Chaos of memories- Surviving archives and the ruins of history

according to the found photo foundation.

Paula Roush

Most archival artworks that circulate today in exhibitions and publications investigate the archive as the site of an ongoing negotiation between the appropriation of photo-historical material and accumulative strategies of installation and publication. To date such research has produced several curatorial projects where strategies of photographic reproduction and distribution are scrutinised as particular modes of knowledge production that whilst engaged in the creation of archival art are far apart from the 19th century model of bureaucratic archive.¹ Such is the case with the exhibition Dear Aby Warburg: What can be done with images? Dealing with Photographic Material (2012), ² where my project found photo foundation (fpfoundation)³ was exhibited as an experimental archive. This and the other works installed across the vast museum explored the many configurations of the use of photographic collections in contemporary art, and its many transmutations since Warburg’s Mnemosyne Atlas (1924-1929).

The homage to art-historian Aby Warburg (1866 - 1929) as precursor to current art archival practices is unpacked by the exhibition’s curator Eva Schmidt, in the accompanying research publication.⁴ The montage of reproduced photographs from divergent sources, the use of variable, non-systematic ordering parameters, and the extremely provisional display strategies are some of the Mnemosyne Atlas’ characteristics that reappear in contemporary works in the exhibition, for example, translated into Abigail Reynolds’ interest for a spatial staging of printed photographic material in The British Countryside in Pictures (2011) and Simon Wachsmuth’s hybrid combinations of photography with painting in Voids (2008-2010), to name just a few of the works exhibited side by side with the processes of photographic collection, accumulation and archiving I used in the fpfoundation (2007-2012).

The genesis of the photographic collections in the exhibition can be connected to the paradigm of time identified by George Didi-Huberman in Warburg’s method of photo reproduction and montage developed in the

¹ The development of the 19th century archive is analysed in depth in Sven Spieker, The Big Archive: Art From Bureaucracy (Cambridge MA/ London: The MIT press, 2008)
³ The found photo foundation will be referred to subsequently as fpfoundation, which is phonetically pronounced with an elongated f (2x)
⁴ Eva Schmidt, “Foreword and Acknowledgements,” In Dear Aby Warburg, what can be done with images? Dealing with photographic Material, ed. Eva Schmidt and Ines Ruttinger (Siegen/ Heidelberg: Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen /Kehrer 2012), 11-14
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Atlas. 5 Warburg’s ‘iconology of the interval’ results from thinking about time itself as a montage of heterogeneous elements, and memory as an editing process that separates fragments, produces holes in the historical timeline and field intervals. It is then a question of selection, of movement between storage (the archive) and presentation (the atlas), as theorist Ludwig Seyfarth wrote: ‘The artists of the exhibition Dear Aby Warburg are collectors of images; their artistic individuality consists less in a style or gesture than in the specific manner in which they...also physically open up new spaces for thinking between the images- something begun with Warburg when he started to pin photos to canvasses.’ 6 In the case of my photographic collections, many of which were found in portuguese second hand markets - ‘...It is usually impossible to trace the provenance of these photographs [referred] to as ‘orphans’... They have become homeless, but nonetheless tell something like a private subterranean history of the time spent under a dictatorship.’ 7 - there is an additional ethnographic potential, a relation to the real through documentary and fiction that opens up different ways of representing culture.

Due to my origins in a southern-european country, at the periphery of the art world canon, it is useful to extend here a reference to Catherine Russell’s study of ‘experimental ethnographies,’ practiced by artists whose works reflect on their cultures of origin. The editing of used, fragmented, even corrupted found imagery in collage, montage or archival practice creates “an aesthetic of ruins; its intertextuality is always an allegory of history, a montage of memory traces by which the artist engages with the past through recall, retrieving and recycling.” 8 Whilst the author’s main concern is with found-footage, she extends her argument to found photography. Additionally, when living away from one’s country of origin, as it is in my case, the identity constructed with found images borders into that of an auto-ethnography. In this ‘journey of the self,’ the condition of being an orphan and homeless is in fact appropriated as the hallmark both of the fpfoundation’s collection and my own (photo)biography.

