Archival Obessions and Obsessive Archives

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Why is it that the discipline that studies art and that pursues a scholarly understanding of art has the word "history" in its title? Neighboring disciplines that also study cultural objects and their understanding are called film studies, theater studies, or literary studies, whereas the discipline that studies art objects seems to privilege only one approach above the diversity of other possible approaches: it is called art *history*.

The privileged position of history in art history is telling. This is reflected in one of art history's most respected tools, the archive. It can be said that what fieldwork is to anthropology, the archive is to art history. What fieldwork and the archive have in common is that, for the disciplines that give them such a privileged position, they are much more than some arbitrary research tool that can be exchanged for other tools of equal value: fieldwork and archival work function for their respective disciplines as *rites de passages*. In order to understand what anthropology and art history are about, and also in order to become a real anthropologist or art historian, one has to undergo the *rites de passage* of fieldwork or archival work: one has to do it oneself.

In the face of the privileged position of history, and especially the archive, in art history, it is perhaps not surprising that artists have become interested in the scholarly applications of the archive. This raises the question, Are artists simply complying with a general pressure to adopt historical genres when dealing with art, or does their use of the archive, instead, complicate the issue? I will discuss two such artists. The first is Toronto-based Ydessa Hendeles, whose enormous installation *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)* consists of found—or rather, purchased— family-album photographs collected on the basis of a single motif: somewhere in the picture there had to be a teddy bear. My second example is Belgian artist Els Vanden Meersch, who presents archives of architectural photographs in book form.

The way I will situate these two artists in relation to the privileged and respected position of the archival mode takes its cue from Mieke Bal's notion of *preposterous history* as elaborated in her book *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*.[1] Reading contemporary artworks in relation to Caravaggio or other Baroque works, she demonstrates the idea that art's engagement with what came before it involves an active reworking of the predecessor. "Hence, the work performed

by later images obliterates the older images as they were before that intervention and creates new versions of old images instead."[2] The complex ways in which art acts upon the past—or, more specifically, upon its own predecessors—and upon conventional motifs and modes of representation suggest that it is the past, not the present, that is conditioned by a perpetual flux. In light of Bal's argument, I will argue that Hendeles's and Vanden Meersch's archival practices are preposterous in relation to the genre. They do not comply with the accepted rules of the genre nor make use of the qualities assigned to it in art history but instead foreground aspects and qualities of the archival mode previously unacknowledged or repressed.

The Imaginative Process of Association Turned Material

Collecting and archiving begin with making distinctions and creating categories. The first concern is with noticing the similar within the dissimilar, and then the differences within what is similar. In that respect collecting and archiving are simply general processes of consciousness and meaning production. Collecting, however, is "the imaginative process of association turned material."[3] Meaning production is no longer performed automatically and unconsciously but is intentionally externalized and materialized. The ordering of objects collected and archived is ultimately a form of association, that is, a form of connecting and joining together.

The acts of collecting and archiving introduce meaning, order, boundaries, coherence, and reason into what is disparate and confused, contingent and without contours. From this perspective they are positive, reassuring practices because the confused and contingent are usually experienced as threatening. But this production of coherence and meaning has a price. The unique, singular object "is supposed to express its uniqueness in relation to other, similarly unique objects."[4] This is one of the paradoxical effects of archiving, because at a certain point the individual components are deemed to be only another expression of those objects that surround it. Uniqueness, specificity, and individuality are destroyed within the process of archiving. Matthias Winzen calls this implication of archiving "protective destruction": the act of protecting something from oblivion or the contingent simultaneously destroys its uniqueness. "In many cases, the transplantation of a concrete individual piece into a collection means that this piece partly or completely perishes in favor of its documentality."[5]

The deadening suction that all forms of collecting and archiving exert at some point is all the more obvious when people, not objects, are being collected. If barracks, hospitals, and monasteries are based on a systematic order to which

the individual temporarily or voluntarily submits himself, then prisons or grave-yards are sorting systems that the individual enters against his own volition. The common thread of these places exists in the subject's transformation into a stored object. Matthias Winzen writes in this regard: "The moment one drops the point of view of the collecting and observing subject and assumes the perspective of the collected object, the violence inherent in all sorting, re- and devaluing, fixing, and defining becomes apparent."[6] This archival transformation from subject to object can be put to political use with frightening results. But, on the other hand, these political exploitations of the archive and archival principles can also teach us about the archive, its nature, and its dangerous potentialities. What I am referring to is Nazism and how archival principles were of central importance to the execution of their deadly politics. Therefore, I will preface a discussion of Hendeles's and Vanden Meersch's archives of images with some notes on the importance of the archive in Nazism. In order to understand the artistic use of archiving in relation to this other, terrifying use of archives, it is first necessary to address the at-times intimate connection between the archive and totalitarianism.

