



paula roush, *Flora McCallica*, found photos and herbarium, part of dreaming through-on and into the exotic, **paula roush & maria lusitano**, curated by Maria M. Kheirkhah at the 198 contemporary art & education, 2013

| Excavation Thrill |

IN CONVERSATION PAULA ROUSH AND TANJA VERLAK

From its beginnings, photography has had to carry the burden of being an objective art, mainly due to its technical capability of capturing the visual world. Reality is thus equated with the visible world, which is in contradiction to the fact that a photograph exposes ideas, values and concepts, and is constantly finding itself in the phenomenological world. What, in terms of human judgement, is objective? And, what is a fact? According to Nietzsche "facts are precisely what is lacking, all that exists consists of interpretations. We cannot establish any fact 'in itself'". The Found Photo Foundation/FPF, under the patronage of paula roush, deals with visuals suitably named 'orphan photographs' and explores this very possibility of walking the line between temporal and spatial domains, where the empirical and the surreal grow surprisingly close. The FPF can also be read as an artistic experiment that twists the document value of an archive beyond its proverbial linearity of causes and consequences. As the connection to the real is often lost, the project is above all a platform of invented space that suggests taxonomical methods of artistic research deep into generations and the unknown.²

¹ Nietzsche, F., 2008. *The Will to Power – An Attempted Transvaluation of All Values – Vol II, Books III and IV: 2*, Read Books, p. 12.

² Verlak, T. *An Attempt at Exhausting an Archive*. In: Schmidt, E., Rüttinger, I., Wann, J. (eds.), 2012. *Dear Aby Warburg What can be done with images? Dealing with photographic material*, Museum für Gegenwarts Kunst Siegen, Kehrer Verlag, p. 278



paula roush, *Bowville*, locative media performance and installation, commissioned by SPACE London, 2004. Foto: arzu altin

Tanja Verlak: paula, your research through art touches upon a variety of disciplines. Some of your works are based on a sensory perception and a further processing of information, like *Bowville*, for instance. What does the use of a certain medium mean for your working method? Is the media platform a part of the conceptual frame itself and shall we read it as such, or do you use the chosen medium as a suitable dissemination of a piece of work?

paula roush: I am very interested in what is known as the post-medium condition. In my projects I intend to explore the tension between the medium and its obsolescence. It was art theorist Rosalind Krauss who suggested that in many contemporary art practices 'medium specificity' (characterised by a focus on crafts and the medium's physical substance) has been replaced by what is best designated as 'technical support' or more general a 'support structure' (that could be defined by conceptual and discursive practices). In my work too, I find this shift has happened in terms of a more investigative approach, where what Kraus describes as 'technical support' is the subject matter. This subject matter will either be the historical period I research, or the collaborative method I use. It seems to me that to many artists of my generation artistic practice is not necessarily



paula roush,
SOS:OK (save our souls: zero killings)
 community intervention, exhibition,
 archive and emergency kit/publications,
 2004-2006

A commission presented as an exhibition at the Coleman Project Space, London and touring to Pavel Haus, Austria, gallery P74, Ljubljana, and Sparwasser gallery, Berlin integrated in the exhibition Public Services curated by Tadej Pogacar



paula roush, *Found Photo Foundation*, installation with photography archive and publications, part of the exhibition: *Dear Aby Warburg: What Can Be Done with Images? Dealing with photographic material*, curated by Eva Schmidt at the Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen, 2013

attached to the specificity of a medium. When we want to understand what characterises this post-medium attitude, we need to accept the shift towards the performative and discursive sites of photography.

As you said, *Bowville*, commissioned by Space (London, 2004) to be part of their platform on wireless public technologies, is an example of my own works taking this shift. In *Bowville* my 'technical support' was extended research on the political economies of photography as a means of identification. This work brought together the history of photographic surveillance and its present implications for social stigma and deportation, such as polices use of electronic tagging to keep non-European immigrants under surveillance. Photography served as one of the main vehicles for this project but the medium was questioned, and integrated in the form of converging multi-layered mechanisms of new and old technologies (geo-locative media, wireless video stream, archival photography, fictional biography, performance with characters) that make the unitary identification of the work's physical support impossible. The confrontation of photography and technologies of fear was made manifest in the work's structure, bringing together a timed performance, a publicly sited investigation bureau, a detective story sometimes mimicking the police's own investigation methods and the participation of the public.

T. V.: Your work could be read as part of a broader emotive and intellectual discourse of contemporariness, of predetermined societies. Critics attribute your work to an interesting research category, namely "the urbanization of art practice". Could you elaborate on this? What does urbanization of art mean to you and what would you define as its antidote? Is it connected to the very means of technology? How do you apply the notion of 'urban'?

