fundamentally opposed. There was a difficulty in translating my engagements in this a new context. It was a struggle to understand where to speak from. In your work with your grandfather’s archive I also sense a notion of translation, and I wonder if you were working through a similar struggle to find language to talk about war. You have a hungry theory brain, as I do, and it seems like we were both trying to find a bridge between these different registers of engagement with war’s relationship to art. Does this make sense?

HO’B: Yes, I also wonder about that feeling of removal. It takes time to develop impressions of communal immediacy toward a particular subject matter. Whenever you move to a new location, the political climate and context change. I had been living in New York City for several years before I decided to pursue an MFA at CalArts. It took me a while to adjust to the new landscape of California. In the fall I took a class about visuality and its relationship to globalization; I was also working on a project related to the current state of the prison industrial complex in the U.S. The dialogue I was having in the classroom related to the momentum of Occupy LA, but by the spring the protests had been pushed out of City Hall. When we started the Work of War course I realized that working with the physicality of a personal slide archive could be an intimate way to help me understand the new political place from which I was speaking. I inherited my grandfather’s slides when I moved across the country, and when I found myself in a new setting (CalArts) and
in dialogue about war, I had an urgent feeling to understand a particular military history that was not talked about while I was growing up. What was it about the demonstrations and activist work in Denmark that generated a sense of urgency for you?

MD: Just before I moved to Los Angeles, I co-curated a group exhibition in Copenhagen focusing on the “war on terror.” I was looking specifically at how I felt silenced and had difficulty formulating conversations from the perspective of living in a country that was an ally to war. We looked to art to cultivate this discourse; we sent out an open call for artworks and we spoke to artists around the world who were dealing with the subject of war in their work. Through this process we slowly started to foster a conversation. When I finished working on the show I realized we had hit the seven-year mark of the war in Iraq; my engagement with political work had followed me through finishing high school to pursuing my MFA. This realization felt like a blow to the head. The antiwar protests and my political work had still not adequately prepared me to describe how I felt at that moment. It was not sufficient to say I was opposed the wars. It was much more than that, a much deeper feeling.

HO’B: That feeling you mention reminds me of something brought up in the publication that we worked on after our class1—what does it mean to not feel the effects of war? And somehow it doesn’t seem enough to simply say, “I’m against the war.” Artist and CalArts faculty member Ashley Hunt wrote an essay in our publication that questions if the making of us to “not feel at war” is a carefully calculated tool. He writes, “Is not feeling at war a way of being at war, a technique of war-making? Are feeling and affect, along with the aesthetics of presentation, representation, revealing and concealing, which we think of as tools of art making, themselves tools of warfare?”2 Further, Ashley encourages the asking of meaningful questions regarding one’s relationship to war: “Instead of the question, ‘Are we at war?’ I prefer, ‘How are we at war?’ ‘How’—rather than ‘if’—triggers an inquiry that will not stop at ‘yes’ or ‘no,’ but demands that we continue with more questions . . .” Growing up in the U.S., I felt far away from physical warfare. The closest I felt to conflict were the events of the Columbine school shootings in Colorado, 9/11, and Hurricane Katrina, since I’ve lived in all of the cities where those events occurred. Yet my feelings toward these horrific events have always been at an emotional distance through fabrications of media; my memory constructed by the often fallacious tools of representation. I wonder if the physicality of warfare felt more real for my grandfather, since he was fighting in combat. Yet he was removed from violence in a different way—as a pilot he didn’t see war from the ground, but from the sky. My work with his slides is an attempt to understand the gaps in personal history, which lie somewhere between the moments in which we live, and the moments we are taught about.

MD: You touch on a few different things. I understand the removed feeling of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the illegality of them, as producing a complex silencing. This act of silencing was a structural and strategic rhetorical operation maneuvered by the government in Denmark and President Bush. The gaps of history you speak to also occur in classroom settings, where we displace speaking about the present (perhaps because there is a foreclosure of language); we turn to theory, texts, and artworks for clarity. For me, your grandfather’s aerial photos and your reflections on that terrestrial perspective are linked to the footage we saw in the Western media from Iraq and Afghanistan—a very specific frame. I linked the photos you presented to other photos that felt familiar to me. What is different in your work, however, is the element of performance; you operate a slide projector and bring your grandfather’s photos together with a script, a series of reflections, on what this archive might mean to you in the present. You also open up how your grandfather might have shaped your understanding of war and your country. I heard a personal struggle in the script as it was read alongside the images.

I see exhaustion on his face.
New pilots get conflicting information of danger and promise.
You seemed to be trying to understand your present self through those documents and your inheritance.

HO’B: Yes, the quiver in the voice is an important element to the work, so I’m glad you picked up on it. There is a consideration of the live performance event versus something perfectly crafted, for example if the work was an edited video piece playing on a loop. Although I memorized and rehearsed the script, the feeling is different each time I perform the lecture. What’s there is there; I can’t do a second take or edit something out. My response changes and the inflection of my voice changes as I look at the projected images on a large screen and speak the words aloud to a live audience.

MD: Your comments make me think of your work as related to something we were trying to describe earlier—the difficulty of developing a conversation among us in the Work of War classroom. The quiver of your voice as you speak the script aloud—as you speak to the images you speak with intense vulnerability and courage, which relates to inner feelings of how we, as subjects, are produced in relation to war. There is something very private about it. That way of speaking is not often heard when we talk about politics.

HO’B: The difficulty of developing a conversation in the classroom was also why working on the publication felt so urgent to me. A semester-long course considering art’s relationship to war was much too short of a time frame to fully think through our different positions. We needed more time and space to reflect on our relationship to the course work. For me, the publication goes hand in hand with the slide performance. During the class I was taking a break from working on a long-term project about the Angola Prison in Louisiana—another space of conflict that, when we started the Work of War class, felt very far removed from CalArts. Thus unpacking an internal and private space in which I could consider my relationship to my grandfather’s view of war made a lot of sense. The slides were physically present in my studio; Angola Prison was many miles away. I was also deeply affected by a film we watched in class, Harun Faroki’s Images of the World and the Inscription of War.

MD: I was struck by how your script moves from frank descriptions of family albums, to considerations of your grandmother’s relation to the war and your grandfather being away, to more abstract considerations of photography and the aerial perspective. Could you speak a bit to how the script developed for you? And also how this performance went hand in hand with the publication? You seem to suggest that your work felt entirely linked to how our conversation was developing in the classroom. I am curious about this dynamic.

HO’B: The first iteration of the script was much more theoretical in its rhetoric. I presented an early version of the piece in the spring of 2012. My head was still very much grappling with texts we were reading in the course, along with a book I had picked up about modern air warfare—The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon. I began working on the script again in the fall after spending the summer compiling and editing works for the publication. When I came back to work on the script, I was writing and editing from a place of personal narrative, instead of from an academic place. But what the course and the publication helped me to work through was a clearer sense of positionality. When speaking about a subject matter as loaded as the term war, a subjective space of reflection was the way in which we began to develop a shared language as a group of artists in the class.

Position is something that Michelle Dizon writes about in the publication: “There are different positions involved in war. There are those who are in the war and those who speak about the war. This understanding, of who is speaking and who is not, who is describing and who is being described, underscores the fundamental question of the place from which one speaks. It is this place from which one speaks that is so violently elided when alterity is conceived as an open relationship toward which one should gesture in the name of ethics, without a real engagement with the terms of what lies on the other side.” So it was important for me to write from a personal place but also to write with a respectful and reciprocal sentiment to and for my family narrative. I am wondering if our time together in that course also affected your work after CalArts, as you moved into a different classroom setting in a curatorial studies program at CCS Bard?

MD: Our class and publication asked a very important and fundamental question—what is the place we speak from as artists, and how do we communicate? I am often drawn to these moments of tension, where there is difficulty or lack of language, where we as artists must think deeply about understanding, of who is speaking and who is not, who is describing and who is being described, underscores the fundamental question of the place from which one speaks. It is this place from which one speaks that is so violently elided when alterity is conceived as an open relationship toward which one should gesture in the name of ethics, without a real engagement with the terms of what lies on the other side.” So it was important for me to write from a personal place but also to write with a respectful and reciprocal sentiment to and for my family narrative. I am wondering if our time together in that course also affected your work after CalArts, as you moved into a different classroom setting in a curatorial studies program at CCS Bard?
how we choose to construct things and ideas for a public. But I think you are also asking how this relates to my transition from a studio art MFA program to now being in the setting of a curatorial studies MA program. I have turned to these moments of conversation in the classrooms as an essential location for me to think through what curating might mean to me. How can we come to hear what the work is trying to develop a language around? What assumptions are being made when we bring artworks together? How do we think about listening, collaboration, and conversation as fundamental steps in curating?

HO’B: In that sense, it seems we both share a deep respect for the shared learning environment— the classroom space.

MD: Yes. And since you just graduated from CalArts yesterday, the question now becomes how you maintain the practice you developed in the context of school outside the structure of the institution.

HO’B: Well, I think we are both invested in a very particular type of classroom, where academic freedom is not reduced to pure consumerism. Paulo Freire might refer to this space as one in which the individual cultivates her own growth through situations from daily life, to produce useful learning experiences. I feel lucky to have spent the past two years working with several faculty and students who were invested in radical pedagogy within CalArts. My hope is that I can continue to participate in collective learning experiences, without the hefty tuition price tag. For example, during the recession in 2008–2010, a collaboration with the Work Progress Collective in New York City provided me with a particular educational space outside of an expensive institution, during a treacherous economic time frame. A lot of it is about timing, and finding committed comrades who share the same enthusiasm, and seeking out alternative modes for conversation, such as symposiums like “Memories Can’t Wait”. Which actually brings me to a question about the symposium—can you share your thoughts in thinking through the theme and its structure around the archive? I am curious about the symposium’s relationship, if any, to the Archive Fever exhibition at ICP in 2008.

MD: Well, to go back to my first question about practice outside of the classroom, the symposium was led by concerns relating to that. The event was a collaboration between ICP Bard and CCS Bard, the curatorial program I’m in at the moment. Two graduate students from each program were paired to develop a symposium. We wanted to cultivate a conversation between the two programs, outside of a traditional classroom structure. We also realized a larger issue to tackle: although there are many art schools in the New York area, there are few chances to come together to share and develop work.

As to your question about the concept of the archive, this was initially an easy connection between the two programs—the archive ties to notions of curating and photography. While I was at CalArts I wrote about Archive Fever in terms of artistic and curating strategies. During our planning meetings for the symposium we looked at how and why certain narratives and subjects are omitted in history. We decided to group individuals by positions and methodologies within various contexts and histories. We decided to look at strategies they used. We did not want to perpetuate already stable narratives, but instead disrupt them. A specific example was the group presentation you were part of. In some ways you were all speaking to World War II, but a more important question was how you were all working through inherited stories vis-à-vis the family album. Since there was no way of validating the stories behind your family heirlooms, you had to speculate, make up, and trouble how and in what ways these stories had affected you.