Nazism and the Archive

The Nazis were master archivists. This becomes clear when we realize that the most notorious concentration camp, Auschwitz, the name of which has become synony-mous with the Holocaust, was modeled on archival principles. These principles were crucial to the way the Nazis ran most concentration camps and to their execu-tion of the "final solution." Let me explain in more detail which structural principles of the camps can be characterized as archival.

In many concentration camps the Nazis were fanatic about making lists of all the people who entered, whether they went to the labor camps or directly to the gas chambers. These lists are not unlike the catalogues that enable a visitor of an archive or museum to find out what is in the collection. It is thanks to the existence of these lists that, after liberation, it was in many cases possible to find out if detainees had survived, and if not, in which camp and on which date they had been killed.

On arrival, new inmates would have a number tattooed on their arm. They were transformed: no longer individuals known by name, but objects known by number. Like objects in an archive or museum, the inscription classified them as traceable elements within a collection. Upon entering the camps they were also sorted into groups: men with men, women with women; children, the sick and elderly, and pregnant women went to the gas chambers. Political prisoners and re-

sistance fighters were not "mixed" with Jews. Artists, musicians, and architects were
usually sent to camps like Theresienstadt. These activities of selecting and sorting
on the basis of a fixed set of categories are basically archival.

Not only were the people who entered the camps selected and sorted, the
same happened with their belongings. At Auschwitz and Birkenau, their sorted pos-
sessions were stored in warehouses called "Canada." The photographs from the
camps, not only of emaciated bodies but also of some of the things stored within
these warehouses, bear witness to the truth of the Holocaust—not just heaps of
bodies but also heaps of suitcases, eyeglasses, shorn hair, etc. In these photographs
the camps appear to be monstrous archives. This "archiving" of belongings was pri-
marily done preliminary to their being reused by the German population, but
Hitler also had other purposes for them. After liquidating the Jewish people, he
intended to build a museum of the Jewish people. For this museum he needed ob-
jects selected from, among other places, the warehouses in the camps. One might
wonder why he wanted to establish this museum. Why would his goal not yet be
reached at the moment that all European Jews had been killed? It suggests that liq-
uidation was not enough. Even after their destruction, the Jewish people could live
on, not amongst the living but in memory—in living memory. The remains of the
Jewish people, in the form of memory, had to be dealt with effectively, so that their
possible continued existence, in memory, was also eradicated.

Thus, the archive and the museum can be effective tools, or perhaps I should
say, weapons, in *killing memories*. Archives, even more than museums, confront the
viewer with decontextualized objects. In this decontextualization the objects be-
come "useless," only able to evoke the "absence" of the world of which they were
originally part. It is in this respect that the archive or museum can become a "morgue
of useless objects."

The French artist Christian Boltanski used this expression for the Musée
de l'Homme in Paris. This museum made the following impression on him:

> It was . . . the age of technological discoveries, of the Musée de l'Homme
> and of beauty, no longer just African art, but an entire series of every-
> day objects: Eskimo fishhooks, arrows from the Amazon Indians. . . .
> The Musée de l'Homme was of tremendous importance to me; it was
> there that I saw large metal and glass vitrines in which were placed
> small, fragile, and insignificant objects. A yellowed photograph showing
> a "savage" handling his little objects was often placed in the corner of

the vitrine. Each vitrine presented a lost world: the savage in the pho-
tograph was most likely dead; the objects had become useless—anyway
there's no one left who knows how to use them. The Musée de l'Homme
seemed like a big morgue to me.[7]

While Boltanski expected to find "beauty" in the museum, an expectation that seemed
to be inspired by the kind of eye Cubist artists had for the objects of African cultures,
he found instead lost worlds in the vitrines. He saw absence instead of presence.

　　We can only speculate that Hitler's museum for the Jewish people would
probably have looked like such a morgue. It would have objectified, killed, and liq-
uidated the Jewish people a second and more definite time. Their remains would not
have evoked their presence. It would not have kept their memories alive. Instead, the
represented objects would have filled the viewer with a sense of absence and lost time.