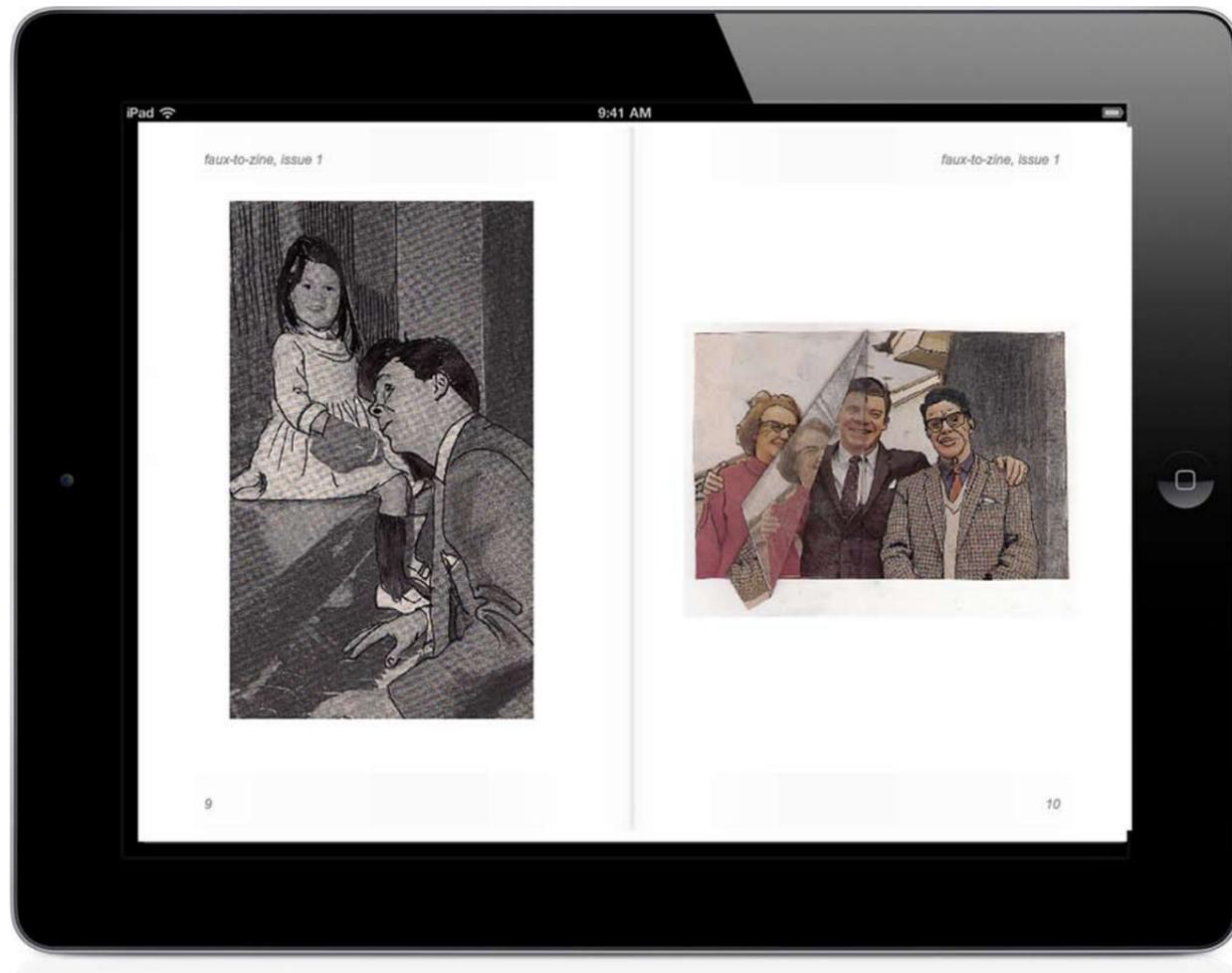
p. r.: The 'urban' here relates to the relation of the work of art, to the realm of sociality and their contexts beyond the confines of representation. Bourriaud, when defining 'relational aesthetics',

took this urbanization of artistic experience to read cities as sites of encounter between people and the artwork. I am interested in these urban interstices in more than one way. I am interested in art that produces sociability and promotes encounter. When I created an emergency biscuit distribution platform at the Coleman Project Space gallery for SOS:OK, the piece addressed the history of the site (a former biscuit shop) as well as the recent history of the area, formerly known as Biscuit Town. I worked with former employees of the Biscuit factory (now unemployed due to the factory's closure) paying them from the money I received from art funding; we produced a new biscuit for the area. People came to the gallery for free tea and biscuits. When we distributed biscuits and the publications for free in the streets, art was being inserted into the social and urban fabric.