HO’B: I appreciated the thought that went into the groupings at the symposium. It was interesting for me to return to ICP after completing the one-year certificate program in Advanced Photographic Studies in 2009. My perspective had shifted quite a bit, due to the CalArts experience, and it was important to converse with New York-based MFA students and realize that we were working through similar questions regarding inheritance and war through imagery. I also enjoyed the roundtable conversation in the room after the presentations. The dialogue included an interesting mix of students from CalArts, Parsons, and ICP. The notion of ethics and representation came up in the dialogue, which was due to the journalistic images that were up on the gallery walls of the school during the symposium.

When I studied at ICP there was a very clear division between the two different one-year programs—1) Photojournalism and 2) General Studies (a studio art/photo program). ICP was founded by war photographer and photojournalist Cornell Capa, who coined the phrase “concerned photographer.” At my ICP graduation ceremony there was constant praise for the photojournalism program and preferred honoring of the “concerned” graduates. This made several of us “artists” feel inadequate to the “journalists”—in fact we were actually told by one faculty member that we weren’t “helping” others since our “artwork” was coming from a different place. One statement made to us was, “Are you going to make art, or are you going to care?” I didn’t understand why the choice had to be one or the other. Having the graduate experience at CalArts and thinking through the place from which I was speaking furthered my inquiries about ethics, positionality, and alterity in a productive way. Being back at ICP for the symposium years later to present a piece that touched on issues of war and its representation offered a timely unpacking of questions around the role of art, the role of photojournalism, and one’s own position to the familial archive.

1. Meta World Peace (2012) is a multi artist collaboration and a response to the course by 12 artists toward the contemporary world as a site of global war, via the media of writing, video, photography, critical theory, and graphic design. Dialogue begun in The Work of War in Times of Art continued beyond the CalArts classroom into this print publication, which allowed the artists to position themselves within a specific political space, while they also further considered deliberations and questions that occurred throughout the course.


Restricted Navigator’s Information File, April 1944:
Learn what the wild waves are saying. At all times remember you are using your own judgment or estimation of the wind.
The appearance and roughness of the sea depends upon a number of factors, not solely on the strength of the wind locally.
You can see a definite wave formation with scattered white caps making their first appearance.
You can catch a wind shift by watching the surface of the sea.
THE PROCESS AND PLEASURE OF COLLECTING:
A NON–INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH

PATRICIA SILVA INTERVIEWS RITA BARROS, CASSANDRA LANGER, MICHAEL PINTO, LIZ SALES, AND ANDRES SERRANO

To bring personal space into conversations about the archive, as a counter-balance to the institutional, Patricia Silva asked the following five collectors to join a panel about what they collect for their personal satisfaction and why. These five panelists—artists, photographers, and cultural critics—are better known for their individual creative practices than for what they collect. Excerpts of conversations with the panelists are featured here. Patricia writes:

An individual collector’s voice naturally speaks the language of wonder. However, collections are often measured by their market value, rarely by the astonishment they illicit in a collector upon discovery. Culturally, we experience collections as private property on orderly display in institutional vitrines or pedestals, even as collectors’ homes are constantly altered to accommodate patterns of selection and accumulation. So, I began asking around: What do people collect for private use? How do people collect solely for the pleasure of emotional company, without market value in mind? These five stories of discernment and persistence reveal how collections and collectors can sustain each other beyond the initial instinct.

RITA BARROS, photographer
Patricia Silva: Have you always identified as a deaccessionist? Or is that a reaction to a previous way of life, or a past experience?
Rita Barros: My father was a serious collector of old books; he had them bound in exquisite materials and placed them in his library for us to admire. He also collected porcelain. I grew up surrounded by beautiful objects that were cherished. Later on, my ex-husband was a compulsive buyer and seller. He would create a collection and, next I knew, it was gone. In the early ’80s I helped him create a collection of rare photographs, which, sadly, had to be sold. I learned not to become attached to valuable things.

PS: What is the pleasure of not collecting?
RB: It’s impossible to throw away what isn’t there in the first place. I suppose I collected unconsciously—objects that I didn’t consider a collection since they were not “noble” (expensive, et cetera). And then one day I felt cluttered and needed to clear the space. My bookshelves have been emptied a number of times to give room to the next batch. Throwing away feels like a victory, and the emptiness it creates kicks in a new excitement. To make room for my new life, out they go.

PS: What does the term private collection mean to you?
RB: A private collection is a way to create a perfect world. The search for the objects is exciting, and the finding even more exciting. Each piece adds a new dimension, a new understanding. I would compare it to a great novel.

PS: Is there more than one way to deaccess? Or is it a simple rejection?
RB: I don’t know that it is a rejection per se, but a way of moving on to the next step. A collection fills the space, and one needs room, mentally and physically, to expand one’s interests into new areas. And there is also the pleasure of giving things away.
CASSANDRA LANGER, cultural critic
Patricia Silva: How long have you been collecting your film noir stills?
Cassandra Langer: About 30 years.
PS: How did you begin collecting them?
CL: I started out by taking a class in black-and-white film at a studio lab. So I learned a good deal about hands-on techniques in the darkroom. I jumped right in with fashion photography because I had been modeling for runway products as a teenager and did some early TV work.
PS: As a cultural critic, you must find your collection useful for research. Is that its primary function?
CL: Yes and no. Yes, it enabled my research interests as an art historian/cultural critic, but the pure pleasure of finding extraordinary things was the prime motivation; the practical grew out of the love of the chase.
PS: Do you reach out to others who collect the same and engage in dialogue with them?
CL: I rarely reach out to others unless they have already revealed themselves to be film buffs and take a particular interest in film noir. It is a special genre and requires a highly developed sensibility. The alienation in film noir is one of the most appealing things about it. Those of us who collect it generally understand marginalization and its effects on populations pushed to the fringes of society.

MICHAEL PINTO, creative director
Patricia Silva: You grew up the son of an artist and collector of antique clocks. What was it like growing up with another collector?
Michael Pinto: Very inspiring: the house was filled with a diverse collection of objects. My father would explore something new, exhaust it, and move on. Most of the objects were very carefully curated; my father might have looked at hundreds of antiques before bringing one back. He would look for diamonds in the rough and then restore them.
PS: Has your father influenced how and what you collect?
MP: What I learned was to follow my passion and not be afraid to explore subjects that I didn’t know. I also learned that all of these objects tell stories, and that you can connect people to art with those stories.
PS: Will you elaborate on the act of discerning? What are your criteria for choosing what you collect?
MP: Some collectors are “completeists” and must own every item relating to something. As an art student in the ’80s, I lacked both physical space and financial means to acquire everything that I might see. So, even back in the ’80s, I was forced to think carefully before I’d buy something. Sometimes I’d skip lunch and spend the money on manga or art books, because the books would be around much longer than a meal. I’d look for books that were high quality and unusual.
PS: How and when do your collections inform your creative practice?
MP: Some people think of design as decoration, but to me it’s a field all about problem solving and storytelling. So part of that process is doing research to better understand your problem. My collections enable me to really think outside the box, and examine different mediums.

ANDRES SERRANO, artist
Patricia Silva: What does your collection consist of?
Andres Serrano: I collect objects from the 17th century or earlier, most of them religious: sculptures, paintings, and objects and furniture that are Medieval, Gothic, and Renaissance.
PS: For how long have you been collecting from this time period?
AS: Almost twenty years.
PS: How did you begin collecting your objects?
AS: I started collecting Art Deco objects in the early ’80s. I didn’t have much money, so many of my Art Deco finds came from thrift stores and flea markets. As I started to make more money and travel, I began going to flea markets and antique stores in Europe. The more I made, the more I could afford things from the 19th or 18th century. At some point I decided that the 17th century or earlier was my period, and I’d stick to that.
PS: What is the best thing for you, about collecting?
AS: The best thing about collecting is living with your collection. Since everything in the house is handpicked, I live among the objects I’ve chosen to surround myself with. It’s like living in a museum, church, and castle!

LIZ SALES, photographer
Patricia Silva: How long have you been collecting your ephemera?
Liz Sales: I have been collecting ephemera (pamphlets, flyers, newspaper, and magazine clippings) on my own for some time. Only within the past two years have I been digitizing material from the organized ephemera collections of institutions such as libraries and archives. Because of the work I make, I often most digitize the material that they have filed under the subject heading camera. I enjoy seeing what other people have classified as “camera” and how that has changed over time.
PS: What is the best thing about culling images from institutions?
LS: The best thing has been gaining an understanding of how other people organize the world and how they see and organize information differently from my way of doing things. The Picture Collection at the Mid-Manhattan Library has an ephemeral folder entitled “The Future.” Because the library has collected ephemera for almost one hundred years, this file lets me see the material that many generations of librarians have classified as “The Future.”
PS: What is the best thing for you, about collecting?
LS: The best thing has been transformed, how has it evolved?
LS: My collection was transformed when I added a digital component. Now it is not only a resource tool to which I refer, but also it contains digital files that I have manipulated and reproduced.
PS: What is the best thing for you, about collecting ephemera in the way that you do?
LS: I like to discover material. An ephemera file does not function the way a search engine does. Search engines rank information based on its popularity and relevancy, and return information in order of relevance and popularity. No hierarchical structure exists within an ephemera file, meaning that there is more room for discovery.

IMAGE:
Collections as dialogue: since childhood, Chinese American artist Martin Wong obsessively collected objects, from the rare to the disposable. Artist Danh Vo combats Wong’s collection to develop a narrative of parallel histories and circumstances. Selected by Wong, arranged by Vo, these objects are decontextualized to illustrate juxtapositions and accumulations relevant to both artists.

THou present fragments of KGB files as ready-made texts in the tradition of found artifacts. But unlike Marcel Duchamp, who claimed in 1941 that the essence of a work of art is the mind of the artist, you select, display, and value these texts as a kind of bureaucratic calligraphy preserved by a unique flow and line. By appropriating the brush stroke of the censors or thetypists' eye, you divert this knowledge or (rather, its obliteration) away from something private that is hidden for public consumption and turn it into a form of poetic discourse of subjugation: the burial of oversight beneath camouflage. Are these formal qualities hidden in the unseen, unedited secret files which only become visible when obscured by the blind instruments? Is there a kind of beauty in the official gesture of concealment?

