

# The Archive as a contact zone

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## Introduction

The use of archival material now has a long history, both in the visual arts and in experimental or avant-garde film, where the creative work of memory through recollection, retrieval and mourning has been widely explored. However, it has acquired a specific relevance for the visual arts in a time marked by the unprecedented dissemination of images through digital media. The 'documentary turn', promoted by the *Documenta 11* exhibition curated by Okwui Enwezor in 2002, describes a number of practices that use 'the tool of the documentary and the function of the archive as procedures for inducting new flows and transactions between images, texts, narratives, documents, statements, events, communities, institutions, audiences' (Enwezor, 2009:101).<sup>1</sup> According to Enwezor, as the pre-eminent forms of archival material, photography and film are privileged media for the investigation of the archive in the visual arts. Their capacity to establish a direct relationship between time and event demonstrates their imbrication with issues of memory, history and identity (Enwezor, 2008:11-13).<sup>2</sup>

Both documentary and archival practices in contemporary art are located in a liminal space between the representation and the production of the real, between the factual and the fictive, the public and the private, the objective and the subjective. This ambivalence is certainly one of the effects of the post-modern and post-colonial critique of knowledge. This is to say that what is culturally understood as "the real" emerge as entwined in a complex mesh of discourses, relations, and subjectivities. The expression *the archive as a*

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1 Okwui Enwezor, «Documentary/verité: biopolitics, human rights, and the figure of "truth" in contemporary art» in M. Lind, and H. Steyerel (eds), *The Greenroom: Reconsidering Documentary in Contemporary Art*, New York and Berlin: Sternberg Press 2008, p. 101.

2 Idem, p. 11-13.

*contact zone* that I borrow from Mary Louise Pratt intends to point this inherent contradiction within what I would call a post-colonial use of the archive.<sup>3</sup>

With respect to the problem of the image as document of the real, documentary and archival practices today are profoundly ambivalent towards rhetorics of truth and authenticity. The works I will consider today deal with notions of history and memory, both personal and/or collective, but they adopt a subjective gaze. This position opens up the possibility of reinventing the relation between self and other, self and history, especially when it deals with subjects and histories that have been omitted, erased or repressed. This subjective attitude can be assimilated to the notion of experimental ethnography, which, as Catherine Russell puts it, is not a new category or genre of film, but a “methodological incursion of aesthetics on cultural representation, a collision of social theory and formal experimentation”.<sup>4</sup>

A recent exhibition at Paris’ Betonsalon called *The Day After* (an exhibition space for art and research) by american-pakistani artist Maryam Jafri is a good exemple of the kind of researches and strategies that these practices often imply. Maryam Jafri’s *Independence Day 1934-1975* is an installation based on her research across public and private archives of several countries (in Africa, Asia and the Middle-East), in search for photographic traces of the day of independence. The installation gathers together a number of pictures from 29 different countries that were taken in a period spanning from 1934 to 1975. In her mapping of the history of decolonization, Jafri is attentive to the rituals and representatons that have characterized the 24 hours period when a colonized territory becomes a post-colonial nation-state. The way she presents the pictures – as a grid that suggests both conceptual art and the form of a collection– underlines the repetitive patterns revealing a political model exported from Europe. The aim of the project is multiple: on one side what is at stake here is the very process of collecting material from so called “peripheral” archives (one would expect to find documentation in the archives and library of the former colonial powers). On the other, through this recollection, Jafri wants

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<sup>3</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Studies in Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Londres, Routledge, 1992.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine Russell, *Experiemental Ethnography. The work of film in the age of video*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1997, p. xi.

to question the way we look at history when it takes the form of visual representation; if and how does the repetitive pattern interfere in our understanding of the event and its related narratives.

Whereas Jafri's inquiry is focused on geopolitical events and their visual representation, in what follows I want to discuss two works where historical and political concerns interact with issues of displacement, subjectivity, and the forming of a community. Shifting from the national communities at the centre of Jafri's work, I would like to look at the ways in which documentary and archival practices in the field of art investigate shared histories where subjectivity plays a crucial role.

