

[excerpt]

Most archival artworks that circulate today in exhibitions and publications investigate the archive as the site of an ongoing negotiation between the appropriation of photo-historical material and accumulative strategies of installation and publication. To date such research has produced several curatorial projects where strategies of photographic reproduction and distribution are scrutinised as particular modes of knowledge production that whilst engaged in the creation of archival art are far apart from the 19<sup>th</sup> century model of bureaucratic archive.<sup>1</sup> Such is the case with the exhibition *Dear Aby Warburg: What can be done with images? Dealing with Photographic Material* (2012),<sup>2</sup> where my project *found photo foundation (fpfoundation)*<sup>3</sup> was exhibited as an experimental archive. This and the other works installed across the vast museum explored the many configurations of the use of photographic collections in contemporary art, and its many transmutations since Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924-1929).

The homage to art-historian Aby Warburg (1866 - 1929) as precursor to current art archival practices is unpacked by the exhibition's curator Eva Schmidt, in the accompanying research publication.<sup>4</sup> *The montage of reproduced photographs from divergent sources, the use of variable, non-systematic ordering parameters, and the extremely provisional display strategies* are some of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*' characteristics that reappear in contemporary works in the exhibition, for example, translated into Abigail Reynolds' interest for a spatial staging of printed photographic material in *The British Countryside in Pictures* (2011) and Simon Wachsmuth's hybrid combinations of photography with painting in *Voids* (2008-2010), to name just a few of the works exhibited side by side with the processes of photographic collection, accumulation and archiving I used in the *fpfoundation* (2007-2012).

The genesis of the photographic collections in the exhibition can be connected to the paradigm of time identified by George Didi-Huberman in Warburg's method of photo reproduction and montage developed in the *Atlas*.<sup>5</sup> Warburg's 'iconology of the interval' results from thinking about time itself as a montage of heterogeneous elements, and memory as an editing process that separates fragments, produces holes in the historical timeline

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<sup>1</sup> The development of the 19<sup>th</sup> century archive is analysed in depth in Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art From Bureaucracy* (Cambridge MA/ London: The MIT press, 2008)

<sup>2</sup> Eva Schmidt, *Dear Aby Warburg: What can be done with images? Dealing with Photographic Material*, Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen, Siegen, December 2, 2012–March 3, 2013. Other curatorial projects linking contemporary art photo collections to the *Mnemosyne Atlas* include: Georges Didi-Huberman, *Atlas. How to Carry the World on One's Back?*, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid 2010, Georges Didi-Huberman and Arno Gisinger, *Nouvelles Histoires de Fantômes [New Ghost Stories]*, *Palais de Tokyo* February 4, 2014–September 07, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> The found photo foundation will be referred to subsequently as *fpfoundation*, which is phonetically pronounced with an elongated f (2x)

<sup>4</sup> Eva Schmidt, "Foreword and Acknowledgements," In *Dear Aby Warburg, what can be done with images? Dealing with photographic Material*, ed. Eva Schmidt and Ines Ruttinger (Siegen/ Heidelberg: Museum für Gegenwartskunst Siegen /Kehrer 2012), 11- 14

<sup>5</sup> See Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante– Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, Paris: Editions de Minuit, 2002

and field intervals. It is then a question of selection, of movement between storage (the archive) and presentation (the atlas), as theorist Ludwig Seyfarth wrote: 'The artists of the exhibition *Dear Aby Warburg* are collectors of images; their artistic individuality consists less in a style or gesture than in the specific manner in which they...also physically open up new spaces for thinking between the images- something begun with Warburg when he started to pin photos to canvasses.'" <sup>6</sup> In the case of my photographic collections, many of which were found in Portuguese second hand markets - "...It is usually impossible to trace the provenance of these photographs [referred] to as 'orphans'... They have become homeless, but nonetheless tell something like a private subterranean history of the time spent under a dictatorship."<sup>7</sup> - there is an additional ethnographic potential, a relation to the real through documentary and fiction that opens up different ways of representing culture.

Due to my origins in a southern-European country, at the periphery of the art world canon, it is useful to extend here a reference to Catherine Russell's study of 'experimental ethnographies,' practiced by artists whose works reflect on their cultures of origin. The editing of used, fragmented, even corrupted found imagery in collage, montage or archival practice creates "an aesthetic of ruins; its intertextuality is always an allegory of history, a montage of memory traces by which the artist engages with the past through recall, retrieving and recycling."<sup>8</sup> Whilst the author's main concern is with found-footage, she extends her argument to found photography. Additionally, when living away from one's country of origin, as it is in my case, the identity constructed with found images borders into that of an auto-ethnography. In this 'journey of the self,' the condition of being an orphan and homeless is in fact appropriated as the hallmark both of the *fpfoundation's* collection and my own (photo)biography.