THou: Although Decamps may have not applied aesthetic qualities of ready-mades he did certainly do it for their particular use-values, implicit connata tions, and nonsensicality. By this way act his document is a type of neomimesis, in the modern sense of the word, seeing how he broke down all former rules with this very act of discrimination what is art and what is documentation a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), what is released is often discretionarily and therefore selectively. This is because not all redaction has become automatic. In other words, digitalization is becoming more and more a fact, after the FOIA shows that much has been illegally edited. It is deciding what to refuse and in physical layers of the archive the bureaucratic lunatics seem to have inadvertently found the role of abstract painter. Using photocopies, the chosen colors are black and white, leaving the whole page looking stretches of abstract fields. Certain painterly switches remain as quite overlooked one, one point group with a marble, or a large strip of a chart (connection field) analysis to the context of the flow to speak. The scible of the hand marks unique erasure, in contrast to the bureaucratic calligraphy, making the whole sections of the page. Hacking back to the ultimate power of the scribal, it is the bureaucratic who composes truth, reality in a single hand, from an account, what to reveal. Foucault aptly points to those things that have been omitted as also part of the archive. Similarly, the FOIA results refer to all those missing pages, blank spaces, as the invisibility of the text is still readable. What content remains?

THou: What are archival memories waiting for? In southern India you exhibited bi ditive form together with the book that had first documented the distinctive plant species for Europeans. The Dutch East India Company established a 17th-century colonial enterprise amidst the lush tropical gardens of Koler, the Hortus Malabaricus, published in Amsterdam, systematized and codified botanical knowledge of the region's timber and spice plants. In its retrieval, the volume becomes a time capsule describing the biodiversity of southwestern India and shapes the Company transported within its territories as slaves, servants, or free citizens. 21st-century genealogies and exchanges of information become part of oral tradition, not just memory conten t of the collective. Is there a kind of beauty in the national interaction with a mnemonic register.

A CONVERSATION ON SILENCE:
STEPHANIE SMITH-STRICKLAND AND PIETER PAUL POTHOVEN

During the symposium “Memories Can’t Wait,” Pieter Paul Pothoven presented Silent Dinner for Seven (2013). This project centers on an artifact from World War II, an old wooden spoon that his grandfather, who was active in the Dutch resistance, used in an unknown prison camp in the Netherlands. This object has been circulating in Pothoven’s family for almost seventy years, but they have little information about his grandfather’s whereabouts during the war. The spoon witnessed a tragic past, yet it is preserved in the silence of generations for which the past was too painful to recollect.

Pothoven’s research focuses on this silence, in which the past manifests itself but is not yet clarified. During his presentation Pothoven answered questions about the intergenerational transmission of trauma that takes place through silence. Can we speak of postmemory? How urgent is it for our generation to connect to previous generations’ experiences? How does collective visual culture—in this case Dutch film and museum culture—shape the imagination in relation to a personal past and the objects that belong to it? In what ways can we use silence, as space of imagination, to reconcile with the past in our present?

Stephanie Smith-Strickland: Did you know the history of the spoon even though it wasn’t talked about in detail?

Pieter Paul Pothoven: My family always grew up with the knowledge that my grandfather was active in the resistance against the Nazi occupation. The spoon was stored in a cabinet full of precious antiques. If you asked my mother Eva about any other antique object she could go on for hours. The moment you touched the spoon however, it was like a machine shutting down.

SS-S: When there’s a history of family trauma, it imprints itself on the children and their children. Does Eva’s reaction to questions about the spoon make you feel like what happened to your grandfather imprinted itself on her, and then you, in some way?

PPP: Yes, absolutely.

SS-S: How?

PPP: Second- and third-generation trauma is evident. There’s been a lot written about it. In my personal case, my mother was born in 1944, the last year of the war. She didn’t see her biological parents for the first years of her life. She was born and then immediately smuggled to a host family in the liberated part of The Netherlands. She grew up with traumatized parents that picked her up after the war, so psychologically she was incredibly affected. I don’t know exactly how that transmits to my generation, but I do know I grew up with a traumatized mother.

SS-S: Was it something you always knew or did you realize it when you were older?

PPP: The importance of the war and everything that happened became most evident to me when she refused to speak about it. She really just blocked it out. It made me wonder, who owns the past? Is there a necessity and responsibility to transmit history? Grappling with those questions is hard and
MEMORIES CAN'T WAIT

frustrating at times.
SS-S: You said the spoon is a “testimonial object” that documents a past that is too painful to speak about. When you were creating Silent Dinner for Seven did you feel it was cathartic?

PPP: It was more than just cathartic. It was a way of finding out how this silent past is present. It helped me to understand and to create a symbolic ritual to articulate the presence of the past in a more accessible and less repressed way. I made a deal with Eva: in exchange for the spoon, I would never ask her about the past again. She agreed, and that’s our deal.

SS-S: Do you ever plan to return it?
PPP: No, it’s part of this installation now.

SS-S: I couldn’t imagine knowing that a history that powerful was there and not being able to talk about it.
PPP: It was hard because I felt that Eva was withholding something that wasn’t completely hers. I know it’s painful for her, on the other hand, I often felt like saying, “If you’re not going to tell it now, then when? What will happen if you refuse to share the past?”

SS-S: Do you think she doesn’t want to remember, or do you think she can’t? This is a bit off topic, but a while ago I was reading a book on the trauma women suffered after the genocide in Rwanda. The author said that when she interviewed survivors it wasn’t that they didn’t want to remember, it was more as if they had developed a collective amnesia. Silence and repression became the only way they could function from day to day.

PPP: I think everybody who experienced war has to repress certain memories in order to be able to operate in everyday life. Through this project I learned a lot about gender and the transmission of history. My grandfather was extremely masculine. In the context of this specific history, I realized how Eva both transmits the past in her own particular way, and is a successful barricade to that sort of masculinity. Looking at these specific forms of transmission of postmemory—the response of the second and third generation to the trauma of the first—one person that inspired me was Marianne Hirsch. She’s an inspiring writer who introduces postmemory from a feminist point of view.

SS-S: It didn’t occur to me until recently that a traumatic experience could be so wholly uniquely based on gender.
PPP: It definitely gives you a different read. Some argue that “hunger doesn’t know gender,” but I am convinced that in almost every war situation women suffer more. Even afterwards, there is more silence around their suffering than men’s. I do have to say that our generation recognizes this more than previous ones, but still, a lot of work has to be done. Our generation is really invested in discovering our identity through research of a past that continues to have a profound impact, although we haven’t witnessed it ourselves. Eva comes from the generation of the baby boomers, the generation of working hard and not looking back. She always says: “If you look in the past, you plow crooked.”

Whereas I think that when we look at the past and find constructive ways to reactivate it even when it isn’t easy, then at least we know who we are, where we come from, and what we share. I want to stress that empathy is very important. It’s not helpful just to keep the wound open, as we see in some commemorative practices. I’m convinced there are more gentle and reconciliatory ways to incorporate the past into our present.

SS-S: Has your mother seen Silent Dinner for Seven?
PPP: No, not yet

SS-S: Would you show it to her?
PPP: Of course. She knew the moment she gave me the spoon that I would do something with it.

SS-S: Your project specifically resonated with me because I felt I could relate to having an unclaimed history that’s yours but still feels very distant. Some of the things that your mother is reluctant to talk about are part of a larger, well-recorded history. Maybe to us sharing an individual experience within that larger history shouldn’t seem so out of place?

PPP: That was one of the reasons why I wanted to hear the story of Eva. I already knew the grand narrative of the Netherlands and the Second World War. I have obsessively watched every film, documentary, and ministries that’s been made about the Dutch resistance since the end of the war. I feel that my story in particular could help create a different image of the very specific masculine figure of the resistance fighter. The things that I hear, see, and read I am unable to glue together with the situation I’m in. There’s a gap between what I experience and what I see presented on the screen and in museums; but it’s hard to counter a narrative with no narrative. So that’s a conflict I have. How can I have my own experience when I’m overwhelmed by this cultural history infected with “sameness”? That’s something I’m trying to figure out.

SS-S: As you figure it out, and as people view your work, is there anything you want them to take away from it? Perhaps some new narrative?
PPP: Well, I hope that I can show that you can activate a past without a paranoid demystification. Inviting the past to the dinner table as a silent guest—eventually it leads to a more embodied and affective experience with the past. So, yes, I hope that people are affected by it. On another level, it’s also a critique on the self-indulgent way Dutch museums represent the resistance fighter. The resistance was small, yet as we speak, there are ten resistance museums in the Netherlands. The representation of the resistance fighter is heroic, isolated behind museum glass—monolithic and un-touchable. There seems to be no place for a study of gender roles or failures to change the course of war, or to embed objects in an emotional context of anxiety, trauma, or difficulties in postwar life. These issues I am familiar with, coming from a family damaged by the war. This memory does not match the historical figure presented in these museums.

SS-S: I can understand its significance for you personally, but I can also appreciate how you communicate this idea of unspoken histories very broadly. It makes it easy for others to apply personal experiences.

PPP: If I can make an object and have a comparative experience with someone with such a radically different background, that’s amazing. That’s much better than I was hoping for.
Silent Dinner for Seven (2013), installation detail, 7 silver spoons, 7 x 2" each.
Her face was painted black and her eyes were two black wooden knobs attached, not by a tangle of nerves and capillaries, but by thick, double-ended screws. “Cheaply built, bad genes,” her in-laws would say a little too audibly. She always wore a small, velvet-lined sack of chicken bones around her neck. The velvet was a deep, cool purple and the opening of the sack was cinched together with golden drawstrings. I’ve seen her, slender and elegant, in a pearl-embroidered qipao, a garment better known as the crudely Anglicized cheongsam; I’ve found her tossed onto the side of the road, turned over and rained on; and I’ve seen her naked, her flesh scalloped and dimpled with repulsive old age. And always, there was the little purple pouch, permanently lodged into the concavity of her nape.

In dark New Orleans alleyways, she pulled strangers close and scattered the chicken bones onto damp sidewalks by their feet. Squatting down like a schoolboy, she would see their futures in the bones—of a so-called peach blossom lucky streak later that year, of bitter loss the next. She never asked for money in return, just a hard-bargained prayer.

I don’t think she looked back often, not at her family’s tragedy near Xi Hu, nor the war and the bombings. Eventually, she started dying her hair black to match her black hair and her black knobby eyes. Eventually, she forgot the admonishment of her dead twin sister, who was always the more divine seer, and started reading the bones for herself, just to pass the time. One December day she wrote to me to say that she couldn’t figure out why each reading got more and more devastating, and out of desperation, she scattered the bones again and again, over and over. The next day, in a hypnotic lysis, an incomprehensibly arbitrary moment, her arteries collapsed as the little rusty nails that held her together finally came loose.
“Lay on top of me,” He’d ask me softly.
“Lie,” I’d correct him.
Lie, lies indeed.

During those years the whole world changed. When the fighting stopped, we were left with a bewitching ringing in our ears, and nobody knew for sure if the buzz was relief or shell shock. So in a daze we walked down to the sea to let the gentle lapping waves lick our wounds clean, not knowing that the sand and salt brought ashore by our brothers and sisters from across the strait would only scrub rawer our unhealed flesh. So we cried together and ached together, and in the mass of unrecognizable puffy faces and dehydrated eyes, we only knew each other by the geological patterns of our vermillion scabs.