T. V.: I would like to touch upon the notion of the archival. The way I see it archive can never be completed and therefore not be reduced to its definition. It is false pretense giving you an overview of the archived field, yet the very decision of what to archive is a selection on its own. Eugene Atget's photographs are exemplary archival; his approach was to photograph what was about to disappear. Christian Boltanski, on the other hand, deals with archival material in a more direct manner, whereas Aby Warburg's approach to the archive is a category of its own... Your recent interest concerns the archival too and photography seemingly embodies the notion well. Could you say more about the archive and its strategies?

p. r.: Rather than trying to define an archive, it might be fairer to speak of a variety of archival art practices that constitute a relationship between history and traces of reality. These artistic archival practices might use various historical methods: creating new archives as the artwork itself, working with existing archives and, more to the point, rethinking the materiality of the archive itself.

When working with photographic archives and particularly with found photographic archives, a complex relation to the real comes into play, oscillating between documentary and fictional modes of representation. The found material always



paula roush & maria lusitano, *Faux-to-zine*, artists' (maga)zine for the ipad, issue 01

points to the 'original' production context and to the ethnographic other. But when that origin is lost, we lose any claim to authenticity and authorship.

Some of these concerns echo in my ongoing project *The Found Photo Foundation (FPF)* initiated in 2007, which was set up to rescue work produced by professional, amateur and anonymous photographers. The piece focuses on footage found in flea markets and car boot sales from Lisbon and London, whilst adding additional photographs found world-wide. The photographs are all organised in informal thematic archives opened up to the public in workshops, which make the archive's contents available for non-destructive editing, re-printing and electronic publishing.

The participants are free to mix this material with other originated in their own archives, further displacing these images' relationship to the 'real', under new intertextualities, such as headings, captions and additional documents. These could be thought of as transcultural hybrids or manufactured "secondary documents," but I think we can look at them in a different way too. As Dipti Desai and Jessica Hamlin write in 'Artists in the realm of historical methods': "Artists are establishing new primary sources and create works that could be considered primary documents in their own right as they collect the stories of marginalized, unconsidered sources."

T. V.: Listening to you I realise that the penetration of art into receptive environments is a rather important part of your practice. You are embracing new technologies with ease but have adopted a classic form – an artist's book. Besides it being a practical, affordable and intimate means of re/presentation, would you like to remind us on something else when talking about a book-form?

p. r.: Publishing has always been an integral part of my projects, both in the form of book-works that were integrated in a wider installation and as multiples that outlive the time-space of the exhibition and start to circulate autonomously. The moniker "msdm" under which I have operated for more than a decade relates to mobile strategies

of display and mediation in contemporary art practices, where publishing provides a crucial platform to produce, exhibit and circulate art work. The mobile formats translate the blurring of boundaries that currently exist between the art work, digital files and publishing. Once a project is digitised, the post-production in InDesign allows me to output it for the paper printing market as a .pdf-x file or alternatively (with a few modifications) to publish it as an .epub for ipad and easily convert it to .mobi for kindle. So these paper-digital publishing practices are already closely connected in the interfaces of the computer.

In 2007 I published my first photobook for the ipod (*no official buildings no local people no oil facilities*). Last year I launched *Faux-to-zine*, an ezine that deals precisely with issues of (re) production in the work of art. What distinguishes it from most other artists' serial publications is the digital platform, as it is an artists' (maga)zine for the ipad. Each edition repurposes discarded/found paper publications through sampling, collage, remix and drawing, existing as paper special edition and as an e-book available for e-readers.

The book provides intertextuality and a time-space matrix to explore the relationships of image and text that is very convenient for those of us working with multiple layers of information. Lately, the publication has acquired a third meaning in my practice, as a space where I can show my work independently of an exhibition. With content being developed primarily for the book, this is further made available in multiple formats from unique hand made editions to print on demand and ebooks for the ipad and other electronic readers.



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Tanja Verlak is a PhD candidate at the Royal College of Art in London. Her research focus is the representation of shock and the phenomenon of magical in photography. She holds a BA and an MA degree in documentary photography from FAMU in Prague and an M.Phil. from the SAA, Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi.

paula roush is an artist, a writer and an educator born in Lisbon and based in London. Her work is conceptually placed between social and public and formally embodies both, new and traditional media. She focuses on archives and orphan photographs, which contextualize such tangible material through negotiable agencies and subjective memories. She is a Fulbright alumni and a lecturer at the London South Bank University.