### chaos of memories

*A propos*, let me briefly sketch for you the memory trauma at the root of the *fpfoundation's* collection. Born and raised in Lisbon I moved to the United States in the 1990s with a Fulbright grant to research photo art therapy in the context of post-graduate studies. Without my mother's knowledge I brought with me a large selection of our family albums. My reasons may have been multiple and at a very rational level, I planned to use it for photo therapy work; but I also believe now there may have been other reasons that propelled my clandestine gesture of sneaking out of my home the only available evidence of its familial existence. Whilst in New York, I had to change residence and in that move I lost those photographs. I tried everything to retrieve them, from repeatedly tracing my steps back to what I could remember to be the last

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<sup>6</sup> Ludwig Seyfarth, "Space for thinking between the images: on the genesis of the 'photographic collection' as an artistic genre." In *Dear Aby Warburg, what can be done with images? Dealing with photographic Material*, 33.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> Catherine Russell, *Experimental ethnography The work of film in the age of video* (Durham / London: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 238

assemblage of boxes, posed on the floor, waiting to be moved out of the house, to submitting myself to hypnotherapy. It was a journey of self-discovery, where I learnt that memory is a place to research and explore but nothing I did helped me to recall the events leading to the albums' disappearance.

The photographs' loss was very distressing and I lived it as an erasure of my own childhood. As if my identity and memories of growing up, of having a father and a mother, and later being part of an enlarged community were stored and articulated on these. Without them, I was left with no lineage, a nobody's daughter with no country and no home to return to. I was left with a gap in my biography. But the lost photographs instead of confining me to exile, became a potential site to create, to fulfill with other people's childhoods, and return to with fragments of others' lives. Sven Spieker's assertion translates the paradox: "Archives do not simply reconnect us with what we have lost; instead they remind us...of what we have never possessed in the first place."<sup>9</sup> The mnemonic method I adopted resembled that of the amateur collector, building an archive of anonymous, dispossessed, ghostly photographs. Legally, these are known as orphan photographs, as they have lost their genealogy or ownership. There are multiple reasons these photos might have become orphan: they may have been lost, stolen, they may have been abandoned following the death of their owners, or they may have simply ceased to be useful and thrown in the garbage, from which they may have been rescued and put back in the market. Whatever their backstories, they've provided me with a method to retroactively recapture my past and that of my country.

The *fpfoundation* grew thus as a framework for experimental archival practices, interested in the relationship between photography and memory. Its mission eventually developed into the 'rescue of work produced by professional, amateur, and anonymous photographers found throughout the world,' and represents now a vast collection of found photography. The *fpfoundation*'s status as an artist-led initiative is similar to other archival projects I developed throughout the years, to open up platforms for independent, self-sustainable collaborative projects. One of these, under the acronym *msdm*<sup>10</sup> became the umbrella moniker for all my projects of 'mobile strategies of display and mediation,' which the *fpfoundation* belongs to.

Without an established agenda or a systematic program to enable independent fundraising and sustain a policy of acquisitions, publications and exhibitions, the *fpfoundation* has advanced in an opportunistic and parasitic way, in response to my own life-art practice. In terms of acquisitions, these result from my regular travel between London and Lisbon, and so there is a focus in photographic objects that were found and acquired in flea markets and car boot sales from Portugal and the UK. In addition, my determination not to miss a street market sale in every city I visit has added photos from all

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<sup>9</sup> Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art From Bureaucracy*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> See <http://msdm.org.uk>

paula roush *Chaos of memories- Surviving archives and the ruins of history according to the found photo foundation*. In *Order and Collapse: The Lives of Archives*, 2015, Negative series, published by Photography at Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg / Hasselblad Foundation, and Art and Theory.

over the world, with the add-on of occasional photographic items gleaned from the streets where I often find discarded and defaced photographs, sometimes in advanced state of decomposition waiting for my adoption.

### *experimental archives*

The *fpfoundation's* contribution to *Dear Aby...* consisted in the recreation of a grass-roots archive, inspired by two queer and feminist archives I visited in London: The Hall-Carpenter Archives, an archive of boxes of material relating to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender activism in the UK, most of the material dated from after the publication of the Wolfenden report in 1957<sup>11</sup> and the Feminist Library, an archive collection of Women's Liberation Movement literature, particularly second-wave materials dating from the late 1960s to the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> These are the kind of places where the boundaries between archives and everyday life are blurred, and is possible to find photo prints, slides, home made zines, underground alternative press and other subcultural objects, sometimes in piles and disordered accumulations. Ann Cvetkovich suggests we should turn to these vernacular archives for inspiration on how to proactively document our (in)visible lives and to queer official archives instead of resigning ourselves to a critique of the archive that posits it solely as the site of (our) historical absence.<sup>13</sup>

Supported by the means of production that enabled the *fpfoundation* to materialise itself in a wealthy public museum, I ordered ready-made metallic shelving units and archival cardboard boxes sourced from commercial providers. Inside were placed not just the *fpfoundation's* raw material (its collection of found photographs, family albums, commercial photography, postcards, historical photobooks, printed ephemera, photo surveys, and photo instructional materials) but also the visual re-presentation and re-appropriation of this material in projects based in and around the collection since 2007.

