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Selected Works from the Berardo Collection

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Vito Acconci

Helena Almeida

Bernd and Hilla Becher

Christian Boltanski

Anselm Kiefer

Hiroshi Sugimoto

Tracy Moffat

Daniel Blaufuks

Credits

If modernism erased the notion of memory from artistic practice, converting its significance into a register of pure visuality, artists in the decades following World War II, and continuing to the present day, have endeavoured to revive this dimension, employing the most diverse forms and procedures. With the collapse in value of the grand narratives that previously gave specific order to the facts and data constituting ‘knowledge,’ the notion of the archive – a notion that, paradoxically, evolved more in the modern world than at any other time – has played an increasingly significant role. The archive is the privileged form granted to the accumulation and objective organisation of historic knowledge, and indeed even personal memory. Such archival objectivity is not, however, neutral. It bears the repository of a system of organisation of records and documents by a state, by diverse institutions, by a collection, a discipline, or simply by an individual subjectivity. Artistic practices of the past fifty years have explored the notion of the archive in such a way as to re-examine its meanings, and underlying concepts and concerns, as well as the power over memory that emerges from such explorations.

Based on an examination of works selected from the Museu Coleção Berardo, Ruth Rosengarten’s essay traces the complex trajectories of the problems these works raise in relation to the potentialities of those artistic practices wishing to reclaim individual historical memory as testimony: a bulwark against forgetfulness.

Pedro Lapa
Artistic Director, Museu Coleção Berardo

There is a story told about the war criminal Ratko Mladic, who spent months shelling Sarajevo from the surrounding hills. Once he noticed an acquaintance's house in the next target. The general telephoned his acquaintance and informed him that he was giving him five minutes to collect his 'albums', because he had decided to blow the house up. When he said 'albums', the murderer meant the albums of family photographs. The general, who had been destroying the city for months, knew precisely how to annihilate memory. That is why he 'generously' bestowed on his acquaintance life with the right to remembrance. Bare life and a few family photographs.

Dubravka Ugresic, *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*

He orders Gapka to bring two melons, and immediately cuts them himself, collects the seeds in a paper, and beings to eat. Then he orders Gapka to fetch the ink-bottle, and with his own hand, writes this inscription on the paper of seeds: 'These melons were eaten on such and such a date.' If there was a guest present, then it reads: 'Such and such a person assisted.'

Nikolai Gogol, *The Tale of How Ivan Ivanovich quarrelled with Ivan Nikoforovich.*

Prologue

The invitation to participate in the series *Untitled* organised by the Museu Coleção Berardo, was a welcome one. Being given, so to speak, the freedom of the collection, I was delighted to be able to pick my way through works accumulated over the years. The delight was not unrelated to a form of laziness, for such curatorship of a virtual exhibition bears none of the practical burdens and pains, not to mention the expenses, of curating an exhibition in a real location. But if, by dint of these advantages and limitations, I have not been granted the pleasure of experiencing these works in dialogue with one another, I have also been curtailed by a further condition: while the collection is in Portugal, I live in England, I am writing this at home, and therefore cannot nip out to see the works I will have considered for selection.

Because of this handicap, I am not able to entertain that form of close observation that would be afforded me with a material and temporal exposure to the works. Painting – of which some exuberant practices of the 1990s tempted me – was of course immediately ruled out, photography quickly presenting itself as the most obvious choice of topic, for being more easily reproduced and potentially infinitely reproducible.

The practical reasons for the obviousness of such a topic were supported, too, by the vagaries of my own practice, in which I have been veering towards the photographic (and its reinventions in other media) over the past few years, both in theory and in practice. I have been particularly interested in the earlier deployments of photography both as mnemonic triggers and as testimonials of presence. Digital photography, with all the advantages it offers, has nevertheless put paid to these initial uses of photographs, artefacts that are now as wrapped in nostalgia as any obsolete, handcrafted relic.

But of course, other than presenting themselves as photographic images, the works were given to me in a particular order, the various strands of the collection being laid out as an online archive, where works could be accessed either through the broader category of ‘artistic movement,’ or by consulting the name of the artist in an alphabetic listing. In the best possible way, curating this hypothetical exhibition would also be a form of mining an already existent archive. So although the two are always interlinked in museological contexts, in this virtual form, *collection* and *archive* had been seamlessly and effortlessly elided, the one collapsed into the other.

Now, I have always been obsessed with matters archival: the question of how to sort, file, keep and access information, and what form that material might take when it was consulted in the future, has seemed to me of primordial import. It so affects how material might avail itself to the forgetful mind grappling for the right word, or the related concept, that sometimes it seems to me that much of what I do occurs in the undergrowth of visible production. For each essay written, or body of work produced in the studio, there has been a desk cleared; a new method of tidying and sorting essayed; some box files purchased or, latterly, a computer application taken on board.