chaos of memories

A propos, let me briefly sketch for you the memory trauma at the root of the fpfoundation’s collection. Born and raised in Lisbon I moved to the United States in the 1990s with a fulbright grant to research photo art therapy in the context of post-graduate studies. Without my mother’s knowledge I brought with me a large selection of our family albums. My reasons may have been multiple and at a very rational level, I planned to use it for photo therapy work; but I also believe now there may have been other reasons that propelled my

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7 ibid
clandestine gesture of sneaking out of my home the only available evidence of its familial existence. Whilst in New York, I had to change residence and in that move I lost those photographs. I tried everything to retrieve them, from repeatedly tracing my steps back to what I could remember to be the last assemblage of boxes, posed on the floor, waiting to be moved out of the house, to submitting myself to hypnotherapy. It was a journey of self-discovery, where I learnt that memory is a place to research and explore but nothing I did helped me to recall the events leading to the albums' disappearance.

The photographs’ loss was very distressing and I lived it as an erasure of my own childhood. As if my identity and memories of growing up, of having a father and a mother, and later being part of an enlarged community were stored and articulated on these. Without them, I was left with no lineage, a nobody’s daughter with no country and no home to return to. I was left with a gap in my biography. But the lost photographs instead of confining me to exile, became a potential site to create, to fulfill with other people’s childhoods, and return to with fragments of others’ lives. Sven Spieler’s assertion translates the paradox: “Archives do not simply reconnect us with what we have lost; instead they remind us...of what we have never possessed in the first place.”  

The mnemonic method I adopted resembled that of the amateur collector, building an archive of anonymous, dispossessed, ghostly photographs. Legally, these are known as orphan photographs, as they have lost their genealogy or ownership. There are multiple reasons these photos might have become orphan: they may have been lost, stolen, they may have been abandoned following the death of their owners, or they may have simply ceased to be useful and thrown in the garbage, from which they may have been rescued and put back in the market. Whatever their backstories, they’ve provided me with a method to retroactively recapture my past and that of my country.

The fpfoundation grew thus as a framework for experimental archival practices, interested in the relationship between photography and memory. Its mission eventually developed into the ‘rescue of work produced by professional, amateur, and anonymous photographers found throughout the world,’ and represents now a vast collection of found photography. The fpfoundation’s status as an artist-led initiative is similar to other archival projects I developed throughout the years, to open up platforms for independent, self-sustainable collaborative projects. One of these, under the acronym msdm became the umbrella moniker for all my projects of ‘mobile strategies of display and mediation,’ which the fpfoundation belongs to.

Without an established agenda or a systematic program to enable independent fundraising and sustain a policy of acquisitions, publications and exhibitions, the fpfoundation has advanced in an opportunistic and parasitic way, in response to my own life-art practice. In terms of acquisitions, these result from my regular travel between London and Lisbon, and so there is a focus in photographic objects that were found and acquired in flea markets

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9 Sven Spieler, The Big Archive: Art From Bureaucracy, 4.
10 See http://msdm.org.uk
and car boot sales from Portugal and the UK. In addition, my determination not to miss a street market sale in every city I visit has added photos from all over the world, with the add-on of occasional photographic items gleaned from the streets where I often find discarded and defaced photographs, sometimes in advanced state of decomposition waiting for my adoption.