Categorization and the Archive

Whereas Boltanski's archival installations deconstruct the archive by showing the
deadly effects of objectification, Ydessa Hendeles's installation *Partners* foregrounds
another aspect of the archive's unreflected principles.[8] The thousands of snapshots,
each of which includes the image of a teddy bear, are arranged according to over
one hundred typologies. The installation is structured after a classic presentation of
natural or cultural objects in a traditional natural history museum. The meticu-
lously framed snapshots completely and densely cover the walls (fig. 1). In the center
of the room are several antique museum display cases. Around the perimeter, mezza-
nines permit closer inspection of the photographs that hang on the upper portions
of the walls (fig. 2).

　　When first entering the installation, the viewer wonders what all these images
have in common. It takes some time before the viewer becomes aware of the fact
that there is a teddy bear in every photograph. The next discovery is that the pho-
tographs have been categorized according to specific typologies. These categories
are completely surprising: the installation, seemingly providing a history of the
teddy bear, shows that in most social and ethnic subgroups, the teddy bear has
functioned as a totem with which to identify.

　　When *Partners* was shown as part of a larger exhibition in Hitler's former
museum, the Haus der Kunst in Munich, Hendeles wrote about the appeal of the
teddy bear in the catalogue:

Fig. I. Ydessa Hendeles (Canadian, born Germany, 1948), *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)*, 2002. Installation view at Haus der Kunst, Munich

Fig. 2. Ydessa Hendeles, *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)*, 2002. Installation view at Haus der Kunst, Munich

> The teddy bear has appealed not only to children as playthings and as
> surrogate playmates, but also to adults as props to express whimsical
> fantasies at parties, in the workplace, at sports events, and in sexual
> play. In fact, teddy bears have attended every social function in society.
> They have been photographed at weddings, in schools, in hospitals, on
> battlefields, at births, deaths, and memorials.[9]

Her installation seems to provide evidence of this; when we start recognizing the
different typologies, we suddenly see all the different groups (fig. 3). Soldiers with
teddy bears, students with teddy bears, prostitutes with teddy bears, lesbian couples
with teddy bears, etc.; there is no end to the different identities that presented
themselves with the teddy bear as their emblem and guardian.

In this respect, Hendeles's archival installation works as the opposite of
Boltanski's. Yet I contend that her archival work is also a preposterous revisitation
of the archive. Whereas in the case of Boltanski all individual differences dissolve
within his objectifying archives, in the case of Hendeles we begin to see differences
where we had not expected to see them. The thousands of teddy bear snapshots
turn out to be extremely diverse. Within this corpus an endless number of individ-
ual categories can be distinguished. The pursuit of specificity and differentiation
leads to amazing results.

But there is still more to it. At first sight, Hendeles's "visual thesis on the
history of the teddy bear" conveys absolute trust in thorough, positivistic scholar-
ship. However, as she points out in her catalogue essay, this reassuring aura of
scholarship is deceptive, "because the use of documentary materials actually ma-
nipulates reality. Creating a world in which everyone has a teddy bear is a fantasy,
as well as a commentary on traditional thematic, taxonomic curating." Hendeles
further comments:

> Because of the relative rarity of photographs that include teddy bears, the
> resulting multitude of over three thousand pictures provides a curatorial
> statement that is both true and misleading. Viewers are inclined to trust
> a curator's presentation of cultural artifacts. While these systems are not
> necessarily objective, they can be convincing and therefore of comfort.[10]

In this statement Hendeles subtly uses the characteristics of the teddy bear to describe
the effects of the archive. Earlier in her text she describes the teddy bear in terms
of a duality:

Fig. 3. Images from Ydessa Hendeles, *Partners (The Teddy Bear Project)*, 2002

> As a mohair-covered, stuffed, jointed toy, with movable arms, legs and
> head, a teddy bear can be cradled and hugged like a baby. But the wild
> bear referenced by the toy is an animal that can be threatening to hu-
> man beings. Having a ferocious guardian at one's side makes the teddy
> into a symbol of protective aggression, which is why, for the past hun-
> dred years, it has provided solace to frightened children and later to
> adults, who carry that comfort with them as a cherished memory.[11]

The duality of the teddy bear also characterizes the archive: comforting and aggressive at the same time. It is comforting because it has the reassuring aura of objectivity, and aggressive because it subjects reality and individuality to classifications that are more pertinent to the systematic and purifying mindset than to the classified objects. It imposes the ideal of pure order on a reality that is messier, and more hybrid, than the scholarly device of the archive can absorb.

