



Milagros de la Torre, *Under the Black Sun* (1991-1993)

The Archive in Transit

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The subject of archives has been a topic of conversation, collaboration and co-teaching between the two of us for several decades. Whether we were working on the memory and postmemory of the Holocaust or the Argentinean Dirty War, thinking about literature, photography, or performance, whether we were co-teaching courses on trauma and memory or co-organizing conferences or workshops, the subject of archives supersisted in our minds. Why had the subject of archives taken on such power? Our discussions about “Engendering the Archive” took place in the very different but equally exciting contexts of two working groups—at Columbia University’s [Center for the Critical Analysis of Social Difference](#) between 2008 and 2012, and at the Hemispheric Institute’s Encuentro in Bogotá, Colombia in August 2009. Both working groups, like this issue, brought together scholars, artists, activists, and practitioners, and both reflected a great variety of fields and approaches, ranging from anthropology, to performance, history, literature, theater, visual culture, memory studies, public humanities, and politics. The theoretical, critical and personal essays, interviews, art pieces, and activist work represented in this issue emerge from the commitment of the working groups to looking at how gender, race, sexuality, class and power determine what societies remember and what they forget.

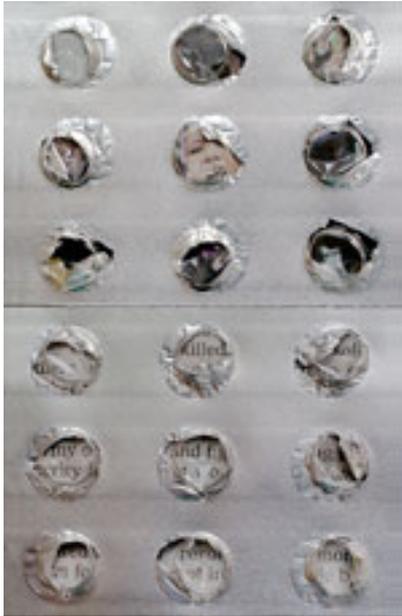
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Why the archive *now*? How has the term become so ubiquitous and so capacious—encompassing the collection, the inventory, the library, the museum, and even the corpus of our scholarly projects, or the references we use? Why have archives, and archival practices become so central to our understanding of our historical moment and of ourselves as subjects of history? More than a repository of objects or texts, the archive is also the process of selecting, ordering and preserving the past. It is simultaneously any accessible collection that potentially yields data, and a site for critical reflection and contestation of its social, political, and historical construction. The archive is also a widespread social practice. We archive ourselves in action, in our files, and on our shelves, as well as on Facebook, YouTube, blogs, and in photos and videos, through every available medium. What is more, the archive is also fertile ground for artists and performers who use and at the same time critique its construction.

As a digital publication, this double issue of *e-misférica* is particularly well poised to look at how digital technologies have realigned the subject of the archive—both the archive as concept and the subjectivity that is created through archival practices. As digital archives expand our abilities to structure and preserve knowledge, have they also succeeded in shifting the logics of intelligibility to bring the unspoken and the unthought into public awareness? How have the power structures behind archival practices been transformed through technological and creative innovation over the past decades?

The contributions to this issue expose the archival work of different media, languages and technologies—verbal and written, digital, narrative, painting, drawing, comics, photography, radio, performance, official and unofficial documents, testimonial objects, bodies, and bodily remains—in calling urgent attention to war, repression, dictatorship, environmental disaster, AIDS, and struggles for economic justice across the Americas. This issue asks *who* and *what* is the “subject” of archives? What do we want or need from the past? How is the past put into the use of the present? What subjects are left out in the process?

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Lorie Novak, *Medicated* (2011)