Moreover, believing inherently in the subliminal work that occurs in the preparation for the writing of a text, it was with the clarity of the obvious that something that linked ‘the photographic’ and ‘the archival’ should have presented itself to me, not only as the means of writing this text, but also as its subject. There were numerous works in the collection that presented themselves as candidates, and those included photographic works made as quasi-archival records of, or studies for, actions (Vito Acconci [fig. 2], Helena Almeida [fig. 3], Hamish Fulton, Ana Mendieta), as well as archivally based work that manifestly contested the notion of photography as unmediated evidence (Tracy Moffat [fig. 11], Vivan Sundaram, John Hilliard), some of it stretching the photographic beyond the certainties offered by recognisability (José Luís Neto). The works I have selected are few, and they plot a particular trajectory, beginning with Marcel Duchamp, whose *Boîte en valise* [Box in a Suitcase] (1935-1941), though standing out as an odd inclusion in relation to the other works I have chosen, provides a necessary structural and art-historical foundation. The inclusion of a single non-photographic work by Anselm Kiefer serves as a counterpoint that, I hope, will prove meaningful in context.

**THE PHOTOGRAPH AND
THE ARCHIVE:
THEORY IN PRACTICE**

The Archive and the Photograph

The historical links between photography and the archive have not only been widely and critically chronicled, they have also been embodied and performed in various practices, often visionary enterprises of early and late (or post) modernism in art, literature, and their areas of overlap: from Aby Warburg's prescient *Mnemosyne-Atlas* (1924-1929), through the monumental and incomplete project of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades* (1927-1940), W.G. Sebald's archival imaginary and his use of photography as the site of commerce with the dead, to Gerhard Richter's heterogeneous *Atlas* (begun in 1964), with its aspiration towards 'comprehensive totality'¹ and its (definitional) 'devastation of that promise.'² The edges that are blurred, in Richter's work, between the catalogue, the archive and the encyclopaedia are similarly undone in the work of another German conceptual artist whose output has great material richness, Hanne Darboven. Her *Kulturgeschichte 1880-1983* [Cultural History] (1980-1983) is a vast collection of photographs, postcards and documents tracing a century of history and displayed in grids, suggesting, yet refusing to allow, a synthesis between the vernacular and the universal, history and the everyday, the documentary and the aesthetic.³

Such a tension between the historical and the personal is at the very centre of the field I am briefly exploring here. It is worth noting that photographic images establish a hinge between public and private spheres in specific ways. The term 'postmemory' was coined by Marianne Hirsch⁴ to capture that particular intersection as it manifests itself in the trans-generational reverberation of an event. In material terms, postmemory is embodied as the after-image that certain photographs provoke, photographs that seem to hover between an individual's memory and impersonal history. It is possible that one might not have lived through such events oneself, but an image of them pervades the culture one inhabits.

Hirsch's 'postmemory' is akin to the theory developed in the field of psychoanalysis by Nicholas Abraham and Marina Torok, who expanded the Freudian system of individual analysis to explore the pathological outcome, in certain individuals, of the traumatic secrets harboured by their parents and grandparents. For Abraham and Torok, the falsification or erasure of the past practiced by people who lived through the Holocaust (for example) and wished to protect the next generation from such horrors, becomes the breeding ground for depression, anxiety and possibly shame in individuals, families, communities and even nations.⁵ For Hirsch, collective experiences of trauma may be distilled in torn or faded individual photographs of someone or something lost though unknown. Exposure to such photographic images intertwines with the stories of those who did live through the events, together penetrating by various cultural means into the very fabric of the self.

1 Benjamin Buchloh, 'Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*: The Anomic Archive,' in *October*, vol. 88 (Spring 1999), pp. 117-145. Reprinted in *Gerhard Richter Atlas: The Reader*, London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2003, pp. 99-114.

2 Lynne Cooke, introduction to the exhibition *Gerhard Richter: Atlas*, Dia Foundation, New York (27 April 1995 – 25 February 1996), text available online: <http://www.diaart.org/exhibitions/introduction/54> (consulted on 6 October 2011).

3 Cf. Dan Adler, *Hanne Darboven: Cultural History 1880-1983*, London: Afterall Books, 2009.

4 Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

5 Cf. Nicholas Abraham, Maria Torok and Nicholas Thomas Rand, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. Surprisingly, Hirsch makes no mention of Abraham and Torok in her erudite study.