

Kathline Carr

Cultural Memory: Truths and Fictions of the Archive

That anamnestic intoxication in which the flâneur goes about the city not only feeds on the sensory data taking shape before his eyes but often possesses itself of abstract knowledge—indeed, of dead facts—as something experienced and lived through.

Walter Benjamin

Trash, photographs, receipts, orange peels, questions. These items were among what constituted the respective archives created in a recent critical theory seminar I attended; each item transformed by their container into a document, a record, a piece of narrative. When considering an archive, one is faced with the truth or non-truth of it; the arbitrary cataloging of information for an archive tells a story, but not always a true story, or intended story. In the essay, “The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again,” Warhol describes his self-made archive of random things that crossed his desk, cataloged by month, the items arranged in no particular order. Now these collective items, known as the *Time Capsules* not only relate a private life, but also provide commentary on the times Warhol lived through. At a count of 612 “capsules,” they have become a formidable body of work, one that almost anyone contemporary to the time span covered can find entry into. Though parts of this archive are “true,” in that they related to Warhol by passing through his office, further narratives and truths have certainly emerged after the Time Capsules entered the public domain and became available for study in 1994.¹

¹ For a description of Warhol’s Time Capsules, see: http://edu.warhol.org/app_aw_tc.html.

The archive, long in use by historians and governmental bodies, individuals and institutions, has become a burgeoning entity of technology. As an area of study, archives are questioned and appropriated by theorists, curators and artists alike. The archive is most relevant to me as a medium and catalyst for art making, and is most interesting for its potential to respond to and document cultural meaning. My questions about the archive as an artistic tool find articulation through the fertile ground of Renee Green's essay, "Survival: Ruminations of Archival Lacunae," where she describes her work in *Partially Buried in Three Parts* as "an overlapping exploration of ways in which we attempt to reinterpret the past as well as our contemporary relations to a natal *patria*."² In *Partially Buried*, Green is dealing with cultural memory; the persistence of our memory is enhanced or perhaps created by her arrangement of an archive of a particular time and place.³

In *Partially Buried*, Green has assembled a multi-media art installation that pulls disparate events and people together with her self being the fulcrum on which the parts balance. It is a powerful and effective piece of cultural dialog and nostalgic experimentalism, using images, sound, film and photograph in conjunction with period viewing stations and settings. On the surface Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Robert Smithson have little to do with each other, but these two artists form part of the weave of *Partially Buried*. The work of Cha and Smithson has impacted Green; another point of intersection is the early, violent deaths of both artists. Part of Green's intention in

² Renee Green, "Survival: Ruminations on archival lacunae." pp 50.

³ For an American of a certain age, the aspects of Renee Green's assemblage in her site-specific piece cohere with an incomplete version of the time in question—1970—and encourages a more complete memory for viewers.

weaving footage of the Kent, Ohio anti-war protest shootings with footage of the student uprising massacre of 1980 in Kwangju while alluding to death, memory and the very formation of collective memory, is to have the viewer examine their own catalog of experience and cultural engagement.

Green's mother worked at Kent State University and was there on the day of the shootings, so a more personal connection exists beyond the merely cultural/historical; Green waited for her to come home amidst tumult in the community. Green's inclusion of period music in *Partially Buried* serves the dual purpose of transporting viewer to the past, or forming a new auditory association with the visual material.⁴ She employs silence also, to "point indirectly to what has been silenced through death."⁵ Though Green is a character in *Partially Buried*, she is an anonymous character. As Nora Alter points out in her essay *Beyond the Frame*, "Any retelling is always going to be a fictional construct of one's imagination embedded in false memories and impressions...if all characters become fiction then it takes only a small step further to conclude that all representation is an act of fabrication."⁶ So the truth of *Partially Buried* is obscured by impartiality; you might say it is partially buried.