I never knew what he saw in me.

His wife was beautiful. She spoke good English and believed in this “God” and His God-damned Bible. I would picture her soft naked body glistening like a tiny jade pendant, polished into the shape of a glorious lioness poet, sprawled out in my crude, cracked palm. Maybe what he saw was that my cheeks were permanently stained with tears and dirt, resembling the pattern of his own wood-grain skin, and so, naïvely, he mistook me for his kin.

On summer nights the cicadas sang the blues, and I lay awake caressing his slumbering mahogany face, his dovetail elbows, his veneered beard. Then in my dreams I would see my far-away Tom Thumb, his insatiable hunger, and the two of us, hand in hand, howling at the moon.

When I woke in the morning, I had born him two bastard sons. By the time he put on his starched officers’ fatigue and his wedding band, I was already slaving away in the backyard trying to break apart the tangled roots of the Japanese knotweeds that sprang into hedges overnight. I squeezed my fingers deep into the earth to figure out whence their relentlessness came. By dusk, their thorns had scratched into me the wrinkles of an old woman, and all I had left was a melancholic whimper to greet our maidenly moon.

“Gueh-niu,” I’d call out to it in my dialect.
“Yue-liang,” he’d say in his.
And our boys just sang, “La-la-la… Lay, lady, lay.”

Anyway, I guess the joke was on me. All I ever really wanted were his lies.
At the symposium, Bernard Yenelouis gave a presentation entitled “Anarchiving Detroit.” Using his images of Detroit in tandem with images taken from media and private sources, Yenelouis offered a retrospective reading of Fordist principles of production underlying the private, as evidenced in snapshots, news photography, and civic boosterism. Deirdre Donohue, ICP Librarian, was in the audience at Yenelouis’ presentation. The following is an email correspondence between Yenelouis and Donohue that took place in the May after the symposium.

On Sat, May 4, 2013 at 3:55 PM, Deirdre Donohue wrote:

The ICP/CCS Bard Symposium was like an Amish barn raising, as so much in the ICP-Bard MFA program is a collaborative creative endeavor done out of passion and neighborliness, with all of its messy interactions and all of its wildly smart and provocative results. This mini-crowd-sourced symposium was also the perfect venue for you to share your thoughts about your work! It was the ideal kind of public program from an institution that exhibits and collects as well as teaches. I really loved your part, particularly.

Your archive is Collyer Brothers-esque, and enthralling for all that. The way you mix thrift store finds and library research with family artifacts to illustrate and elucidate the multiple histories of your hometown, Detroit.

From a wild profusion of facts and images, though, comes the terrific order of your mind, which makes sense of Detroit’s story, and how it became inscribed on you and your family.

The best is how enriched the narrative becomes with your conversation with philosophy, pop culture, economics, and I even feel like it is open-ended and welcoming more and more detail.

After 6 months, is this line of inquiry still growing?

On Sat, May 4, 2013 at 5:36 P.M., Bernard Yenelouis wrote:

First off, I would like to unpack the term “hometown” as it doesn’t seem to fit. Hometown sounds too “honey”—it implies too much of a sense of belonging. I’ve lived elsewhere most of my life & I say “I am from there” as that is the bald fact of it, without a sense of home, or belonging. There might be some yearning in my work—a yearning for a place, or a sense of belonging, but that kind of resolution is not there—or I hope it isn’t. What I try to retrieve from the past isn’t a sense of unity, maybe more a map of illusions.

I tend to think I don’t have enough material, but when I try to assess what I have, it can instead appear to be too much. For my purposes “too much is never enough” (thinking of the Morris Lapidus autobiography here—which has little to do with the story directly, but maybe—well, Lapidus designed a fantasy of modernity in Miami Beach that relates well to the rupture & efflorescence of the Fordist world, a quasi-Germanic “longing for the south”—with a great magical jet-plane distance from the line & the factories, as a sunny, tropical culmination of “getting ahead”—all the semiotic displays of the good life, from the bright sun overhead to the fleur-de-lis in the polished floor of the Fontainebleau Hotel).

Initially the work was about architecture—but the architecture of Detroit is not like Los Angeles, which I thought was my “subject” for a long time (& Los Angeles may be another Fordist dream—there’s a residual Manifest Destiny built into Detroit, a near religion of highways & a distance travel to a newer, better, warmer place), it is conservative. The factories were modern, but the official city of offices & developments before WWII looks backwards, as it were. Italianate office buildings, clad in limestone, sober & un-special. The rich lived in pastiches of historical styles, the most notable perhaps being Horace Trumbauer’s Rose Terrace, a copy of the Petit Trianon in Versailles, for Mrs. Horace Dodge—I visited it as a child & I have some instamatic snaps of it somewhere! Or in more middle-class terms there is an apartment building on Woodward, the Alhambra, which is I believe still standing—yellow brick with “Moorish” detailing—in a neighborhood of squat stucco-&-timber Tudor houses. All of it is a kind of conventional domesticity raised with walls of fantasy.

But then I could not tell if I was simply trying to recall what seemed a kind of violence to the landscape of my childhood. Weekly, my family would drive to Northland, a Victor Gruen designed mall in Southfield, to go to J.L. Hudson’s. I recall driving through endless fields in Oakland County to get to Northland, [fields] which were systematically being built up in the following years. That sort of then-constant suburban decentralization is how I remember it. How did vacant lots become filled with acre upon acre of suburban houses & strip malls?

And perhaps, if I could say this, is an internalized narrative related to my sense of the loss of childhood. I would also point out that one of the big developers in that time in the early 1960s was Kaufman & Broad; Eli Broad later relocated to Los Angeles to make an even bigger fortune. What I saw was really happening. So perhaps this is all about the intersection of my subjectivity, a sense of the urban/suburban, and virulent codes of entrepreneurship, real estate, capitalism, inscribed in that city.

And I think of my parents’ generation—they were mostly the children of immigrants, and there was a very conscious break with the past in their sense of assimilation. They could be fairly vocal about rejecting any ties to the past and I don’t think that was particular or special, that was how things were done, at least how they saw it. What a harsh sense of the present to live with. While sustaining ties to the Church, to a sense of general nation-state (as we could term it now) “traditions.”

On Sat, May 4, 2013 at 6:08 P.M., Bernard Yenelouis wrote:

For my family, questioning the incessant progress, the constant relocation of things was tantamount to being a Communist or something equally dreadful.

The photographs from then, along with my photographs from now: Is it necessary to disrupt the images, when, especially from the past, they are already ruined? Or is what I am doing trying to animate the images. The conventionality of snapshots can be overwhelming, however, the “punctum” with these images is now time rather than the array of unruly quirks within the image.

For me there is something horrible about the images, too—but that doesn’t mean I want to leave them.
On Sat, May 4, 2013 at 7:38 P.M., Deirdre Donohue wrote:

It’s very interesting how emotional your relationship is to the material, because your thesis show was in the coolest, most unsentimental, architectural setting possible. When you spoke at the conference, the passion was there, evident in the vigorous accumulation of material and information, as well as your actual desire to pack as much of it into the time allotted as possible, a kind of informational “horror vacui.”

Your comment about your family’s lack of connection to these activities reminds me that you have been enveloped in Proust in the last six months. How is that affecting your progress?

On Sun, May 5, 2013 at 9:50 A.M., Bernard Yenelouis wrote:

I think each school program develops its own atmosphere. I was in a tiny program in a large research university. These are simply my school memories, now. I was happiest in the great libraries and in my academic classes, but beyond the particulars of the situation, I was also finding where it felt the most comfortable, with how I could “process” my experience.

All of this leads to my own sense of looking at detritus, as it were, whether in a shoebox of snapshots or in the now lunar landscapes of abandoned industries that I visited in more recent times, and trying to find some sort of design linking it all. For me it was a way to connect (such a pop term) to both the vanished world of my family—they are all gone—and the world I think they thought was the lay of the land.

On Sun, May 5, 2013 at 11:04 A.M., Bernard Yenelouis wrote:

Proust uses art as a model, as well as the books he reads, the stories he knows, which are all in a process of revealing themselves to him, continually, a kind of interior cartography. And Proust is best re-read. The major lesson I have learned is: reading is re-reading.

On Sun, May 5, 2013 at 9:55 P.M., Deirdre Donohue wrote:

Proust and Koolhaas make me think about what I think is the gradually emerging prominence of a kind of economic philosophy in what you write about yourself and what you make.

Economics and culture.

Proust, because it amuses me to think of you in 1960s Detroit, in 1980s Lower East Side, and in 1990s Williamsburg as some sort of equivalence of his Paris. I think of your education of the eye and mind in a place teeming with culture and transgression, but where the rude awareness of class, cash, and the role of the underclass overlays it all.

On Sun, May 5, 2013 at 11:03 P.M., Bernard Yenelouis wrote:

I know jack about economics, but enough to see that “economics” and monetization of culture appears everywhere, including the secluded Academy, and my peripatetic existence has somehow been on the cutting edge of decades-long waves of gentrification in NYC. Now that I’m in Ithaca—that’s a stretch—could it happen here?!

Proust is about reading/re-reading, as are texts like Delirious New York, and Sebastien Marot’s “Palimpsestuous Ithaca” [still-not-published, but it exists as a videotaped lecture from the GSD at Harvard], which I know through Brendan. Marot’s essays were very helpful for me too. I sent one of Marot’s essays to Mike when he was teaching in Rome—Mike responded that it made him realize that Rome isn’t that much different than New Jersey!
On Mon, May 6, 2013 at 12:03 P.M., Deirdre Donohue wrote:

It struck me that you were returning to your hometown, and places and images and events of the past, but the ideas were very allied with philosophical points of views that were formed since you left there, if that makes any sense.

On Mon, May 6, 2013 at 12:14 A.M., Bernard Yenelouis wrote:

My ideas for an archive came out of readings: Walter Benjamin, Gerhard Richter, Kaja Silverman on Richter. It began with the idea of parataxis—putting together items that had no relation, allowing them to be together as such, to generate meanings from that. This allowed my collections, or archive—I’m not sure what it is—to stand alone, as it were, and be inclusive of very disparate materials. I’m still working with this—it’s a way for me to be less linear, & to expand my concepts & do a bit of time-travel. Most of the materials I used were from the past & it was a way to disobey time, at least partially, as both a retrieval and an exhumation. I could be an archaeologist with my past—digging out fragments of things, to try to piece together a missing whole.

I agree with you in bringing up the idea of intense pleasure(s) found in the archive. If I were to simply follow a historical trajectory, that would be so oppressive, so determined, so claustrophobic. In my materials there’s a dead city, a long-gone family, & it goes elsewhere too—different cities, different people—it’s ghostly, and in that cohabitation with these ghosts there is a surprising camaraderie. If I may be so bold with an archive.
MARIAM GHANI AND PRADEEP DALAL IN CONVERSATION

The practices of Mariam Ghani and Pradeep Dalal examine how to approach architecture—to create dialogues between seemingly disparate spaces and times. In conversation on December 15, they queried each other about the functions of their work.