**experimental archives**

The *fpfoundation*’s contribution to *Dear Aby*… consisted in the recreation of a grass-roots archive, inspired by two queer and feminist archives I visited in London: The Hall-Carpenter Archives, an archive of boxes of material relating to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender activism in the UK, most of the material dated from after the publication of the Wolfenden report in 1957\(^{11}\) and the Feminist Library, an archive collection of Women’s Liberation Movement literature, particularly second-wave materials dating from the late 1960s to the 1990s.\(^{12}\) These are the kind of places where the boundaries between archives and everyday life are blurred, and is possible to find photo prints, slides, home made zines, underground alternative press and other subcultural objects, sometimes in piles and disordered accumulations. Ann Cvetkovich suggests we should turn to these vernacular archives for inspiration on how to proactively document our (in)visible lives and to queer official archives instead of resigning ourselves to a critique of the archive that posits it solely as the site of (our) historical absence.\(^{13}\)

Supported by the means of production that enabled the *fpfoundation* to materialise itself in a wealthy public museum, I ordered ready-made metallic shelving units and archival cardboard boxes sourced from commercial providers. Inside were placed not just the *fpfoundation*’s raw material (its collection of found photographs, family albums, commercial photography, postcards, historical photobooks, printed ephemera, photo surveys, and photo instructional materials) but also the visual re-presentation and re-appropriation of this material in projects based in and around the collection since 2007.

I had been interested in editorial authoring of found photos, and the role and status of the editor as author when appropriating ready-made printed matter. When I started lecturing in photography in London,\(^{14}\) I took the opportunity to run several workshops on indie publishing, the photobook and artists strategies with archives. I brought in the *fpfoundation*’s collection and the photographic material was for the first time catalogued using informal archiving methods, provisional taxonomies, temporary groupings and series. Several photobookzines were then produced. I use this term to describe short-run, self-published, cheaply produced books, where the photographs...
are edited according to one selected topic, have an austere appearance of minimal design and layout often with one single photo per page and little textual narrative except for the indicative colophon.

An example of a work entirely sourced from the fpfoundations’ photos is Andreas Obexer’s photobookzine *Discipline* (2010), using portuguese found photographs from police and maritime academies. Other conceptual investigative methods of appropriation included the combination of a spanish family album and reenactment in Sara Soupedemots’ *Never let me go* (2011), a photobook that resulted from a photo-therapy process realised with her grand aunt in the initial phase of alzheimer disease. These and many other photobookzines produced during the workshops along with the photo collections were shipped to the museum in Siegen where I came to organize them, with a cataloguing system that addressed the material characteristics of the photo objects whilst allowing a hands-on experience of the archive.

The taxonomies developed for Siegen included provisional references to fictive documents, queer affects, collage history and the contested space of the archive itself. The archiving order ignored the principle of provenance generally used in institutional archives, opting instead for the introduction of chaos into the grid arrangement of the boxes. The viewers, invited to browse wouldn’t know what to except from labels such as: dust, excessive, embodied researcher, evidence, hairs, fictional identity, fingerprints, hannah höch / til brugman, instructions on how to survive the archive, lusciously tactile, matt and stupid, messiness, passing, photo re-enactment, prints in suitcase, strokable. Elucidating the use of experimental taxonomies, Tanja Verlak pointed out in the exhibition’s publication: ‘The fpfoundation can be read as an artistic experiment of twisting the document value of an archive beyond its proverbial linearity of causes and consequences. As the connection to the real is often lost, the project is above all a platform of invented spaces that suggests taxonomical methods of artistic research deep into generations and the unknown.’

In addition to the provisionality of taxonomies, another strategy to keep the archive open has been the foregrounding of participatory tools. A workshop for Siegen-based artists-educators that were invited to bring their personal images archives for remix, was a critical opportunity to reflect on ethical as well as aesthetical aspects of working with collections of images. Quoting Eva Schmidt, again: ‘How can photographic images thought lost – due to a lack of place or name– be re-found and made to speak to us again? The significance of a photographic image does not lie in the image itself; the decisive aspects are its context and actualization as material object. (…) The fpfoundations’ work consists in tracking down photos that have become homeless (…) and