Ultimately—and in this it reconceptualizes the archive preposterously—Hendeles's installation shows the utter arbitrariness of archival typologies. Her excessive differentiation within the corpus of snapshots showing teddy bears ultimately produces a feeling of being lost in the viewer. The rigorous adherence to systems in the archive suddenly forces it to show its Janus head of total arbitrariness.

The feeling of melancholy hits you immediately upon entering the room. This excessive and emblematic archive shows lost worlds in the extreme. Of course, teddy bears do not belong to the past; children and other groups of people still have them and play with them. But because these snapshots are old and are presented as part of an archive, they automatically are presumed to belong to the past, to a lost world. Within the metaphoric realm of "lost worlds," the Holocaust figures as the most literal case. That is why the category of Holocaust victims with teddy bears is central in the typology.

But Hendeles activated the frame of the Holocaust in yet other ways. After spending some time in the teddy bear installation, the viewer enters a space that, compared to the densely packed archival installation, is almost empty. The only other presence is that of a small boy on his knees at the far end of the room. It turns out to be the sculpture *Him*, by the Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan. It is a puppet-like sculpture with the body of a small, innocent boy and Hitler's adult, mustachioed face (fig. 4). Whereas the similarity between teddy bears and archives was previously suggested, now the awareness of the association between teddy bears and Hitler (and archives) is unavoidably made. *Hitler was comforting as well as*

aggressive. He offered a deceptive source of safety to the German people. I quote Hendeles again:

> The system of the teddy bear archive raises the notion of other systems created with strict stipulations, and how they can, because they appear to make sense, persuasively manipulate reality. The purity of race to which Hitler aspired was the application of a system of rules. Like the teddy bear, Hitler shares a duality of origin, where danger is domesticated.[12]

The framing of the teddy bear archive by the person of Hitler has especially disenchanting consequences for the archive as such. Is the archive—its system and its goal—complicit in Hitler's ideal of a purity of race? Is it Hitler's modeling of the concentration camps on archival principles that makes the archive suspect, or is it suspect no matter what—that is, intrinsically? A provisional answer to this question seems to have been given by Hendeles herself when she showed the teddy bear installation for the first time in an exhibition in the Ydessa Hendeles Foundation, Hendeles's own gallery in Toronto. That installation was entitled *Same Difference* and took place in 2002–3. After the room containing the teddy bear installation, the viewer entered a relatively narrow corridor. On the left side of this corridor were more framed snapshots of teddy bears. At the end of that wall one noticed a small text panel that gave the description of an artwork, the name of the artist, and the date, telling the viewer that he or she had missed noticing an artwork. On the right side of the corridor, on a completely white wall, was a wall

Fig. 4. Maurizio Cattelan (Italian, born 1960), *Him*, 2001. Installation view at Haus der Kunst, Munich

text in light-gray letters. The text was by the artist Douglas Gordon, and was dated 1989. It ran as follows:

ROTTING FROM THE INSIDE OUT

After this text, the confined space of the corridor suddenly gave way to a much larger space where Maurizio Cattelan's *Him* was kneeling. The subtle sequence of artworks made each function as a framing device for the one that came before it and after it. *Rotting From the Inside Out* became a chilling comment on the teddy bear, on Hitler, and on the archival genre itself.

The Anomic Archive

In recent years several artists have presented collections or archives in book form. Well-known examples are Gerhard Richter's *The Atlas* and the many artists' books by Christian Boltanski. Els Vanden Meersch's work also uses the medium of the archive-as-book, in which she presents collections of her photographs of architectural spaces and structures. The images are diverse and show a variety of spaces. At the same time the collections are far from arbitrary. There is a constant suggestion of order and systematicity, although the nature of the collection is not immediately clear. Yet, because of the suggested ordering, it is appropriate to approach her collections of photographs as artistic archiving.

Indeed, there is more to this case of the underlying archive-as-book. Some of the images in the archive show archives. There is an image of a long corridor with bookcases filled with filing boxes on either side (fig. 5). In other images, filing cabinets show up. It looks as if these images reflect on the medium within which they are presented; they are what in rhetoric is called *mise en abyme,* or mirror texts.[13] They are emblematic of the rest of the work in which they are embedded. Therefore, they are a good starting point for an understanding of Vanden Meersch's archives-as-books. But they are only a starting point, because these photographs concern conventional, functional archives, not artistic collecting and archiving. In order to understand the specificity of artistic collecting and archiving, especially Vanden Meersch's practice in this domain, we must relate it to archiving as such.