Mariam Ghani: I’d like to discuss two related projects, the video A Brief History of Collapses and the book Afghanistan: A Lexicon, which focuses on the production, politics, and poetics of space. In a way, you could say that both projects sprang from the same set of questions. What does history look like from the perspective of a building? If a building could write a history—if it would be troubled by such a foolish wish—how would that history be written? Does a building remember? Where does its memory reside? Is it in the building that is now, the physical fact—the building that was, the image or record—or the building that could be or could have been, the idea?

Afghanistan: A Lexicon, which I co-wrote with my father, the anthropologist Ashraf Ghani—uses the form of the lexicon, and in particular cross-references, to show not only how the legacies of Amanullah and his ideal city, Dar al-Aman, are intertwined, but also how those legacies connect to other places, spaces, and people. Lexicon traces the various constructions, destructions, and reconstructions of Afghanistan over the 20th century by mapping the histories of, and associated with, specific buildings, intersections, and infrastructures, which are presented as definitions of 71 terms, most of which are paired in the printed Lexicon with original or archival images. Within each entry you find underlined words, which refer you to other terms and entries in the lexicon. This form allows for overlapping or multiple accounts of the same events, people, and places, enabling us to present this particular period as a recursive cycle of reforms, revolts, collapses, and recoveries.

The second project, A Brief History of Collapses, developed from research into the architectural similarity between two buildings built two hundred years and thousands of miles apart—the Museum Fridericianum in Kassel, Germany, and the Dar al-Aman Palace built by Amanullah west of Kabul. As soon as the similarity was pointed out to me I imagined a project in which two cameras would track in tandem through the two buildings.

The video is 22 minutes long and designed to be watched on a loop, ideally several times. Two cameras travel through the two buildings, sometimes on parallel courses, sometimes mirrored, in pursuit of two figures that continually escape the frame. Meanwhile, voiceover narration winds back and forth through some of the histories, myths, intentions, uses, values, and crises that surround and connect the buildings and the cities for which they stand.

The research process for this project was long and went through several phases. In the first, I explored the actual spaces of the buildings in the present, through the lens, generating many photographs. Then I started researching the buildings in the past, in the archives, in the written, photographic, and cinematic records, and in the stories told around them that operate more as legends than fact, rarely committed to print. I put together this diagram, which maps all the different events, people, ideas, and so on that I could now connect to each other through one or the other or both of the buildings. Again, you could see it as human history processed through or framed by the perspective of the two buildings. While only some of what’s in the diagram surfaced into the final script for the video, all of it informed the project in one way or another.

The idea for Lexicon also emerged from the research for A Brief History of Collapses. But while these two projects overlap, they are not identical. The most important of the different differences between them is that where Lexicon deals almost exclusively with the spatial politics of real places and buildings, A Brief History of Collapses engages in a sustained act of imagination, constructing a narrative within the space through the constant flow of the voiceover and its intricate stitching backwards and forwards in time, together with the constant, unmoored glide of the tracking cameras, in perpetual motion, as well as the suggestion through editing of a certain continuity between the two buildings, or at least a bridge between them that the two fleeing figures may be able to cross, even if the camera and the viewer cannot. This is a very deliberate attempt to accommodate a kind of possible space that exists within or hovers above the real, in which it is filmed—a space that could be called the building that might have been but wasn’t, or the building’s dream of itself, or even the building’s memory, because what, after all, is memory but a story we tell ourselves about something that might have been?

Pradeep Dalal: My work is an attempt to deepen my understanding and admiration of the artistic traditions of India and to recalibrate this knowledge within a deeply inscribed modernist aesthetic of the fragmentary and the provisional. Over the past dozen years or so I have visited and documented many of the historic architectural and archeological sites in India and Sri Lanka.

It sounds deliberate, like a huge grand project, but it didn’t begin like that. It began with one casual road trip with my parents a dozen years back to small temple towns in South India, and then it slowly assembled, over a period of time. Through small steps of accretion, a couple of visits, maybe one or two sites every year, I’ve slowly assembled a whole bunch of ideas around these sites. And, hopefully, an understanding of ideas in traditional Indian culture.

I realize that the way I’ve approached my work is by not dealing head-on with ideas of memory or the archive, but still, that’s a portion of it. As an architecture student, I spent several weeks measuring and preparing drawings of the 12th-century temple in the South Indian town of Trichur. I revisited the temple complex recently and recalled very little from the previous visit, over 25 years ago, but I was stirred by the architecture this time. The sensual form of the stone plinths, the faceted columns in shades of nut brown and Kumkum red, and the clarity of the grid-like enclosure of the temple complex. And the deceptively loose placement of the shrines, modulating the flow of space gently, nudging, not forcing.

The modest grace of the devotees encircling the temple offering prayers; the practiced ease with which they gather the hem of their mundus as they walk, climb, bow, or fall prostrate. Their subtle erotic charge confronted me with a troubling certainty: my inability to cross from observer to believer. So, I realized in this visit and from the study; that this temple was as complex and layered as the Assembly building in Chandigarh by Le Corbusier, while the experience of the temple spaces was significantly more tactile and visually rewarding.
And for the first time I was able to see a sophisticated and richly nuanced sensibility within an architecture that I had previously dismissed as old and irrelevant. In a way, that’s been the slow project, and it’s taken a huge amount of visiting, looking, thinking, and always calls to attention, sometimes to the limits of the research and what the research can get me into. Some of these insights have to happen on their own terms and not on the terms that I develop.

So, for me as with memory and other ideas, I am always interested in trying to find another vantage point in. Ideas travel via books and music across all manner of divides, geography, culture, and time. How then to bring some sense of motion to a still photograph? Can photographs be as real as words?

In the project Go West, I was attempting to bring together everything that I live with, so I just parked my scanner on the floor of my apartment and pulled things that were around me, books, textiles from my mother, all kinds of things. And I have in here other images—in this third image, what you see kind of going horizontally across the images, a pillar by the emperor Ashoka in New Delhi that I visited on a family holiday, and there is an 18th-century watercolor, a recent snapshot, prints of flowers from Mumbai streets. I wanted to see how different moments and times, centuries even, could sit together or, sometimes, apart.

I used my fingers, knuckles, and arms to grab a place, to hold, nudge, jog, sweep, and shape the different components of the photomontage. The discordant friction between the separate bits of the montage, and the moments when the scenes dissolve and the juxtaposed bits come together are both desirable. These were very dense, and I was really interested in making images that combined a lot of things.

I’ve been away from India now for more than twenty years, and there are few things in New York or in the U.S. that remind me, or can trigger memories of, my childhood. And when something is triggered, where smell or taste or a look of a person cannot be sustained, it comes in a flash and slips away.

Over ten years ago, I found an essay that made a nuanced and spirited case for the vitality of the traditional vernacular architecture of India as a source for design inspiration and practical knowledge. This beautifully observed and elegant essay by William Wurster and Catherine Bauer focused on two case studies, the riverbank ghats in Wai and the domestic architecture in Narakkal, near Cochin. I carried this article with me when I moved to New York from Washington almost ten years ago. I knew about Kochi, but I had never been there, and I had not even heard of Wai. Then three years ago I visited Kochi and carried the article with me and read it while visiting the temple, palace, and synagogue. Later, back in New York, I reread the essay more carefully and gradually the low-key but persuasive argument for the value of vernacular architecture in their photographs of the riverfront steps and temples in Wai made me want to investigate further. I went to Wai and found these beautiful steps that are now in ruins, but when William Wurster and Catherine Bauer visited in the late 50s, early 60s, they saw something very beautiful: “an entire rocky riverbed which had been cut into long rows of noble steps with numerous temples and shrines placed in orderly relation to the steps. This does not mean that they are parallel or placed in any mechanical way, rather there are great rhythm of steps recognizing the natural curve of the banks, with the structures placed at different levels and angles, all with a real knowledge and the feeling of inevitability that makes one recognize a great creation.”

So, when I went there and saw that, obviously I couldn’t imagine what it might have been, but it was there. And I also thought about what it was like to build something communally over 400 years, rather than with a star architect. And the idea of Wurster and Bauer noticing something beautiful and valuable for themselves, not something that had been annotated in history books or by others. And that is something obviously that’s important to me.

Mariam Ghani: Specifically with this project relating to the Dar ul-Aman Palace, one of the things I suggested is that there is a whole series of memories and histories about which you do not speak in Afghanistan. There is a sort of no-go zone in history that is full of unwritten and undiscovered histories. Dar ul-Aman is one of the spaces in Afghanistan that is a container of those memories and those histories, and it stands in for them in a way. It holds them. Some of them are literally written on the surface of the building, with this super-extensive graffiti, some of which is actually martyr memorials, and some of which is layers of conversations on the walls between...
different people who occupied the palace at different times. In the Lexicon, the entry for mujahidin is a transcription of one of these graffiti conversations, where one layer says, “O mujahid, adopt the way of battle, for they must know that this is a sacred land of Allah and not the land for every piece of dirt.” And then the next layer says, “We will fight as long as there is money to keep going.” And then there is a final layer that just says, “Gulbuddin is a national traitor,” which refers to Hekmatyar and Hizb-e-Islami.

Successive groups of mujahidin who inhabited the building then literally overwrite each other on the walls, and then the Taliban come in and overwrite everybody else. In a way it’s logical that this particular building would be a vessel for these histories because they are literally on the walls. But it’s also because of that earlier history with Amanullah, and the building already having this very intense symbolic charge, that it stands for many, many different moments, starting with Amanullah.

Pradeep Dalal: I wanted to ask you a question about the video. For me, in the video itself, there’s a cool, elegant, and precise way of framing and thinking through these issues, which I value, because these are hotbeds with lots of issues going on, as you’ve been describing. Now, I’d like to think specifically the pairing of the two, the Dar ul-Aman alongside the Fridericianum. I was always interested much more in the ruins, but also for all these narratives that were buried and not allowed specifically the pairing of the two, the Dar ul-Aman alongside the Fridericianum. I was always interested in the ruins, but also for all these narratives that were buried and not allowed into the public debate. But then I wondered: in the stills, you have the image of the castle building in ruins, so is there a sense of hope that the video doesn’t immediately convey? Is it like one society is in ruins, and then another has a slow kind of control of their universe in some way?

MG: In a way, each building functions as a kind of dark mirror, or ghost, of the other. When you have Dar ul-Aman alongside the Fridericianum, Dar ul-Aman in a way represents what the Fridericianum was and the Fridericianum in a way is what Dar ul-Aman could have been or could be, not exactly what it was, of course, but in some ways what it was imagined to be, and even what it might have been at some points, in its past. So, each is functioning in this way to haunt the other, and that’s part of the reason for juxtaposing them. And the other is this dialectic that is set up between the ruin and the restoration. There is a question about which one actually is closer to the original, which one retains more of the building that was.