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15 Provenance is a fundamental principle of archives, referring to the individual, family, or organization that created or received the items in a collection. The principle of provenance or the respect des fonds dictates that records of different origins (provenance) be kept separate to preserve their context. See Richard Pearce Moses, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, 2005, http://files.archivists.org/pubs/free/SAA-Glossary-2005.pdf
16 Tanja Verlak, *An attempt at exhausting an archive /Found Photo Foundation*, In *Dear Aby Warburg, what can be done with images? Dealing with photographic Material*, 278. The text is also part of newspaper published to be part of the installation: paula roush, *found photo foundation #1* (London: msdm publications, 2012)
invite others to ‘adopt’ these ‘orphans’ in their own configurations.’ 17 The inclusion of studio trestle tables next to the shelved boxes opened up the fpfoundation’s play with historical material, a temporal process of editing and montage so crucial to an understanding of Warburg’s strategies: from individual ‘signature’ to collaborative authorship, from working with a personal family album to the appropriation of orphan photographs, from the absence of writing to the collage of text and image, from the incorporation of an ‘original’ print to the reproduction of images using a photocopy machine.

historical allegories

The latest materialisation of the fpfoundation appeared in the installation The past persists in the present in the form of a dream (participatory architectures, archive, revolution) that was exhibited in London in 2014 by HS Projects as part of Paradigm Store, a curatorial project reflecting on the haunting gap between 20th century modernist utopias and historical matrixes that have ripped apart modernist myths of progress. The past… in the form of a dream occupied that gap between the 1970s promises of radical participatory democracy and the contemporary reality of neo-liberal democracy in southern europe, featuring the Apeadeiro housing estate, one of the urban villages developed during the portuguese SAAL architecture programme, and now facing demolition. I was a child in 1974 when the 25th of April coup d’etat put an end to five decades of fascist dictatorship. Within just a few months, the country underwent a fertile incubation period out of which mushroomed a series of experiments in participatory democracy with SAAL symbolising the architecture of the revolution.

Architect Jose Veloso built a SAAL project with a fishing community living in precarious conditions in a small shanty town in Meia Praia, by the seaside of Lagos city. With his team’s support the villagers formed an association and applied for funding and ownership of the land. Forty one houses were built following a ‘modular typology of evolutionary housing.’ The basic unit was the one bedroom flat, and each unit contained five additional options of interior organisation allowing the family to develop the space up to a five bedroom flat, according to their household needs. The architects made the proposals, elaborated the technical aspects of the construction and all decisions were taken in collective meetings, where almost everyone participated: “It was a very cohesive, lucid and coherent group in their decisions. They didn’t want each family to be simply building their own house. Instead, everyone worked in all the houses collectively, and they would all be built at the same time.” 18

The SAAL programme was eventually dissolved in 1976 by a government invested in joining the prevailing neoliberal capitalist model, in a process of normalisation for the portuguese society where hegemonic models of western-style consensual democracy replaced the participatory experiments put in place during the revolution. The Apeadeiro village was never finished,

17 Eva Schmidt, Foreword and Acknowledgements, In Dear Aby Warburg, what can be done with images? Dealing with photographic Material, 13.
18 from an interview with the architect, video recorded in the summer of 2010.
the streets never paved and the houses are currently threatened with
demolition to make space for a new golf course. This happens concurrently
with an identified crisis of memory in portuguese history by “getting rid of
those formulations that were seen as direct expressions of the vigorous
popular movements of the revolutionary period and their achievements,” as
Santos and Nunes write\textsuperscript{19} and that explains the institutionalisation of a
‘selective’ historical amnesia.