At first sight Vanden Meersch's archive of architectural photographs seems somber, almost frightening. But upon closer inspection, it turns out that Vanden Meersch is able to avoid the deadly exertion of the archive and instead open up new directions for this medium. Previous selections have been published in *Transient*

Fig. 5. Els Vanden Meersch (Belgian, born 1970), *Untitled*, 2006. Reproduced from Els Vanden Meersch, *Implants* (Ghent: MER, 2006)

Constructions: Selection Photographical Archive 1996–2003[14] and in *Paranoid Obstructions*.[15] *Implants* presents the third selection out of her archive.[16] It is, however, the first time that she has included images of archives in her archival montage. The photographs in this archive show a diversity of architectural spaces and structures; humans are never included in the image. We see modernist apartment buildings, empty offices, barracks, concentration camps, archives, deserted factories, machine rooms, shower rooms, prison cells, etc. (figs. 6–8).

Earlier, I characterized collecting and archiving as an associative process turned material. Vanden Meersch's photo archive, however, is rather the result of free-association turned material. It is not immediately clear what kind of rationality lies behind it. Its ordering is not self-evident, yet the images are coherent. They have something in common that is not stipulated by didactic categories but that is suggested or produced in the process of going from one image to the next. It is through free-association that similarities pop up. Her archive is not strictly ordered, but is, in the words of Benjamin Buchloh describing Gerhard Richter's photo archive *Atlas*, "anomic."[17]
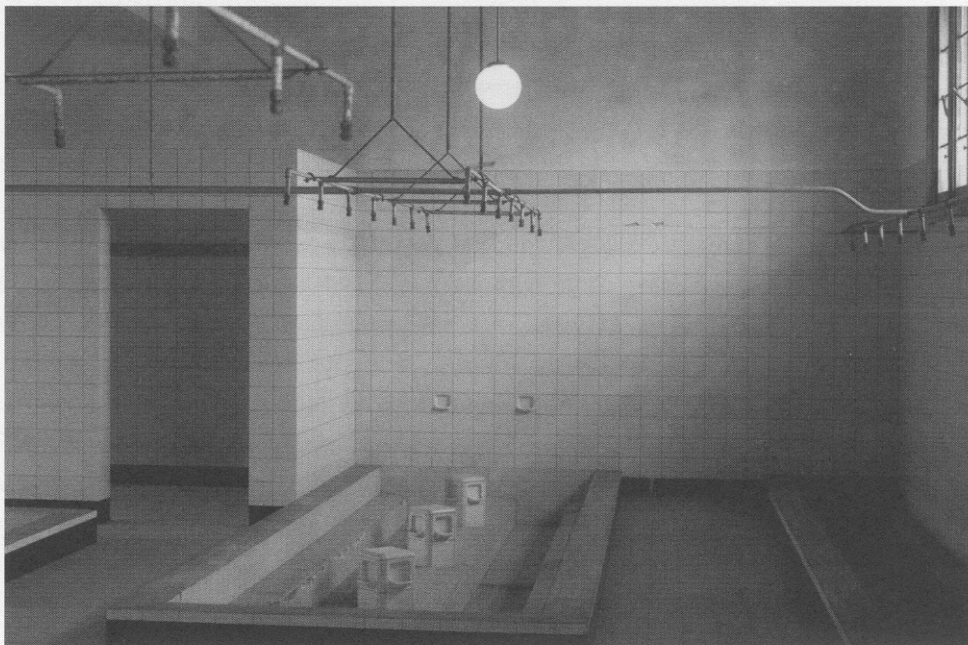
Fig. 6. Els Vanden Meersch, *Untitled*, 2006. Reproduced from *Implants* (Ghent: MER, 2006)