Audience Participant #2: I also picked up on the elongation of time—Mariam is concerned with the elongation of the time of the building, while in Pradeep’s images there is elongation of the time of photography, liberating it from its temporal constraints.

MG: Yes, but there is also a collapse of time happening in your photographs, Pradeep, like a collapse of different moments and different spaces into one image that becomes very dense, unstable, and fragmented.

Audience Participant #3: Pradeep, you seem to enter it from a very anecdotal space, and it seems that at times, Mariam, you have a very large idea and then disperse into the anecdotal. Maybe you could reflect a little bit on the differences and how you both converge in your practices.

PD: I have thought about it, and I find that for me to understand something it has to have a very particular thing. I like to put my finger on it and really get it. Without that, I can’t understand the larger ideas and I am interested in the larger ideas. But I need to get at them, like little steps of accumulation from a bunch of different small ideas that then slowly get assembled. Maybe it is just a collage aesthetic overall, in that there are things that are ferreted and assembled.

MG: I think I come at it from a slightly different way of working, in which I start with the central idea, and then I accumulate a collection around the idea, and then the project is the interface to the collection. That’s why sometimes there is more than one interface to the database of the project, because sometimes the project finds more than one form.

I first became interested in archives by working with them in a professional capacity, which may be why I reflexively look for actual archives where I can do serious archival research about a given subject. And then I also start thinking about who are the people who are researching the same subject in other disciplines, so that I can meet and steal from them.

PD: But I feel that I also have a kind of skepticism or a wariness of archives or anything institutional. I remember a couple of years back at a CAA event organized by Richard Meyer, one of his Ph.D. students at USC was working at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. He was working with Robert Smithson’s archive, at the request of the family, and he came across this whole collection of gay porn of Smithson’s that was not indexed, and not even part of the archive. So, there is a sense that you aren’t going to find the real story there; it exists somewhere else and you have to ferret it out another way. But that may be a kind of a shtick on my side.

MG: I don’t think there is ever going to be one archive that tells the whole story about any given
subject. I also think that archives are proliferating everywhere today, especially online. All of these niche collections are more likely to become linked to each other, and to become more accessible to wider audiences. Things that would once have been very difficult to find, like photographs of the Amanullah period, are now very easy to find; the Williams College Afghan Media project has digitized them all and put them online. Things that might once have been even harder to find are now available, like the propaganda photographs shot by young Afghan photojournalists trained by Americans and sponsored by the State Department, who were embedded with mujahidin groups in the 1980s. This really amazing trove of images was briefly available through the Williams archive, and then the State Department changed its mind and took them back. But those kind of incredibly odd, strange images were also floating around for a couple of years.

**PD:** When you do this kind of even-handed, Kassel-Kabul thing, is it possible—and it’s a question I think about with my own work—is it possible to make work without that act of translation? Without equating it to a western context that has to then be absorbed and understood? There’s something that shifts with that, like when you couple them, there are things that work beautifully, like the figure moving between them, but then you aren’t taking the Afghan building on its own terms, for its own qualities and its own histories. So this is a question I sometimes wonder about; I know that I am also hardwired in a way to make a work that understands and explains this context.

**MG:** I think it’s always a danger. In this case, the parallel made sense precisely because the Afghan building was designed by German architects and specifically referred back to the ideals and the forms of that classical period of German architecture, to this kind of moment of de-fortification and opening of a society that was represented by the construction of the Fridericianum. This was a common point between the two buildings. So it’s not to equate them, exactly, but there was a fundamental commonality between them. Dar ul-Aman was built during one of the most westernized periods in Afghan history, which, ironically, was also the decade when Amanullah won the war of independence from the British, and the only ten-year period in the entire 20th century when Afghanistan wasn’t taking foreign aid.

**Audience Participant [Nayland Blake]:** The Fridericianum has had as many occupants as the Dar ul-Aman, but it has an entire labor system built around its barring. It’s weird that it is the situation of art now that we encounter it in spaces that are supposedly neutral phenomenologically. It was a little chilling for me to think of it in the terms of its being what the other building could be, but, would you want it to be? Do humans need that? In this way, it links back up with Pradeep’s description...
of the moving experience of discovering this place, as many people have made over 400 years—the space has not pretended that it just fell on the ground yesterday. There is a very different experience of temporality that isn’t archival, but is part of a form of accretion, or a different sense of continuity.

MG: That’s certainly one of the ways in which Dar ul-Aman serves to haunt the Fridericianum, as a reminder of what the Fridericianum once looked like, not just as a ruin, but as a building. When it was first constructed as a museum was when museums were meant to be architecture, not just white cubes. And the video winds its way to this question of the ruin versus the restoration—a thought about what has happened to the space of display. The museum had to have all of its edges smoothed out—it becomes like a magician’s cabinet, in which art is supposed to magically appear and disappear, and we’re never supposed to see any of the process behind that; the machinery behind all of it is hidden.

Audience Participant #4: I was really interested in hearing about the ghats in Wai, India, being created communally over four centuries. The creation of these buildings and then the destroying and subsequent reconstructing of them. I was thinking of it in relation to the writing of Allan deSouza that Pradeep mentioned. How he was building up and destroying his memories. Pradeep, in your project, you’re going back and taking pictures. How do those moments relate to each other?

PD: Well, 400 years is a long practice. One thing I would like to say is that going there repeatedly, looking at these places, documenting them, a part of it is not so much about restoring them to history. A part of it for me is also that in the present moment, with all my absorption and the speed with which things move, going back to things that I had visited as a child or earlier is a way of slowing things down. It’s a way to inscribe it deeper and to pull something out of that experience and to hold it for a bit—not just producing the images, and counteracting what’s happening in the way I am experiencing, living, and working here in New York. However, going back to India, making some images and returning here, grants me a freedom in the way I can work with these memories and images, a freedom I would never have, living there. I can play fast and loose with the material in the way that I like. And here, the weight of tradition and the weight of history are on my terms.

1. Allan deSouza, “My Mother, My Sight”, A Decade of Photoworks 1998-2008 (Talwar Gallery, New York | New Delhi, undated
BRIDGET DE GERSIGNY: REFLECTIONS ON A CONVERSATION WITH RENÉE GREEN...

“The world is not made up of atoms; it’s made up of stories.”
—Muriel Rukeyser

“Memories Can’t Wait” brought together a diverse group of people interested in telling stories—some marginal, some forgotten, some imagined—through sharing and engaging with multiple forms of documentation.

Artist and educator Renée Green gave the closing presentation at the symposium. Her work deals with the multiple issues of representation, through language, space, and perception. As the symposium organizers, we were interested in her presentation of multiple narratives—nonlinear histories informed and shaped by experience and imagination. These divergent practices and uses of the document (through film, photography, sound, et cetera) are some of the interesting artistic strategies we explored in the symposium. Green’s concepts of the “archipelagic mind,” linking worlds, time, and space, seemed to fit with the concepts of how diverse ways of accessing the past, through memory, documentation, and personal experience, can shape new narratives and create a collective, evolving and subjective understandings of history and place. Green began by sharing two video works, Selected Life Indexes and Climates and Paradoxes, and then I spoke with her about her work and practice. What follows are my reflections.

Climates and Paradoxes was created in 2005 as part of a commission to make a work related to a location Albert Einstein inhabited in Berlin, as part of the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the theory of relativity. Using the commission as a provocation to examine the porosity of memorialization, Green produced a film on the site where human rights organizations that Einstein belonged to had existed in the early years of the 20th century. The colorful phrases that migrate across the screen contain references to five people—Albert Einstein (1879–1955), Muriel Rukeyser (1913–1980), W. E. B. DuBois (1868–1963), Lou Harrison (1917–2003), and Paul Robeson (1868–1963)—whose lived overlapped and who in some instances inhabited the same location. The provocation in making this work was the notion of a memorial, prompting Green to ask, “What might a time-based, portable memorial contain?”

I try to recall the content of the public conversation we had at the ICP toward the end of last year. My dry tongue and shallow breath. A pounding heart that fixed on the bottom of my throat. The aura. The adrenaline that comes from performing in public. I can’t recall the exact questions and answers. Clearer is Green’s warm smile, willing me to engage insightfully. The echo of our public laughs. My blankness returned, a stage affliction. Had I memorialized a living artist in my own head? Created such an imaginary spectacle of someone I had just met? Artworks do this to artists, as books do to writers. The works wander off into the world like trumpeters in days gone by, announcing the arrival of royalty. And sometimes that idolization creates an impenetrable barrier, an expectation so dense it can’t be unlocked.

Archives can do this too. At junior school I used to hate the question teachers loved to ask: “If you could invite anyone in the history of the world to dinner, who would it be?” I think I hated it partly because I really never wanted to meet Jesus and partly because I knew I wasn’t cool enough to think of someone famous and interesting. I mean, my mother bought me cassette tapes of Michael Bolton, and he was hardly playground cred. In my acceptance interview for the ICP–Bard MFA program, Nancy Davenport asked me which artist I would most like to meet. Same thing. Blank. But perhaps blankness is a good glitch, which can help us to decompress things. It can provide a clean slate, free from predetermined ways of thinking, opening up the past to imagination.

What does it mean for an artwork to go out into the world, to be situated and presented differently? Are artworks forms of time-based memorials? Growing, shifting, changing with each new viewing exchange? Like picking up a beloved childhood book twenty years later? This happened to me recently. My partner Zee, found her 1988 copy of Maurice Sendak’s Where the Wild Things Are. I have it propped up on my desk and have yet to reread it because I keep staring at the illustration. I noticed first how soft Max’s feet looked beneath the wild buffalo “suit,” and how small the pond looks. The muted, dusty colors, and sketchy, etching-like cover drawing is enthralling. Max feels so big under the little trees, unlike Spike Jonze’s 2009 fantasy film remake. The Max of my memory was so much brighter, cooler, contemporary. I recently read that like Einstein, Sendak had Climates and Paradoxes was created in 2005 as part of a commission to make a work related to a location Albert Einstein inhabited in Berlin, as part of the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the theory of relativity. Using the commission as a provocation to examine the porosity of memorialization, Green produced a film on the site where human rights organizations that Einstein belonged to had existed in the early years of the 20th century. The colorful phrases that migrate across the screen contain references to five people—Albert Einstein (1879–1955), Muriel Rukeyser (1913–1980), W. E. B. DuBois (1868–1963), Lou Harrison (1917–2003), and Paul Robeson (1868–1963)—whose lived overlapped and who in some instances inhabited the same location. The provocation in making this work was the notion of a memorial, prompting Green to ask, “What might a time-based, portable memorial contain?”