### **Andrea Geyer's *Spiral Lands* (2007-2009)**

I want to turn now to a different project that deals with issues relating to contested territories and their historical narratives. In 2007 Andrea Geyer presented an installation called *Spiral Lands (chapter 1)* at the Documenta 12 in Kassel (she then developed this project in two subsequent chapters in following years). This work uses archival documents in a way that challenges mainstream accounts of the American Indians in that she superposes montage and iconicity, narration and allegory. *Spiral Lands* reflects upon the narratives that have shaped the history of the conflicts for the possession of the territories in the American South-West, where Navajo and Pueblo had lived for centuries. A number of historical sources are appropriated by the artist and then juxtaposed to a series of images in order to draw the history of a nation's myths and constitution.

*Spiral Lands (Chapter 1)*, is an installation composed of a series of 19 frames containing two photographs (sometimes three) depicting the contested sites, and a text. A photographic and textual archaeology of the American Indian's struggles against the expropriation of their lands in New Mexico, Utah, Arizona, Colorado. In this inquiry across the archives of the American colonization, Geyer explores the entwinement of historical narratives and identity formations. She also emphasizes the condition of inhabiting a place where conflicts and warfare are part of everyday life.

The black and white pictures show desert landscapes, endless horizons, portions of ancient buildings, forests, a canyon, and so on. Geyer adopts a documentary, descriptive style that avoids the romantic conventions of Hollywood Westerns. Her images bear no trace of the dramatic encounter with the West typical of established traditions in American photography, where the representation of the American West becomes first and foremost a spectacle for the colonizer's gaze (think of Ansel Adams). She also avoids the picturesque or touristic imagery. Instead, she chooses to mimic a documentary style suggesting the gaze of the scientist, archaeologist or geographer, who came here to study these lands.<sup>5</sup> Pairings provide a better view of a particular site and mimic the stereoscopic device, thus connecting modern science to a specific way of seeing referring to the gaze of the explorer. Her use of black and white is also reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> century imagery and contributes in strengthening the reference to this epoch as a key moment in the cultural representation of these lands. Geyer's pictures explicitly or implicitly refer to a specific "way of seeing": I suggest that they cannot be described as landscapes, but rather as views, according to Rosalind Krauss' famous distinction.<sup>6</sup> Landscape refers to an artistic genre, whereas a view is a depiction that Krauss defines as topographic because it is related to a territory's exploration, study, or cartography. Also, contrary to landscape painting or photography, what Krauss defines as view was considered as a document and not as a work of art, as an archive cataloguing a specific territory. In a similar way, Andrea Geyer's operation simulates the constitution of an archive retracing the history and topography of a given territory.

The text describes the artist's encounter with the land and the stories she has heard drawing from a number of diverse sources, from Indian oral tradition to political discourse. The textual material is a montage of a number of historical documents referring to the history of the colonisation of these lands: proclamations, treaties, manifestos of American Indian Associations, selected studies in cultural anthropology or travelogues, as well as personal accounts she has heard, and considerations in the first person, all of which introduces an

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<sup>5</sup> On the visual culture of the American West see Martha Sandweiss, *Print the Legend. Photography and the American West*, New Haven, Harvard University Press, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, «Les espaces discursifs de la photographie», in *Le Photographique. Pour une théorie des écarts*, trad. fr., Paris, Macula, 1990, pp. 37-55.

oral dimension in this historical montage. Another layer comes to complexify the image/text montage, but this is only visible in a separate brochure distributed in the exhibition (it can also be found in the artist's website). A text containing a number of footnotes that are not just the references to the main text. These footnotes define a parallel narrative, a hidden text running under the plates composing the installation.<sup>7</sup>

*Spiral Lands* adopts an openly critical perspective with regard to the attempt to reconstruct the entwinement between place, history and notions such as possession and struggle, in their relation to visual representation. Place and history refer to some of the most problematic conditions of our globalised present. In Geyer's perspective, the landscapes depicted in the photographs thus appear as the sites where the dynamics of history is taking place. Through the operations of assemblage and montage, a multiplicity of voices, tensions, and histories can emerge. But whereas each image depicts a particular site – a mountain, a village, and so on<sup>8</sup> – there is no indication of the site's name, nor of any geographical localisation.