Fig. 7. Els Vanden Meersch, *Untitled*, 2006. Reproduced from *Implants* (Ghent: MER, 2006)
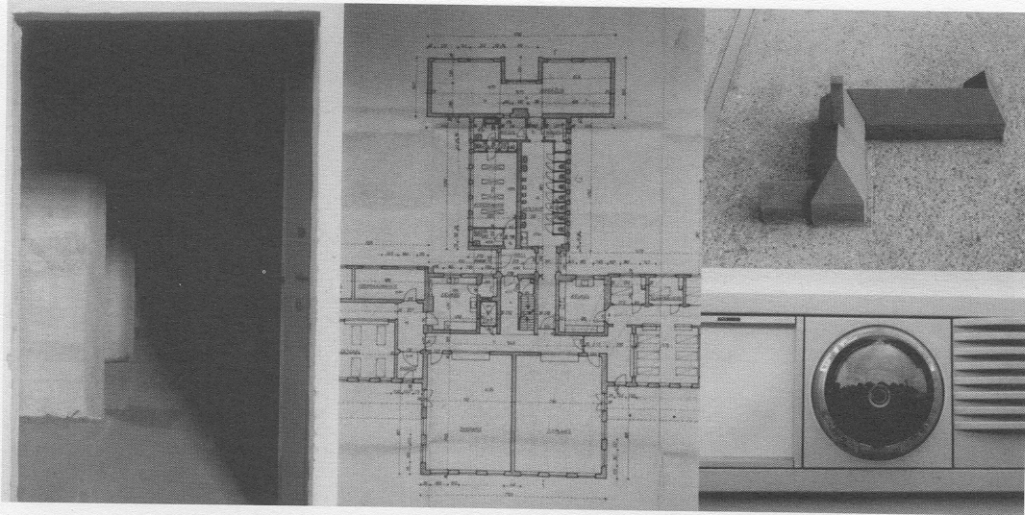
Fig. 8. Els Vanden Meersch, *Untitled*, 2006. Reproduced from *Implants* (Ghent: MER, 2006)

The lack of stipulated categories has radical consequences for what happens to the individual images within the archive. In conventional archives, unique objects or subjects become representative of the category within which they are included: they become another expression of those objects that surround it. The images in Vanden Meersch's archive are not representative, at least not yet, because it is not immediately clear to which category they belong. As long as this doubt continues, they remain individual images. It is this lingering quality that can be recognized in many artists' archives. Artists usually collect and archive the trivial, objects that are normally overlooked, not usually worth collecting and archiving. Also, artistic collecting changes the individual object through its absorption into the collection. But this change apparently takes place in reverse order when artists collect trivia.[18] The worthless and unnoticed is rendered exceptional, comes into being, and becomes visible by virtue of being collected.

The images in Vanden Meersch's archive are prime examples of this. The architectural spaces and structures she photographs are not beautiful or special. They are also not the opposite of beautiful; they are not ugly or horrendous. On the contrary, they are the kinds of architectural spaces that are not just overlooked but actively repressed. Her images foreground architectural qualities that radiate frightening feelings. They are frightening not because they are terrifying but in the sense of being uncanny; they are at once familiar and unfamiliar. Her images con-

front us with architectural spaces that are too common and too familiar to be no-
ticed. Vanden Meersch makes us see them again. Her images function, one could
say, as a return from the repressed. The excessiveness of this too-common archi-
tecture is not noticed when we see just one single image, it is only noticed as part
of the archival montage.

The transformation from worthless and overlooked to unique and notable
is a reverse of the usual archival transformation. Vanden Meersch's archive also
demonstrates, however, a second reversal of the usual transformations that take
place while being collected and inserted into an archive. It concerns the reversal of the
mechanism that converts time, the loss of time, into something material. Theodor
W. Adorno has explained how this mechanism motivates the collecting drive:

> The will to possess reflects time as fear of loss, of the irretrievable nature
> of everything. What is, is experienced in relation to its potential non-
> existence. Consequently, it is all the more turned into possession and
> thus into a rigid functional entity that could be exchanged for another
> equivalent possession.[19]

In the case of Vanden Meersch's archive, however, dead matter (architectural spaces
and structures) is animated through subjective meaning. These spaces become em-
bodiments of subjectivity and are in that sense a reversal of the kind of transformation
discussed by Adorno. Windows in a wall become eyes in a face. Those eyes watch us
like surveillance cameras. Many of the windows are closed off by curtains or bricks.
That does not imply that these windows no longer evoke the presence of another
subject, but rather, subjects we cannot get access to: the eyes see us, but we cannot
get contact with them. Ultimately, it is a kind of psychological mentality that is evoked
by the sequence or collage of images. Generically, it is then more appropriate to
see the images as portraits rather than as cityscapes or "architecture scapes."