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relatives killed in the Holocaust; the few that escaped to Brooklyn became his inspiration for *Wild Things*—storybook memorials to his surviving relatives, albeit with little glamor, but a memorial nonetheless.

Memorial is a heavy word. It’s dense. Sad. Locked when it should be open. Like that dark leathery barrel-top trunk my gran kept in her dusty garage. Memorial always feels more secretive than it’s supposed to. Like the lingering of the ghosts you’ll never know. No matter how much we try to resurrect the past, or the ones we loved or feared, we can’t. Those memories slip like water through fingers. Sometimes we call it screen memory; in my case, I think it’s a matter of bad memory and performance anxiety. We have tools to help us: letters, photos, books, and films, records of things past.

The notion of portability and movement becomes integral to understanding and unpacking histories, which are linked to the material property of time in a way that allows for new connections to be forged and new meanings to be made. In Green’s work we revisit Einstein, not through the expected trajectory of his scientific theories but rather through his relationships with other people who lived concurrently. This decompressing opens up new ways of imagining and understanding the icon—a form of de-monumentalizing, in order to see differently.

In this way too, the reframing of artwork and its portability across history and place has a way of de-monumentalizing and creating new contexts. Talking about presenting her work in different locations, and specifically *Selected Life Indexes* and *Climates and Paradoxes* at the ICP, Green said, “I see them as forms of compression that can be expanded and animated by others, and also over time.”

So, what might a portable memorial contain? Artworks can be portable memorials, but what happens when we move them? They become at once containers for memories and codes of new ones. *Climates and Paradoxes* is set in Germany, in two locations, and was shown six years later at the ICP in New York. When I asked about this, Green mentioned an expression coined by the artist Steven Premo, “systems specificity,” which allowed her to think about site in relation to a number of works that she had made. Even if the works reference a particular location or time, she said she hoped they could move, and become something that could exist somewhere else, that someone could experience in different ways. Watching images of Berlin in the mid 2000s pan across the screen, punctuated by ads and images and sounds of contemporary life, I found myself contemplating how our individual lives are so different, and yet mass media and transnationalism have made the material output of life seem so similar. I interpreted fragments of meaning from the German billboards, a legacy of the Dutch in colonized South Africa. Language weaves its way through the flows of history. I’ve never visited Berlin, but the Berlin of Green’s videos seemed familiar—the urban pace, the street sounds, the promise of something more, something else, and yet also something unsettling, in a slippery way, something that forces me to accept that the only history I have is my own.

At the symposium opening Jesal Kapadia challenged us to decompress the archive and release it from its death drive. To give it new meaning and new life, a theme that threaded its way through the symposium. How could we unpack dense pasts, histories, and records? How do photography and all recorded media have the habit of entombing things? Part of the desire and urgency to “remember” is a desire to revisit the past and open it up to new lives. Kate Levy mentioned something Walid Ra’ad had said: “Our relationship to the past is the same thing as our relationship to the future.”

To which Green responded, “In terms of the idea of the past, future, and present, I would add, we are informed by what already happened, by what existed. I am interested in those things. They return even without our necessarily trying to bring them forth. They are already here, so I am interested in bringing to consciousness aspects of those things.” By combining concurrent histories and stories that wouldn’t necessarily sit together, we can imagine and view history from a new place, with fresh eyes; perhaps it was this that our symposium tried to achieve.
MEMORIES CAN’T WAIT

JEANNINE TANG: AFTERTHOUGHTS

“Memories Can’t Wait”—the title of this year’s symposium collaboration between students in the ICP–Bard MFA and at CCS Bard—involves photography’s relationship to memory as an urgent thing. Historically, this relationship has been fundamental to photography’s discourse, which has long theorized memory’s vicissitudes through issues of representation, recollection, history, events, and evidence. After postmodernism and post-structuralism (summoned here by the organizers and many of their speakers), theories of photography—that would put photography itself into question—investigated not only discrete photographic objects and series, but the broader mediums, discursive practices and institutions that constitute our collective histories. Rather than cluster presentations and speakers by thematic or historical situation, this symposium crucially proposed shared intellectual projects and intergenerational affinities. The effect emphasized photography’s persons and their positions, and the expansion of its modernist attention to medium into writing, sound film, and experimental forms of recording and repository.

It is fitting that “Memories Can’t Wait” displaces the function(ing) of photography from any modernist emphasis on medium into its recording, production, and archive, amid a technological context in which media constantly verge on others. Whether by human or sentient actors, unconsciously pricked by photography’s punctum, interpolated as its citizenry, unfolding and expanding its systems, photography’s contemporary discourse stresses its fundamental heteronomy and interdependency with manifold institutional, psychic, and political effects. From those who participate in making such expanded photography—amplifying its capacity through collection and study—to others who look, write toward and alongside—all participate in photography’s claims upon the fabrication of memory. This call upon photography to intervene in the making of history is necessarily performed from a multitude of positions and through a polyphony of form, by photographers, artists, curators, archivists, and writers. If memories can’t wait, it is because we cannot resist our desires for them, repeatedly articulated in and around the question of photography. This collection of voices testifies to the immediacy of this project.

NAYLAND BLAKE: IN PARTING...

“Take a walk through the land of shadows
Take a walk through the peaceful meadows
Try not to look so disappointed
It wasn’t what you hoped for, is it?”

Photography is most often spoken about as an activity, an activity that those of us in charge of schools are presumably attempting to teach. Photography’s power, however, comes from its status as a system of knowledge, a system that has restructured our consciousness and identity as powerfully as any human invention since writing.

The gathering of thinkers documented in this volume took as its starting point an examination of memory, and the various speakers, onstage and off, explored cultural memory, historical memory, and personal memory across a wide range of eras and interests. But in large part when we speak about memory, we are speaking about a relationship to a past that has been radically restructured by photography itself.

We use memories to remember, to connect again the scattered limbs of our experiences. Before photography’s birth the common way to do that was through narrative. The past, for individuals and for cultures, was a story, and language was the medium of identity and history: “history is written by the victors” collapses into absurdity when we try to swap “photographed” for “written.”

What photography has given us, then, is not a way of democratizing narratives, but rather a notion of the past that removes it from narrative altogether, transforming it from something we hear to something we see. Photography’s reconfiguration of the past into a site of visual evidence means that the act of remembering happens first through the eyes, and provides an object that stands outside of the consensual and sometimes contested space that language provides. From the object we can slide quickly to the objective, and while the notion that photographs constitute some sort of objective record has long been laid to rest, the idea of the past as a series of objects that we take in through the eyes, has become ever more ingrained in our thinking. We have come to remember in pictures, having surrendered to a machine the necessary skills of inflection and narration. We need to remember with all of our senses, not just the eyes.

This past/object produced by photography needs to be interrogated, to be played with and unpended, so that we don’t take it as a reflexive truth. This symposium marked one of the attempts to do just that. By speaking together—not simply as sentence-spouting experts, but as varied subjects seeking to pass language back and forth—we restore photography to its rightful place, one tool and one pleasure among many.
Erin Barnett is the Assistant Curator of Collections at the International Center of Photography. For ICP, she has organized President in Petticoats! Civil War Propaganda in Photographs: The Loving Story: Photographs by Grey Villet; Hiroshima: Ground Zero 1945; Take Me to the Water: Photographs of River Baptisms; Munkaci’s Lost Archive; and Amelia Earhart: Image and Icon (with Kristen Lilbben). Recent publications include “Lesbian, Pervert, Mother: Catherine Opie’s Photographic Transgressions” in Reconciling Art and Motherhood: Hiroshima: Ground Zero 1945 (with Phil Mariani); and Amelia Earhart: Image and Icon (with Kristen Lilbben). A graduate of the University of Kansas and the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, Barnett was previously a curatorial fellow at the New Museum of Contemporary Art and a curatorial assistant at the Guggenheim Museum.

Nayland Blake is an internationally acclaimed interdisciplinary artist and educator whose work is included in the collections of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the Des Moines Art Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the University Art Museum, Berkeley. His writing has been published in Artforum, Interview, Out, Outlook, and numerous exhibition catalogues. He has been on the faculty of the Milton Avery Graduate School of the Arts and has taught at the San Francisco Art Institute, the California Institute of the Arts, the University of California, Berkeley, Parsons School of Design, New York University, the School of Visual Arts, and Harvard University School of Visual and Environmental Studies. He is represented by Matthew Marks Gallery in New York.

Ann Butler is the Director of the Library and Archives at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College and the Project Director for Arts Spaces Archives Project (as-ap.org). Prior to joining CCS Bard in 2008, she was Senior Archivist at the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University where she helped build a mixed format collection of over 10,000 linear feet of archival materials relating to the contemporary and performing arts. Before joining Fales, she was the Archivist for the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum where she implemented an enterprise-wide museum archives program. Her education includes a BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, an MLS from Rutgers University, and an MA in Art History from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and an MLS from Rutgers University. Ann Butler has lectured widely on the preservation and documentation of international initiatives focusing on the preservation of cultural heritage materials. Her research interests include the intersection of archives and the contemporary arts; documentation of moving image and electronic media works. She has participated in The Whitney Independent Study Program, New York in 2008-09. She has been artist-in-residence at Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP), New York. Recent shows include: El Museo del Barrio, NY; Art in General, NY; The Studio Museum in Harlem, NY; Bureau, NY; Lunds Konsthall, Sweden; Kunsthallen Brandts, Denmark; Aarhus Kunstbygning, Denmark; Arte Povera, Italy; Westfälischer Kunstverein, Germany. Her work is in the collections of the Museum for Contemporary Art and The National Museum of Photography in Denmark. Buhl received her MFA from The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 2006 and participated in The Whitney Independent Study Program, New York in 2008-09. She has been artist-in-residence at Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and International Studio and Curatorial Program (ISCP), New York. Recent shows include: El Museo del Barrio, NY; Art in General, NY; The Studio Museum in Harlem, NY; Bureau, NY; Lunds Konsthall, Sweden; Kunsthallen Brandts, Denmark; Aarhus Kunstbygning, Denmark; Arte Povera, Italy; Westfälischer Kunstverein, Germany. Her work is in the collections of the Museum for Contemporary Art and The National Museum of Photography in Denmark. Buhl’s artist’s books A Journey in Two Directions, City Grammar (with Liz Linden), and Atlas of Anatomy (forthcoming) are published by Revolver Publishing. Her work has recently been discussed in Art in America, Flash Art, Artforum, and The New York Times.