In my chapbook, *Family Album*, I draw on a personal archive, mostly photographic, to investigate the dementia and death of my mother from early onset

⁴ Though I am younger than Green, I remember the Vietnam footage on the news and the horror that it instilled in me. It was unavoidable and pervasive, like the music on the radio. Some songs from the early 70's are indelibly associated with events of the times.

⁵ Nora Alter, "Beyond the Frame: Renee Green's Video Practice," pp 159.

⁶ *ibid*, pp 167.

Alzheimer's disease. The narrative hinges on a lost photograph of me as a newborn. The fact that this photograph is missing, which had been so important to my mother, seemed emblematic of the "removal" of the person I knew to be my mother by illness. The truth is selected from a larger chain of facts to show a section; this becomes a story. An artist sifts through an archive, selecting the pieces for inclusion, dusting them off and showcasing them, while leaving piles of dirt behind. This kind of excavation interests me as an artist, and Green's work speaks to this archeological pursuit of the past. But the archive remains, and useful information continues to surface, depending on who is holding the shovel.

Nora Alter contends that one must examine Green's work as *flâneur*, a wanderer among the assemblage, overlaying one's own experience onto the work. But isn't this the way to approach any archive? The formation of cultural memory will always take on the cast of the individual, even as it remains momentous to the society that claims it. Take for example the events of September 11, 2001. Like the Kennedy assassination decades earlier, most people cognizant on that date remember when he or she heard about the planes hitting the Trade Center, even if they were far from the event. 9/11 has become a line drawn onto American history, a defining marker in our collective cultural memory.

As modern *flâneurs*, we are less likely to wander the streets of a city than to surf the Internet, the unchallenged gatekeeper of modern cultural memory. Benjamin suggests in the epigraph above that the *flâneur* lives vicariously through borrowed experience, not unlike a viewer of Renee Green's *Partially Buried in Three Parts*. Whether one has an

experience or not becomes difficult to pin down with such a plethora of visual images to view, cull and assimilate. Professor and writer Aleida Assmann writes, “Perhaps contemporary culture approaches a state in which...remembering and forgetting are no longer clearly distinct from each other.”⁷ Computer archives such as YouTube promote collective experience, and can even replace a “lost” memory, as I found the other day when I searched for an old Sesame Street sequence I have never forgotten from my early childhood. I was pleased to find it, and to learn that Grace Slick was responsible for the vocals. I passed it on to my teenage daughter, as a tradition might be handed down in some earlier time.

YouTube, however, is not a true archive, according to Lucas Hilderbrand, though he names it a “portal of cultural memory.”⁸ In *Film Quarterly*, he writes, “YouTube may render archives irrelevant and introduce unrealistic demands for access.”⁹ Everything is on YouTube, it seems, for better or for worse, which brings us back to trash. As Hilderbrand writes,

Culled from users’ personal collections of recordings and productions, the site’s videos and its search engine offer some evidence of what from television’s past now constitutes our cultural memory—a concept that suggests the idiosyncratic ways that personal experience, popular culture, and historical narratives intersect.

⁷ Assmann, Aleida Assmann, “Texts, Traces, Trash: The Changing Media of Cultural Memory,” pp 134. Assmann is considered to be an expert in cultural memory.

⁸ Lucas Hilderbrand, “Youtube: Where Cultural Memory and Copyright Converge,” pp 54. Hilderbrand is a professor at University of California. According to his faculty page, he holds a PhD in Cinema Studies from New York University.

⁹ *ibid.*

So much of our personal and social memories are comprised of television news coverage, commercials, or scenes in bad sitcoms.¹⁰

Perhaps art can offer salvation out of the maze of irrelevant flotsam that we willingly allow into our lives, or that enters us pervasively through visual images that punctuate and fabricate our society. Artists, as philosophers, pillagers, scavengers, archivists, appropriators, have always approached objects of culture with ideas; the onslaught of technology is merely producing different modes of expression. Like Renee Green, we (as artists) surface from our products of art making, for posterity—or for YouTube.

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¹⁰ *ibid*, pp 50.

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