After having become part of her archive, Vanden Meersch's photographs
lose their referential meaning. They are not documentary, and it is no longer im-
portant where exactly they were taken. Was it in Brussels or Berlin? Is it the image
of a hospital, a sanatorium, or a military barracks? These questions are paradoxi-
cally no longer relevant once we see the images within the montage that her archive
creates. But this dissolution of referentiality does not mean that each image is ob-
jectified and formalized and will be read from now on metaphorically or symbolically.
It is the going from one image to the other that produces the psychological and

subjective mentality. It is in association with each other that this realm is released. The archival nature of Vanden Meersch's work is in that respect indispensable for its effect. We should not see it as a collection of individual images but as a montage. It is in the images' interrelationship that their collective meaning comes about. Such an archival effect, however, can only be produced by anomic archives, never by rational archives. The strict, rationally distinguished categories of the conventional archive divide the elements from each other and reduce them to a level of sameness. Difference as well as sameness is absolute, whereas in the anomic archive difference is ultimately overruled by sameness and similarity by difference.

What kind of subjectivity or psychic mentality is invoked by this archive of architectural images? All the architectural spaces and structures are relatively empty: there are never any human beings present, and only in a few cases are there traces of earlier human presence in the form of graffiti. For the rest, there only are pieces of furniture: desks, file cabinets, meeting tables, and rows of washstands, showers, etc. The objects in these spaces never tell us about specific events or the kind of life that once took place there. They don't seem to have any relationship to the past. Instead, they seem to plan and program a life yet to come. The few images of maps are, in that sense, exemplary: they provide a structural framework for future life. Another important aspect of the represented architectural spaces is their concern with collective life. There seems to be no room for individual life in the programming that is architecturally performed by these spaces. The systematicity and rationality of the programming seems to be absolute and perfect. The function of most spaces is well defined: they are for holding meetings, for doing laboratory research, for collective showering, for archiving, or for medical research; there are transit spaces like long corridors, or working spaces like offices. Some of the images show spaces that look like control rooms. From these rooms the activities of a much larger space (e.g. a prison, a factory, a hospital, or office building) can be controlled. Surveillance cameras, although not visible, are always implied; they are the instruments by which this control is performed. The few images in this archival montage that represent private homes are framed by the photos that concern collective life. This framing questions the individual nature of the private home. It suggests that individual life is also programmed and controlled on a collective scale.

The archive of architectural images connotes a psychic mentality that wants to program and map out future life (and death, in the case of concentration camps, photographs of which are also included in the archive). But programming alone is not enough. At the moment that activities are going to take place in the designed

spaces, these activities should at all times be checked, controlled, and reprogrammed if necessary. In this collage of images, architecture does much more than simply provide a material environment. This architecture looks at us, categorizes us, programs us, and controls us.

What constitutes the nature of "this architecture" should be explicated. Some of the images show modernist apartment buildings. It is the uniformity of the architectural design that makes them modernist. In contrast with most of the other spaces and buildings represented in the archive, these apartment buildings are meant for individual life. However, the free-associative sequence within which they figure suggests something else. Also, the individual life that is possible in these environments is uniform, that is, programmed and controlled by the architecture in which it takes place. The kind of modernist architecture that is represented here is not special or marginal. On the contrary, the utter banality of most of the spaces implies that this architecture is prevalent and rules our lives in the smallest detail. Ultimately, this montage of images does not represent modernist architecture as a formal phenomenon (in fact, many of the photos show architecture that is, from a formalist point of view, not modernist at all) but as the result of the mentality of modernity, the condition within which most of us were interpolated.

Though there are no human beings in the architectural spaces, in some photographs there are traces of human presence. Some of the images show graffiti, and others show architecture that has been destroyed. Both cases function as indexes of human presence. But the nature of this presence is very specific and can be read as directed against the space in which it occurs. Rosalind Krauss's characterization of the medium of graffiti explains the antagonistic nature of these traces of human presence:

> [G]raffiti is a medium of marking that has precise, and unmistakable, characteristics. First, it is performative, suspending representation in favor of action: I mark you, I cancel you, I dirty you. Second, it is violent: always an invasion of a space that is not the marker's own, it takes illegitimate advantage of the surface of inscription, violating it, mauling it, scarring it. Third, it converts the present tense of the performative into the past of the index: it is the trace of an event, torn away from the presence of the marker. "Kilroy was here," it reads.[17]

The graffiti, as well as the destroyed spaces, have to be read as traces of acts of resistance—resistance against the architectural spaces in which these acts were performed.

All the mental features evoked by Vanden Meersch's archive of images can be attributed to the archive as medium. The mentality of modernity does not only manifest itself in a specific kind of architectural space but also, and perhaps most severely, in the archive as medium. As a medium, the archive is the most privileged historicist tool, and nineteenth-century historicism being one of the fruits of modernity, the archive is modernist by birth. But the archive is not only a medium, it is also a specific space. The filing cabinets that figure in some of the photographs and the bookshelves with filing boxes lay out the contours of the archive-as-space. As space/medium it is emblematic for the mentality that pursues the ordering and programming of time and life. As long as this ordering concerns time past, as most conventional archives do, then archival effects are comforting. But when it concerns future time, the effects can be deadly. Vanden Meersch's montage of architectural spaces demonstrates this in the most subtle and worrisome way.