As a cover image, Lorie Novak's *Medicated* (2011) is both a testimonial object and a figure for the ways in which archives have come to matter. The disposable aluminum wrapper that contained eighteen pills is all that is left, an ephemeral remainder, to be discarded or, at best, recycled. The violent past, revealed through the fragments of newsprint images of contorted faces and words—"killed," right in the center, "soldier" perhaps, "revolt," and "army"—is thrown out with the trash. Political, economic, and social issues are disavowed as politics and displaced onto individual bodies where they are lived as symptoms. Andreas Huyssen observed that modernity's *mise-en-scène* of history was based on the assumption that "one learned from history."¹ The temporal and emotional distance from the past allowed for the practice of objective analysis. The past is now known differently—not as something we can look back to, study, and analyze. We experience it; we re-live the affect without necessarily understanding the former iteration. Agency moves from the polis to the private, from the citizen to the consumer as suffering victim. Such displacement disappears the political scenarios explored in this issue—criminal politics, corrupt policies, and exploitation—and blames the victim. Her distress is her problem. Take a pill. Get over it. Novak has recycled that which is discarded into a work of art that disappears the body and leaves a trace; a world of pain classified into the regular linear intervals of analgesia and powerlessness. Through the blisters, pain irrupts into the present as malaise. But the tinfoil was hastily torn by the impatient user seeking to filter out or cover over the excessive vulnerabilities and fragilities that plague us.

This issue moves away from understandings of archives as stable repositories, and thinks of them rather as engines of circulation, as archival acts or practices that both mobilize different media and are mobilized by them. Instead of valuing notions of fixity, authenticity, and

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legitimacy, we look at the archive as the site of potentiality, provisionality, and contingency. Instead of the mute or silent archives studied by Silvia Spitta, most of the likely and unlikely archives discussed here actively demand recognition. The teeth x-rayed in Muriel Hasbun's *Multimedia*, *X post facto*, for example, belonged to a living body before they appeared in forensic files, before they were filed away as evidence in a police archive and, in turn, transformed into a work of art. The art pieces represented or discussed in this issue constitute no more than one step in archival circulation: they are not a final place of consignment. They are a haunting provocation, an implicit demand for justice that will in turn be collected in various physical and digital repositories—galleries or museums—as they continue their transformation and re-circulation. Each of these manifestations asks its own question: what can teeth/ x-rays/ evidentiary files/ art do? The answers, and the responsibilities of each, vary from work to work and from context to context.

The archive, as seen in this issue, is in transit and in translation. The contributions trace the movement of archival subjects and objects through media and remediations. One simple everyday object like the *camiseta* in Marcelo Brodsky's piece was, first, his disappeared brother's undershirt, then a photograph taken by a disappeared man working for the Argentine Armed Forces, then evidence at the trial, and later an art piece that remembers, memorializes, and testifies. A physical shirt becomes an analog photograph and is now reanimated and recirculated in digital form. The artist-brother's words accompany the object in these transitions. Along the way, each moment has its needs and affects. Each has its politics.

Some contributions in the issue look through archival scraps—teeth, a lock of hair, pills, undershirts—to piece together the bodies that were once there. Others look to what's missing from the archives, the slave's face, the girl's story, her subjectivity. What is not there also provokes: by exceeding historical awareness and intelligibility, it forces us to acknowledge the archive's limits. Live bodies and the embodied practices of the repertoire exceed the bounds of the archive and become available through the traces revealed in court papers, desk drawers, and archival boxes—all waiting to be found. By opening the story, we can open a future for lives in transit.

Contributors to this issue look at how forms of transmission—such as the webcam or the weekly radio programs created by families for their kidnapped relatives in Colombia—archive themselves as they come into existence. These accidental archives enable the telling and preservation of a history that unfolds off-scene, whether in the inner circles of the United Nations or at the very margins of Colombia's unimagined communities. Some are stories of rescue and responsibility. Some are calls to action.

The archives included in this issue move across the Americas, across languages, historical moments, disciplines, and modes of transmission. This multi-lingual issue published in digital form, of course, adds yet more complexity to these paths of circulation. The digital enables greater access across geographic and linguistic

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divides, yet it further destabilizes the traditional archive, what was once considered a secure and permanent repository of knowledge. Links, updates, and uploads highlight transitory and provisional forms of classification. These new technologies further demand that we re-envision the archive as a set of objects, practices, and places always in motion. And yet, this issue, like all *e-misférica* issues, will be preserved in NYU Libraries. Even there, however, preservation and “stability” are only possible through constant translation into new formats and platforms. Long term, of course, no one knows where and how any of these archives will end up—as dust, as free-floating data, as traces, or perhaps the memory of traces. But one thing seems clear: the subject of the archive will be fragmented, dispersed—dust, data, and traces that will be assembled and reassembled, each time, in different ways, for use in an ever-changing present.

Notes

¹ Huyssen, Andreas. 1993. *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Stanford: Stanford UP. 1.