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View of archives basis wien, Vienne © Markus Krottendorfer

- 1 Are computers causing us to lose our heads? When he revisited the legend of St. Denis, Michel Serres¹ ironically suggested that, after centuries of suffering spent obligatorily learning things by heart, we will be freed from the restrictions of apprenticeship. We now have our head—an erstwhile storage site for knowledge—in our hands. And above

our decapitated neck "pass air and wind".² It is true that the technologies of inclusion, connection, exposition and surveillance—widely known by the umbrella term "Internet"—have opened up new areas.³ Without wishing to dwell on the epithet "free" in their regard, it has to be said that these areas have made it possible to delimit other territories to the critical discourse, and its uses, as well as misuses, as Christophe Domino revealed in his editorial in No. 52 of *Critique d'art*.⁴

What about archives?

- 2 In the wake of Michel Serres' words, we would have to presume that decapitation by computer would not harm archives. On the contrary: they are the gold in the digital age's mines. It is only because of data scrupulously gathered by human beings, and painstakingly digitized, that these machines have us believe that they can replace our heads. The hour of glory for archives is upon us; in particular art archives, where we observe—at least since the turn of the 20th century—an "archival impulse"⁵ closely bound up with the a-historicity of "contemporary art". This latter needs the past for its identity, and it needs archives to give it material form. Contemporary art lends meaning by drawing from the past, but without making a (big) thing of it.⁶ To this end, its agents—artists, curators, art historians, critics, gallery owners, collectors and auctioneers—need archives.
- 3 In this kind of context, governments should invest considerable sums to support them, help them to grow, and create a secure environment for them. We should also expect greater recognition for people founding and keeping archives in the way they deserve to be kept, being often acquired voluntarily. So we might suppose that Internet users are hastening to collect, sort and appraise what should be kept, in order to exercise their computers and make their *contents* visible. But this is not the case. Shaped to a considerable degree by the "Google" search culture, archives—especially those dedicated to artists—are too often too little known about by the public and by professionals.

A base in Vienna

- 4 "We were in a very fragile period, not to say nothing less than a depression", explains Andrea Neidhöfer, a representative of basis wien, "when our founder Lioba Reddeker passed away in 2011".⁷ Lioba Reddeker was an innovative force as Austria's "federal commissioner", who had set up an initial digital archive of artistic practices in 1997. She subsequently invited artists, critics and curators to provide data and, in 1999, she launched an initial online version of the contemporary art research and documentation centre: basis wien. Since then, this resource centre has been systematically examining, evaluating and collecting information associated with contemporary art in Austria—items such as invitations, artist's dossiers, press articles and catalogues. 30,000 archived elements and 6,000 books are accessible at the library in Vienna's 15th Bezirk (district). "Artists themselves are sometimes surprised to find something there that they had forgotten about. We remain in the shadows", laments Andrea Neidhöfer, a member since 2008 of a three-person team. This is a task that is being discreetly fulfilled, in the background, and one that has very little public acknowledgement." Wrongly: today, 90,111 people, 16,435 institutions, 66,086 events (such as projects, exhibitions, lectures, and the like) and 93,668 objects are listed on www.basis-wien.at,

all totally accessible online—barring restrictions to do with royalties. “The basic idea was to take broader contexts into account; to think of archiving at a European level, especially with regard to the first networks of the period”, Andrea Neidhöfer continues, since 2008 a member of a team which shrank in 2011 from fourteen to three members. “Our sense of unity saved us and reciprocally assured us that our work was not for nothing.”

View of the Institut für moderne Kunst archives, Nuremberg © Institut für moderne Kunst, Erhard Och

United archives

- 5 As is illustrated by Lioba Reddeker’s programme, the activities of ‘basis wien’ were, from the outset, underpinned by a desire not to do battle alone. To achieve this, it was important to work on the accountability of different data-banks, and find pooled archival and research formats. This need triggered a surge of normalization at the European level—which was associated with the global thesaurus project. As part of “Culture 2000”⁸, the project known as “Vektor—European Contemporary Art Archives” was launched in 1999, bringing together a consortium of five archives and institutions, including the Archives de la critique d’art.⁹
- 6 As part of the pooling, basis wien was associated with *Kunstbulletin* (an art magazine published by the Société suisse des beaux-arts [SSBA], a key organization made up of 36 local and regional fine arts societies) and the SIK-ISEA (the Swiss Institute for Art Studies). Together, they created the metaresearch engine European-art.net (EAN). By linking the online data-banks of several resource centres, European-art.net today boasts 540,336 inputs from twelve connected archive platforms. “We were the only people to have complete archives of articles and exhibitions thanks to our programme, and this since 1998”, observes Claudia Jolles, chief editor of *Kunstbulletin*. This earmarked us as a partner for Austrians.”¹⁰