Vanden Meersch's own medium is, however, also the archive. Her archive differs from the archival, modernist mentality that her work is about by being anomic instead of well ordered. It is thanks to the loose organization and free-associative structuring of her collection of images that she is able to avoid the deadening suction that all collecting and archiving exerts at some point. Her anomic archive of well-ordered archives shows that an archival mentality that is not dealing with the past can be envisioning instead of deadly—on the condition that it refrains from stipulation.[21]

Conclusion

Don't worry, the implication of my argument is not that art-historical practices are totalitarian or that archival work is ultimately deadly. However, the privileged position of archival work in art history is potentially harmful. When the archive is worshipped, privileged, and trusted as an authority, it destroys, even kills critical and autonomous thinking. Uncritical belief in the importance of the archive is ultimately blinding because it closes off certain perspectives, it discourages the asking of certain questions. When we study art, archival work, or the historical approach as such, can be extremely relevant. But the relevance of archival work and the historical approach all depends on the questions we ask. Archives should never dictate the kinds of questions we are allowed to ask in art history or in visual studies. And when we "believe" in history then it is this method that decides for us what kinds of questions we can ask or are allowed to ask. History, then, becomes blinding, or even deadly, instead of illuminating. Archives, however, should be used to serve

the scholar. That is one of the reasons why árt history should get rid of "history" in the name of the discipline. Let's call it, from now on, art studies, like film studies or literary studies. Because archives should not function as *rite de passage* but as humble and useful tools, nothing else.

1. Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

2. Ibid., 1.

3. Matthias Winzen, "Collecting, so Normal, so Paradoxical," in *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art*, ed. Ingrid Schaffner and Matthias Winzen (Munich: Prestel, 1998), 22.

4. Ibid., 24.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Delphine Renard, "Interview with Christian Boltanski," *Boltanski*, exh. cat. (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou and Musée national d'art moderne, 1984), 71.

8. Ydessa Hendeles is one of the most important collectors of contemporary art and of the history of photography active today. She has her own museum, the Ydessa Hendeles Foundation in Toronto, where she curates exhibitions of her collection. For an analysis of her practice of collecting and curating, see Reesa Greenberg, "Private Collectors, Museums and Display: A Post-Holocaust Perspective," *Jong Holland* 1, no. 16 (2000): 29–41. The title of the installation, *Partners*, refers to the intimate relationship between the owners of teddy bears and their playthings.

9. The exhibition, which Hendeles curated for the Haus der Kunst in Munich, had the same title as her teddy bear installation: *Partners*. This title has several meanings: it refers to the collaboration between a public museum and a private collector, between a German institution and a Jewish collector, and between Hitler's former museum and the daughter of Holocaust survivors. For an analysis of this exhibition, see Ernst van Alphen, "Die Ausstellung als narratives Kunstwerk/Exhibition as Narrative Work of Art," in *Partners*, ed. Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski (Cologne: Walther König, 2003), 143–85.

10. Ydessa Hendeles, "Notes on the Exhibition," in *Partners*, 212.

11. Ibid., 211–12.

12. Ibid., 215.

13. For an explanation of the trope *mise en abyme*, see Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1997).

14. Els Vanden Meersch et al., *Transient Constructions: Selection Photographical Archive 1996–2003*, exh. cat. (Ghent: FLAC Centrum voor kunsten en beeldcultuur, 2003).

15. Els Vanden Meersch, Hilda van Gelder, and Alice Evermore, *Paranoid Obstructions* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2004).

16. Els Vanden Meersch, *Implants* (Ghent: MER, 2006).

17. Benjamin Buchloh, "Warburg's Paragon? The End of Collage and Photomontage in Postwar Europe," in *Deep Storage*, 50–60.

18. Winzen, "Collecting, so Normal, so Paradoxical," 28.

19. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: New Left Books, 1974), as quoted in ibid., 23.

20. Rosalind Krauss, "Cy's up," *Artforum* (Sept. 1994): 118.

21. I wrote this essay during my stay at the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. I thank Michael Ann Holly and Mark Reinhardt for inviting me there as the Clark/Oakley Fellow.