Andrea Geyer addresses the history of the American colonization avoiding to visually represent Native Americans, who are the main subjects of the struggles described in this work, and with whom we are supposed to identify. I wonder if this has to do with the risk of producing a nostalgic, reified representation? Or if by choosing to focus on place instead of people, Geyer wants to underline a double appropriation concerning both the land and a community that has been so often reified in the image? As it has been stressed by several scholars, modern ethnography tends to consider native populations as belonging to the past: their authenticity is deemed to disappear because of its proximity with western culture. Photography had a crucial role in this process that James Clifford, among others, has defined as “salvage ethnography” which produces the native subject as a ghostly figure coming from the past. Edward Sheriff Curtis' *North American Indian* – a 20-volumes collection of photography – is a famous example of this kind of project. This

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<sup>7</sup> See Andrea Geyer's website: [www.andreageyer.info](http://www.andreageyer.info). Texts and images related to this project are reprinted in *Andrea Geyer / Spiral Lands / Chapter 1*, London, Koenig Books, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> See Janet Catherine Berloo, «Libraries of Meaning and of History: *Spiral Lands* and Indigenous American Lands», in *Spiral Lands*, *op. cit.*, pp. I-X.

type of visual representation was predicated on the need to provide an “objective” image of indigenous population, whose final destination was the museum or the archive. Native subjects are thus constructed as structurally linked to the past. Their “authenticity” was related to the a-historical condition in which they were placed: encountering history – the western colonizers – would mean to disappear.

Throughout *Spiral Lands* the voices of the American Indian emerge on the contrary as active forces within the spatial and historical coordinates of the conflicts. Geyer thus composes a counter-archive that challenges the very notion of historical time connected to the colonial enterprise. While looking at the contested sites’ images along the textual montage, places and documents emerge as contact zones, where conflicting forces confront each other in a context where power relations and resistance coexist. As Mary Louise Pratt defines it, a contact zone designates the space of encounters derived from colonization: « The space of colonial encounters, the space in which the peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish on-going relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict »<sup>9</sup>. Against nostalgia for the authenticity of a free and uncontaminated territory, *Spiral Lands* underlines the impossible reconciliation between the epic narrative of the American West and the multiple histories of the conflicts that have shaped its territories.

### **Alejandra Riera’s Habitations of the world**

The work of Alejandra Riera is based on documentary film, photography and writings that she assembles together in the form of the installation, the book or even as a film. “Reality – she says – is an unresolved problem”: this idea of the real as something unresolved is the driving principle of most of her work and particularly of her *Maquettes-sans-qualité* (or: *Prototypes-without-quality*), that she assembled as a book on the occasion of her exhibition at the Tapiès Foundation in Barcelona in 2004. The book is a collaborative project

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<sup>9</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes, op. cit.*, p. 6.

structured as an archive – or as she says more precisely, as a number of discontinuous assemblages (agencements discontinus) -- of different projects composing the five parts of installation and then the book. The maquettes contain texts and images assembled in ways that produce layers of meaning and possible interpretations. The superposition of visual and textual materials seems often incoherent and difficult to decipher, defining a number of narratives that irregularly criss-cross along the pages of the book. A crucial line of investigation emerging from it is related to Riera's involvement at the sides of the *sans-papiers* movement in Paris between 1994 and 1998. Images recalling issues of displacements, migration, illegal existences and modes of inhabitation are disseminated throughout the book.

Although the reference is not made explicit, nor do we see moments of actual political action, images such as this one described as "Arrivals. Charles de Gaulle Airport, Roissy. 1990", suggests a liminal space of control and spatial containment with respect to the experience of being in transit, alluding to Riera's own arrival in France (she was born and raised in Argentina). This other picture is accompanied by this capture: "*1996. Partial view of the Eglise St-Bernard's left side occupied by sans-papiers, while Jacques Derrida, some lawyers and several representatives of the associations installed at a table at the centre of the church give a press conference to support the hunger strikers*". There is no trace of the famous philosopher in the picture, neither of the mentioned press-conference. The photograph clearly positions the viewer outside of the event. It's a "partial view", as Riera describes most of her pictures. What we see, again, is located at the threshold of both the actual space of the church and the media event. A group of people stand before what could be the entrance of a church, in the middle of a disordered set of objects, fabrics and clothes, suggesting the occupation of a public space as well as a collision between the inside and the outside.