\textit{aesthetic of ruins}

It is this complex crisis of memory that I attempted to work in the form of
another experimental archive, an installation that mixed found photographs
with my own photography. In my first field trip to the village, in 2010, I
photographed the forty one houses like Ed Ruscha would have photographed
every building on the Sunset Strip,\textsuperscript{20} or the twenty six gasoline stations on
Route 66.\textsuperscript{21} I created a visually efficient typology, and tactics of
‘typologisation’ are frequent in many other spatial photobooks, as pointed by
Ian Walker,\textsuperscript{22} but it didn’t engage the psycho-historical resonances of the site.
I carried on with research at the National Library and Archives in Lisbon
where I searched for traces of my case study and found the cotton tape used
to bundle-up documents. I eventually cut the houses out of their backgrounds,
wrapped them around construction bricks, and re-photographed the series.
The fragmentation of the image and the archival cotton tape inserted spatio-
temporal gaps in the photographs that result in the creation of a historical
allegory. Further, the fragmentation and doubling of photographic material in
the installation created, in turn, an archive of participatory architecture and an
archive of revolution, that is also an archive of ruins and forgetting. The
difference between typological and allegorical archival installation might be
seen, as explained by Craig Owens,\textsuperscript{23} in such engagement with the
psychological and mythical resonances of the site. This along with other
strategies as the \textit{creation of images through reproduction of other images, an
attraction to the imperfect, the impermanent, the ruin that stands for process
of decay and abandonment, an obsessive gathering, piling up of fragments,
involving the spatial, leads to hybridisation and photomontage and a temporal
projection of structure as sequence.}

Could \textit{The past… in the form of a dream} installation communicate the time of
the construction, the time of the photograph and the time of the archive? It
appears to function both as a spatial and a time montage that shifts the
viewer’s perception between utopia, ruins, document and monument. The

\textsuperscript{19} Boaventura de Sousa Santos and João Arriscado Nunes, “Introduction: Democracy, Participation and
\textsuperscript{20} Edward Ruscha, \textit{Every Building on the Sunset Strip} (Los Angeles, CA: self-published, 1966)
\textsuperscript{22} For a study see Ian Walker “A kind of ‘Huh?: The siting of twentiesix gasoline stations (1962)” in \textit{The
Photobook: from Talbot to Ruscha and Beyond}, eds. Patrizia di Bello, Colette Wilson & Shamoon Zamir
\textsuperscript{23} As exemplified in the site-specific work of Roberth Smithson and archival accumulations of Hanne
(Spring, 1980), 71.
danger with ethnographic approaches is, according to James Cifford, the distancing of the represented communities in the ‘salvage paradigm’ that freezes them into a ‘present-becoming-past.’ This is something I have been very wary of, threading my way between documentary and experimental autoethnography. However, the allegorical structure of double representation, in which the ethnographing of the culture is recognised and made visible through photography’s reflexivity, complemented by the inclusion of other voices, transforms such ethnographic practices. Catherine Russell also sees this happening in the use of allegory to appropriate utopian desires, as in Walter Benjamin’s radical theory of memory. In her reading of Benjamin’s work, his study of the Paris arcades suggests that the past persists in the present in the form of a dream, often commodified as a wish image; this conception of the past is captured in the shifting temporalities of the reproduced and archived photography and became the title The past persists in the present in the form of a dream (participatory architectures, archive, revolution), for both a newspaper and installation.

In the installation, one of the sculptural clusters looks like a disordered construction site, a visual memory from my first visit to the village, where I saw the poetic debris of everyday life, let out and about in the streets… A wooden frame placed over a shabby linoleum strip evokes both the front of a house and a large light-box, with fluorescent light illuminating a quasi-transparent instance of the brick-house. Moving to the side, there is a defaced nightstand, placed over trestles, as if waiting repair. Hanging from its open door is a double spread from the photo newspaper, with a different brick-house. Other assemblages show construction materials and photo reproductions leaning against it, a homage to the DIY skills of the villagers, that glean iconic trash of late capitalism to repair the deteriorating housing estate. This creolisation, the hybridised appropriation of the globalised culture in a localised vocabulary of forms creates odd juxtapositions, for example, of brick chimneys with macdonalds’s logos. Is this a TAZ, a temporary autonomous zone? A pirates’ encampment that resists state control? Like a rhizome, the TAZ is a node reconfiguring itself in order to enact hit and run resistances. Otherwise how to rethink today SAAL’s ideas on social emancipation?