Nanna Debois Buhl is a Danish visual artist based in New York. Her work combines a poetical, visual language with theoretical and literary references, often making use of formats such as maps, atlases and travelogues. Her projects examine historical and cultural knowledge through plants, animals, images, and architectural components and are realized through a combination of installation, drawing, film, text, photography and sound. Buhl received her MFA from The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in 2006 and participated in The Whitney Independent Study Program, New York in 2008-09. She has been artist-in-residence at Lower Manhattan Cultural Council and International Studio & Curatorial Program (ISCP), New York. Recent shows include: El Museo del Barrio, NY; Art in General, NY; The Studio Museum in Harlem, NY; Bureau, NY; Lunds Konsthall, Sweden; Kunsthallen Brandts, Denmark; Aarhus Kunstbygning, Denmark; Arte Povera, Italy; Westfälischer Kunstverein, Germany. Her work is in the collections of the Museum for Contemporary Art and The National Museum of Photography in Denmark. Buhl’s artist’s books A Journey in Two Directions, City Grammar (with Liz Linden), and Atlas of Anatomy (forthcoming) are published by Revolver Publishing. Her work has recently been discussed in Art in America, Flash Art, Artforum, and The New York Times.

Born in Montreal, Canada, David Deitcher is a writer, art historian, and critic whose essays have appeared in Artforum, Art in America, Parrish, the Village Voice, and other periodicals, as well as in numerous anthologies and monographs on such artists as Felix Gonzales-Torres, Isaac Julien, and Wolfgang Tillmans. He is the author of Dear Friends: American Photographs of Men Together, 1840-1918 and curator of the exhibition of the same name that appeared at the International Center of Photography in New York. He was the editor of The Question of Equality: Lesbian and Gay Politics in America Since Stonewall (Scribner, 1995). He has been core faculty at the International Center of Photography/Bard College Program in Advanced Photographic Studies since 2003.

Pradeep Dalal is a Mumbai-born artist and writer based in New York. Recent exhibitions include: Pictureing Parallels: Photography and Video from the South Asian Diaspora in San Francisco, Exchanging Glances at Chatterjee & Lal in Mumbai, and Vision is Elastic. Thought is Elastic. Murray Guy in New York. His work is included in Blind Spot 43 and he is a recipient of the Tierney Fellowship. Pradeep has an MFA from ICP/Bard College and a MA in Architecture from MIT. He is on the faculty at the International Center of Photography and the Bard College MFA Program, and he also directs the Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant Program.

Malene Dam b. 1983, Denmark is an artist and curator, she engages in an array of issues related to contemporary society, most recently with a strong focus on the histories of feminism, education, and conflict. Her research-based practice has a particular interest in how discourses situate themselves as knowledge. She has come to curating with a background in producing and thinking about art and holds a BFA from the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts and a MFA in Photography and Media from CalArts. She is a current 2014 MA candidate at the Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College.

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Bridget de Gersigny is a South African born, visual artist living and working in Brooklyn, New York. Her work draws upon political history, often related to shifting ideologies, through a post-colonial and queer lens. She spends her time pondering things from far too many perspectives, and is interested in the interplay of imagination and documentation in the creation of meaning over time. She is a 2013 ICP-Bard MFA graduate and holds a BA (Hons) degree from the University of Cape Town, in Psychology and Literature, and Art History from UNISA.

Deirdre Donohue is the Stephanie Shuman Librarian of the International Center of Photography and an artist and educator. She has done the librarian thing at The Costume Institute of The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Guggenheim, the artist thing at places like Queens College Art Center, the Mid-Manhattan Library Art Wall on Third and ICP and the educator thing at Pratt Institute and ICP.


Renée Green is an artist, filmmaker, and writer. She is Associate Professor, and Director of the MIT Program in Art, Culture, and Technology. Her work engages with investigations into circuits of relation and exchange over time, the gaps and shifts in what survives in public and private memories as well as what has been imagined and invented. She also focuses on the effects of a changing transcultural sphere on what can now be made and thought.

Marvin Heiferman, independent curator and writer, produces exhibitions and online projects about photography and visual culture for institutions including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; International Center of Photography, New York; the Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C; the New Museum for Contemporary Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of Art New York; artists spaces such as Exit Art and White Columns in New York; and commercial galleries. A contributing editor at Art in America, Heiferman is part of the Core Graduate Faculty at the ICP-Bard College Program in Advanced Photographic Studies, an adjunct professor in the School for Visual Arts’ MFA Program in Photography, Video, and Related Media, and a Visiting Senior Research Scholar at the Center for Art, Design & Visual Culture at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He is a prolific writer of books and magazine essays, whose work has appeared in The New York Times, Art in America, Artforum, Bomb, ARTnews, Aperture, Photoworks, Mousse and numerous other magazines and newspapers. As an editor and book packager Heiferman has produced more than two dozen books on photography and visual culture. He began his career in the gallery world, first as Assistant Director at LIGHT Gallery, and later as Director of Castelli Graphics. His most recent book, Photography Changes Everything, in collaboration with the Smithsonian Photography Initiative, was published by Aperture in 2012. WHY WE LOOK, his Twitter project (@whywelook) tracks news stories about photographic imaging and visual culture, with new post added daily.

Jesal Kapadia is an artist from Mumbai, and a graduate of the Whitney Independent Study Program. Employing mediums such as the book, the archive and the photograph, as well as experimental film, video and performance, her work explores the potential forms of non-capitalist subjectivities. Her interests lie in an ethical praxis of being-in-common, and the cultivation of an awareness of art that is place-based, diversified, multiple, small-scale, cooperative and autonomous. Over the last ten years, Jesal has collectively edited art for Rekhting Marxism, as well as organized and participated in events with members of 16beaver group. She has taught and developed a number of courses and seminars at various schools, including the International Center for Photography, New School for Public Engagement, Cooper Union School of Art, and Rhode Island School of Design. Her work in different classrooms and with the two collectives has further enabled her explorations into the fragile but dynamic exchange between art and organizing, art and social change, and art and pedagogy. She currently teaches at MIT in the department of Art Culture and Technology. She has exhibited her work both locally and internationally; most recent screenings, installations and workshops include the ‘And And And And platform at Documenta 13 in Kassel, ‘First Experiments in Financial Semantics’ at the Neiman Gallery in Columbia University, ‘Prolonged Engagement’ at EFA Project Space in New York and ‘Art and Revolution’ at the U.S. Social Forum in Detroit.

Canadian born Ted Kerr is a New York based artist and writer. He is the programs manager at Visual AIDS. Last year he completed his BA from The New School’s Writing and Democracy program. Kerr was the 2010 Artist in Residence at the Institute for Art Religion and Social Justice at Union Theological Seminary.

Kate Levy grew up outside of Detroit and graduated from ICP-Bard’s MFA Program. Kate writes for Daylight Magazine blog. In the summer of 2013, she travelled to Kenya, where she worked with a community of Maasai land-rights activists to produce a documentary about a contested piece of land. This is her first editorial role in a publication. She currently lives in Brooklyn.

Marget Long works with photographs, video, and text to explore questions of historiography, the limits of photographic representation and the physical experience of photography itself. She received a BA from Harvard University and an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design, where she was the recipient of the T.C. Colley Award in photography in 2002. She lectures frequently on photography and visual culture, most recently at Yale University’s Photographic Memory Workshop and at the Center for Visual Cultures at University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her work has been screened and exhibited at many venues including

Thomas Ross Miller is an anthropologist, media artist, and independent curator working with sound archives and visual media. A National Endowment for the Arts recipient and member of the Ethnographic Terminalia curatorial collective, he holds a BA (Honors) in music from Wesleyan and an MA, MPhil, and PhD in anthropology from Columbia. Past exhibitions include Drawing Shadows to Stone: Photographing North Pacific Peoples (1897-1902) at the American Museum of Natural History (www.walkered.com/drawing-shadows-to-stone/), Siberian Shamans at Linden Museum-Stuttgart Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde (http://tinyurl.com/Shamans-Journey), On the Road of Bones at Kris Waldherr Art and Words (http://ontheroadofbones.com/), and Secret Wars at Proteus Gowanus (http://proteusgowanus.org).

Ulrike Müller is an Austria-born, New York-based artist whose practice encompasses both art making and community organizing. Her work, which can be seen as an extension of feminist movements from the 1970s onward, utilizes text, performance, publishing, as well as drawing and painting to create spaces of excitement and humor. The artist’s use of narrative, language, and abstraction functions to break down traditional binary systems, creating new options by addressing contemporary feminist and genderqueer concerns.

Heather M. O’Brien is an artist and photographer living working in Los Angeles, CA. She holds a BA from Loyola University New Orleans and an Advanced Certificate in General Studies from ICP in New York. She is currently an MFA candidate at California Institute of the Arts. Her work unpacks and re-contextualizes various social and political structures in the United States, while specifically looking at issues relating to housing, labor, the prison system, the media, and untold U.S. histories.

Pieter Paul Pothoven searches for alternative ways of approaching histories of post-colonialism and conflict through the study of historical objects and ancient natural resources. He has shown work at The Kitchen (New York) 2013; International Center for Photography (New York) 2012; De Service Garage (Amsterdam) 2010; Nieuw Dakota (Amsterdam) 2010 and FOAM (Amsterdam) 2008. His texts and visual works have been published in Anamexa, 2013; Simulacrum, 2011; Volume #26, Architecture of Peace, 2010; HTV Maps, 2010; and Beyrouths, an Alternative Guide to Beirut, 2010. In 2011-2012, he initiated and co-curated The Economy of Colour. He was recently awarded with a Fine Arts Work Center Fellowship (2013) In 2009, he was a resident at AFIR Architect and Planners in Kabul, Afghanistan. He holds an MFA degree from Parsons The New School of Design. He graduated from the Gerrit Rietveld Academy in 2006 (BFA). He lives and works in New York.

Stephanie Smith-Strickland is a Brooklyn-based freelance writer with experience in fashion, lifestyle, luxury and creative writing. She has written for the International Business Times.
The “Memories Can’t Wait” team would like to extend our sincerest thanks to our institutions, the International Center of Photography and the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, for tremendous support in realizing this project. A special mention is in order for Suzanne Nicholas, Nayland Blake, Jamie Liles, Josh Latz, David Deitcher, Jesal Kapadia, Nathan Lee, Johanna Burton, Jeannine Tang, Jaime Baird.

We would also like to acknowledge the work of the participants of the symposium as well as publication contributors whose dedicated work made possible the vision for this publication.

Thanks are also due to the colleagues of the editors in both the ICP-Bard MFA program, and the CCS Bard MA program, including our fourth symposium organizer, Nicola Ricciardi. Each of these individuals offered invaluable feedback, support and time to both the symposium and the subsequent publication.


Published by the International Center of Photography and CCS Bard, New York

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Editors: Malene Dam, Bridget de Gersigny and Kate Levy
Book Design: Kate Levy
Cover Design and Typography: Karine Lihn and Rikke Vagner
Copyeditor: Debby Mayer

Printed by Conveyor

The heading text in this publication is set in Akkurat and the body text is set in Cardiff, with the exception of Nanna Debois Buhl’s contribution, which is set in Filosophia, and Hyn Wong’s contribution, which is set in Perpetua.