What does it mean to inhabit the outside? How to imagine an inside when one's living place is located outside? The fifth chapter or "prototype" of Riera's *Maquettes-sans-qualité* is related to her film *Cité des femmes (City of women)* and takes these questions as its point of departure. The film was initiated by the artist in collaboration with Madjiguène Cissé, a former spokeswoman of the

*sans-papiers* movement between 1994 and 1998, who then decided to leave France and return to Senegal.

A very peculiar kind of cartography opens this film: it's a map printed on the fabric of a woman's dress that the camera films following the path defined by the woman's finger and explanations across her body. As we slowly understand, the fabric draws a cartography of women's life and labour, a map defining women's places and tasks in a space that is both geographic and domestic. One could argue that the film is about drawing alternative maps of women's lives and experiences, particularly with respect to the living spaces. The scene is located in Dakar, where Riera went in the early 2000s following Madjiguène Cissé, who started a project called Refdaf (*Réseaux de femmes pour le développement durable en Afrique - Women's Network for sustainable development in Africa*) that promotes women's housing initiatives. As Riera explains, the film is a "project under construction" and at the same time a sort of shelter (*un chantier-refuge*, she says) that aims at providing a link between here and there, between the experience of struggling for the right to have a place in Europe and the struggles to be able to imagine a woman's place. The film's narrative takes place in a deserted space at the edges of Dakar, during a special day when a group of women, gathered together under a precariously constructed shelter, discuss and dream about a future "city of women". This is the land where they are going to build their houses and we see them tracing plans and maps of the still imaginary town on the sand. Yellow tickets and small objects mark the future sites of the market, public garden, hospital, library and so forth, thus echoing the map on the fabric that opened the film.

Riera follows the women's desires and aspirations and tries to question what does it mean to construct a (gendered) place for oneself in a post-colonial context, which is to say a place where people have been historically dispossessed. The camera follows some of the women in the places where they actually live in Dakar. Most of these women have low wages and work in the so-called informal economy, they spend most of their time outside: in the mobile space of informal labour and in the open spaces of the courtyards they share with other families. The movement between their desired "City of Women" and the images of their actual living spaces constructs an imaginary map where the reality of the living conditions collide with their aspirations to be allowed to

build a place of her own, a shared space where, as a woman says “ *il fasse bon vivre*”. The film considers the ways in which other configurations of being-together can be possible and how they can have transformative effects for both the subject and the (women’s) community.

This is maybe the meaning of the numerous references to Cissé’s experience in France during the film, where, as she herself explains: “In Paris in 1996, we, the *sans-papiers*, we were obliged to live in different places [...]. We occupied churches, hangars... The question is to know what are our rights when we don’t have any right”.<sup>10</sup> At times we see super-8 footages and pictures referring to the *sans-papiers* demonstrations and hunger-strike in 1996, images that contrast with the media spectacularization of the events at the time. The film draws a connection between these two moments in Madjiguène Cissé’s wanderings and struggles that deal with the desire of being able to chose where and how one wants to live. As Riera suggests in her notes on the project, the film circulates around exterior spaces without entering the narrow interiors of the women’s houses. The women’s *interior* space thus emerges as a present space of possibilities that can be located under a shared shelter, during a meeting and collective discussions.

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<sup>10</sup> «Nous, les sans-papiers à Paris en 1996, avons été contraints d’habiter dans plusieurs endroits, même s’ils ne nous appartenaient pas. Nous avons occupé des églises, des hangars... La question est de savoir quels droits on a quand on n’a aucun droit» See Pascale Cassagnau, «Images en chantier. Entretien avec Alejandra Riera», *Vacarme*, n. 32, 2005, p. 70.