Surviving archives

It is crucial to note here that there is no official archive of the housing estate: a main gap in the residents’ archives is the absence of the official documents that would grant them ownership of the land and houses. In this absence, their position is extremely vulnerable and the creation of such archive appears as a matter of urgency. The inclusion of three large studio trestle tables to

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25 paula roush, The past persists in the present in the form of a dream (participatory architectures, archive, revolution) (London: msdm publications, 2012); first exhibited during the Brighton Photo Biennial 12 Photobook, October – November 2012 and Brighton Photo Fringe, Phoenix Brighton, November 2012
display the records of the SAAL architecture along vernacular and personal archives is an act of reparative justice as well as a direct result of the centrality of the fpfoundation in my studio practice. The collection of found material has a very a mobile configuration “in transit and in translation” moving like Marianne Hirsch and Diana Taylor suggest happens with temporary archival forms, away from “understandings of archives as stable repositories.” 27 Crucially, like the artists’ studios analysed by Jenny Sjöholm 28 my studio can be seen as an experimental archive in itself, with all types of collected objects being taken out and incorporated into installations set-ups, silkscreen prints, photobookzines and other practices that translate the contents of the storage boxes into new patterns that further loose its connection to its original site of production. Thus, not surprisingly, it is frequently impossible to identify the provenance of the photographs on display in any of my installations.

The inclusion of found state photo albums from the fascistic government, alongside Jose Veloso’s architectural archive and with the villagers’ personal archives in the tables query the weight of the archive to legitimise and or destabilise power positions. In the reproductions of the villagers’ photos they appear in their homes, surrounded by their collections of images and artefacts, as collectors and archivists in their own right, aware that in spite of this ordering, they lack the documents that prove their citizenship. Their staging for the camera of their personal archives reveals politically and aesthetically astute use of images, where evidence of citizen’s life is a plea for human rights. These archives of the private sphere show how politicised is the figure of the dispossessed. The image of the villagers as activists can only be complete with the memories of the films and songs that evidence their life in the public sphere, since life in the village has been wrapped up with the codes of ethno-documentary representation and the politics of image since its inception in the 1970s.

As part of the installation, I included a video archive that deals with the village in two different periods. The film Continuar a Viver - Living On (1976) was directed by Antonio Cunha Telles when the filmmaker joined the construction team in 1975. Since 1968 European militant cinema had been filming the working class struggle. Living On is both an ethnographic work and a piece of militant cinema, a politicised documentary of direct cinema, with no leading actors, rather the working class takes stage as the main character. Here, the protagonist is the fishing community performing for the camera as citizens exerting their right to the city, building their own houses collectively and assuming the control over their means of production by establishing a fishing cooperative.

The other video archive moment is a contemporary Youtube playlist of thirty cover versions of the song Indios da Meia Praia (1976). When the protest
singer Zeca Afonso (1929 – 1987) wrote the soundtrack for the film he called it *Indios da Meia Praia* (*Indigenous of the Meia Beach*) as the Lagos city population called the villagers, a derogatory term that implied both foreigner and subaltern positions. The song appropriates the term to claim an anti-bourgeois attitude, and it has been so popular throughout the years, that it has slowly become an anthem for the revolution. So whilst in fact many people have never visited the village, the so-called *Indios* became a legend in its own right and the song regularly reappears as a new cover version in political rallies, TV shows and song contests.

In the site of an empty office building in the borough of Victoria, central London, the viewer’s experience of walking along the archival installation was framed by the background view out of the 6th floor window frames: outside were the red bricks tower of the neo-Byzantine style catholic Westminster cathedral erected in 1903, the dark grey cement cluster of brutalist architecture office buildings built in the mid-1970s, contrasting with the new stainless steel office buildings, a symbol of the present digital economies, with office workers visible at their computer desks. The allegorical archive could be experienced in a total environment of time-space compression at the time of globalisation.29

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