Human networks

- 7 *Kunstbulletin* works closely with its readers. "While the major digital companies were created based on the capacities of their machines, looking for communities to breathe life into their networks, we did the opposite: our archives—those of the *Kunstbulletin* as well as those of basis-wien—are based on a strong community of artists, critics, and curators", insists Claudia Jolles. "We have a firm footing in the art scene. With us, the user is a tangible, living, human interlocutor." To start with, as a side effect of an archival task peculiar to a publication, the relational data-bank today represents for *Kunstbulletin* a valuable collection, which it uses through the artlog.net website and its future dedicated app: artist. Users have access not just to the magazine's contents. They can also connect them in real time to exhibitions they have just seen, thanks to a system of mapping and integrated guidance. In order to be transmitted, institutions and galleries pay a contribution. "In addition to these solid foundations for the magazine's economic future, the relational data-bank has above all enabled us to intensify and perpetuate human relations. It is in this spirit that we are still involved with the EAN. This latter is not a mere metaresearch engine. It is above all a human network permitting active exchanges of experiences and knowledge", explains Claudia Jolles.

Collection quality

- 8 "At the Institute of Modern Art in Nuremberg, we're not strong enough to challenge search engines. But this has never been the end purpose. We are keen to guarantee high quality for our collections,"¹¹ explains Kathrin Mayer, a member of the EAN executive board. As assistant director of the Institute, archives, for her, are one of the pillars of the work of the institution, which was founded in 1967 as a "documentation and information centre" for postwar art. Since 1999, as part of the Neues Museum Nürnberg—Museum of Art and Design, the Institute has become the museum's library. Its archives hold special collections, including a major collection of artist's books, a noteworthy collection of invitations and—supported as part of a federal scientific project—archives of press articles, the outcome of intense "home-made" media monitoring. These are sources which even specialized critics and journalists sometimes do not know about, for lack of time, ignoring valuable materials which shed light on development, support, the market, and links helping artists to flourish. This involves understanding that archives do not just draw the lines of the past. They form and format our perception of the present. By being archived, objects are transformed and a share of the non-reconstruction of the past is peculiar to them.¹² This is masked by the ongoing threat of loss, and oblivion, aggravated in the meantime by digital technology: "We benefit from our slowness, but this causes us to lose many things, especially digital ones. We are currently incapable of archiving them", says Kathrin Mayer, who is also worried. While the Internet presents users with an interface providing them with simple access to data, Internet users often know nothing about the underlying process of transforming the object into *information*, and thus nothing about the way people's way of looking at things is formatted. The distinctive feature of the EAN is that it re-connects data to the data-provider: "It is important to consult printed traces, such as invitations, press *communiqués* and other documents, too often regarded as

insignificant. Our brief is to offer this access route to material data in the age of dematerialization and digital oblivion”, declares Kathrin Mayer. Painstaking work. Without help from the European Union, European-art.net is managing to persevere thanks to contributions—small ones—of 500 euros per member to pursue a task which, running counter to the effects of “decapitation” by computer, is still a human task.

At the Dox, centre for contemporary art, Prague, September 2019. Left to right: Jarmila Štogrová, Irena Lehkoživová, Jan Kuntoš © Werner Egli

Finding a common denominator

- 9 “The EAN, for us, is a door to the outside world: towards other archives, digitized or not, towards users, but also towards art”, says Kathrin Mayer. Like Andrea Neidhöfer and Claudia Jolles, Mayer emphasizes the federation of archives and the need to preserve the identity and specific features of each network member. To do this, the association’s annual meeting, initially conceived as a purely technical authority, has become a crucial moment. “During these meetings, we come across other archives and we pool our strengths. We have just welcomed Archiv výtvarného umění (The Fine Art Archive) of Prague, broadening our coverage of art to Eastern Europe thanks to the abART data-bank. Prague was also the city which hosted our 2019 meeting. It once again enabled us to consolidate and unite our work”, adds Claudia Jolles. This invariably friendly and constructive expansion, as those involved are at pains to stress, raises the issue of homogenizing digital archive formats. Claudia Jolles, who was invited to the first “Vektor” meeting in 1999, nevertheless nursed doubts: “For me, as a Swiss person, the idea of a thesaurus and a centralized archive had problems. Let’s not forget that every country has its own way of archiving, and its own standards in terms of library economics. How are we to preserve this great variety of identities within a uniformization of data?” This question turns out to be pivotal for EAN’s future. “The normalization of data and the development of an international inventorial standard is our association’s major project”, stresses Kathrin Mayer. “Our solution was to merge instead of homogenize,” continues Claudia Jolles. “It’s a matter of a federation and not

a centralization of data." To this end it was necessary to find a less complex common denominator than the one introduced just by archives. Existing data-banks, which are very diverse in terms of their formats, systems and languages, were having trouble communicating. "We arrived, very naturally, at the artist's name as the common denominator. In a way, we started out from a simple list of artists, but at that time diacritical signs were missing", emphasizes Claudia Jolles. Despite the limits of this criterion, the EAN now permits access to data to do with legal and natural persons, as well as by way of data-banks also associated with exhibitions and publications. It is completely free, and offers a search engine that leads to respective archives, in compliance with their own characteristics.

Constructing the future of art

- 10 The EAN is above all a "professional networking tool, including beyond the EU" (Kathrin Mayer) and an important base for "activating, promoting and perpetuating the artistic community" (Claudia Jolles). For artists, archives are a way of forging an identity and a history. For some, the archive as an institution can play the part of "a legitimate and physical container, creating the environment in which the wounds of history might heal."¹³ If we admit that what goes into archives never comes out again unchanged, the act of archiving displays a desire to transform.¹⁴ Archives as an organic form obey their own law and logic. They record and re-distribute data. In so doing, they manufacture their users, and format ways of looking at things and the use that will be made of these materials. These latter fuel critics. Referring to archives with the sole aim of filling in a knowledge gap, to do with what is prescribed, is even less adapted to the use of art archives. If archives make it possible to retrace a creative process, they offer the possibility of pursuing this process, and giving it clout through a critical act, namely by distancing content in favour of the human beings connected with it.
- 11 Within the EAN, this commitment takes the form of a supportive production of a future which cannot be reduced to the fantasies of a decapitated body of knowledge. Art historians and critics, who work in tangible ways and on a daily basis for these archives and their networks, see in them above all "human beings becoming involved and weaving the cultural memory of their societies by discerning the value of these documents for the future", as Andrea Neidhöfer puts it. In this sense, we should consider European-art.net no longer as "European" or as "a network", but as a collection making it possible to construct the future of an art which currently sees itself being ill-treated by "digital conditions"¹⁵ and de-contextualized by a panic-stricken contemporaneity that is unaware of its environment.

NOTES

1. <https://leblob.fr/societe/la-parabole-de-saint-denis-michel-serres>, consulted on 26/9/2019
2. Serres, Michel. *Petite Poucette*, Paris : Le Pommier, 2012, p. 29, (Essais & Documents)

3. Cf. Harcourt, Bernard E. *Exposed: Desire and Disobedience in the Digital Age*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015.
4. Domino, Christophe. "Une critique 2.0 ?", *Critique d'art*, no. 52, spring/summer 2019, p. 9-14
5. Understood as an artistic tendency involving a re-historicization and materialization of data by Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse" (*October*, no. 110, autumn 2004, p. 3-22) and Charles Merewether in *The Archive* (London: Whitechapel, 2006, p. 143-148).
6. This is how Juliane Rebentisch analyzes it in *Theorien der Gegenwartskunst zur Einführung* (Hamburg: Junius, 2013).
7. All the quotations are taken from a telephone interview with Andrea Neidhöfer on 27/8/2019.
8. Launched in 2000 by the European Commission, the "Culture 2000" programme continued until 2006, with a budget of 236.4 million euros. The goal was to promote a shared cultural territory, hallmarked by its diversity and its shared heritage: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/previous-programmes/culture-2000_fr, consulted on 9 September 2019.
9. The project was wound up in 2003. The consortium partners were the Archives de la critique d'art (Rennes); documenta Archiv (Kassel); the John Hansard Gallery at the University of Southampton; Museion – Museum für Moderne Kunst (Bolzano), and Zentralarchiv des internationalen Kunsthandels (Bonn).
10. All the quotations are taken from a telephone interview with Claudia Jolles on 4/9/2019.
11. All the quotations are taken from a telephone interview with Kathrin Mayer on 3/9/2019.
12. Cf. Derrida, Jacques. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. Translated by Eric Prenowitz
13. Quotation translated from an interview with the art historian and curator Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez; Sennwald, J. Emil. "Between critique and nostalgia. An interview with Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez about the rampant 'mal d'archive'", *Springerin*, no. 4, autumn 2012, online at <https://www.springerin.at/en/2012/4/zwischen-kritik-und-nostalgie>
In it she refers to Okwui Enwezor, who, in his text "Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art" (New York: International Center of Photography, 2008), proposed to think about the interior of the archive as a place where "past and present are healed".
14. Cf. Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, "Innovative Forms of Archives, Part One: Exhibitions, Events, Books, Museums, and Lia Perjovschi's Contemporary Art Archive", *e-flux journal*, 13 February 2010, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/13/61328/innovative-forms-of-archives-part-one-exhibitions-events-books-museums-and-lia-perjovschi-s-contemporary-art-archive/>, consulted on 19 September 2019.
15. Cf. Stalder, Felix. *Kultur der Digitalität*, Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016 ; *The Digital Condition*, translated from the German by Valentine A. Pakis, Cambridge: John Wiley and Sons, Polity Press, 2018.