I had been interested in editorial authoring of found photos, and the role and status of the editor as author when appropriating ready-made printed matter. When I started lecturing in photography in London,<sup>14</sup> I took the opportunity to run several workshops on indie publishing, the photobook and artists strategies with archives. I brought in the *fpfoundation's* collection and the photographic material was for the first time catalogued using informal archiving methods, provisional taxonomies, temporary groupings and series. Several photobookzines were then produced. I use this term to describe short-run, self-published, cheaply produced books, where the photographs

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<sup>11</sup> The Hall-Carpenter Archives is named after the authors Radclyffe Hall and Edward Carpenter, and was founded in 1980. See <http://hallcarpenter.tripod.com/>

<sup>12</sup> The Feminist Library was set up in 1975 and is run by a team of volunteers. See <http://feministlibrary.co.uk/>

<sup>13</sup> Ann Cvetkovich, "Queer Archival Futures: Case Study Los Angeles" In *On the subject of archives*, eds Marianne Hirsch and Diana Taylor, Vol 9 (1 and 2), 2012. See <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/e-misferica-91/cvetkovich>

<sup>14</sup> At the London South Bank University with the BA and MA Photography courses.

are edited according to one selected topic, have an austere appearance of minimal design and layout often with one single photo per page and little textual narrative except for the indicative colophon.

An example of a work entirely sourced from the *fpfoundations'* photos is Andreas Obexer's photobookzine *Discipline* (2010), using Portuguese found photographs from police and maritime academies. Other conceptual investigative methods of appropriation included the combination of a Spanish family album and reenactment in Sara Soupedemots' *Never let me go* (2011), a photobook that resulted from a photo-therapy process realised with her grand aunt in the initial phase of Alzheimer disease. These and many other photobookzines produced during the workshops along with the photo collections were shipped to the museum in Siegen where I came to organize them, with a cataloguing system that addressed the material characteristics of the photo objects whilst allowing a hands-on experience of the archive.

The taxonomies developed for Siegen included provisional references to fictive documents, queer affects, collage history and the contested space of the archive itself. The archiving order ignored the principle of provenance<sup>15</sup> generally used in institutional archives, opting instead for the introduction of chaos into the grid arrangement of the boxes. The viewers, invited to browse wouldn't know what to expect from labels such as: dust, excessive, embodied researcher, evidence, hairs, fictional identity, fingerprints, Hannah Höch / Til Brugman, instructions on how to survive the archive, lusciously tactile, matt and stupid, messiness, passing, photo re-enactment, prints in suitcase, strokable. Elucidating the use of experimental taxonomies, Tanja Verlak pointed out in the exhibition's publication: 'The *fpfoundation* can be read as an artistic experiment of twisting 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 spaces that suggests taxonomical methods of artistic research deep into generations and the unknown.'<sup>16</sup>

In addition to the provisionality of taxonomies, another strategy to keep the archive open has been the foregrounding of participatory tools. A workshop for Siegen-based artists-educators that were invited to bring their personal images archives for remix, was a critical opportunity to reflect on ethical as well as aesthetical aspects of working with collections of images. Quoting Eva Schmidt, again: '*How can photographic images thought lost – due to a lack of place or name– be re-found and made to speak to us again? The significance of a photographic image does not lie in the image itself; the decisive aspects*

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<sup>15</sup> Provenance is a fundamental principle of archives, referring to the individual, family, or organization that created or received the items in a collection. The principle of provenance or the *respect des fonds* dictates that records of different origins (provenance) be kept separate to preserve their context. See Richard Pearce Moses, *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, 2005, <http://files.archivists.org/pubs/free/SAA-Glossary-2005.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Tanja Verlak, *An attempt at exhausting an archive / Found Photo Foundation*, In *Dear Aby Warburg, what can be done with images? Dealing with photographic Material*, 278. The text is also part of newspaper published to be part of the installation: Paula Roush, *found photo foundation #1* (London: msdm publications, 2012)

Paula Roush *Chaos of memories- Surviving archives and the ruins of history according to the found photo foundation*. In *Order and Collapse: The Lives of Archives*, 2015, Negative series, published by Photography at Valand Academy, University of Gothenburg / Hasselblad Foundation, and Art and Theory.

*are its context and actualization as material object. (...) The foundations' work consists in tracking down photos that have become homeless (...) and invite others to 'adopt' these 'orphans' in their own configurations.'*<sup>17</sup> The inclusion of studio trestle tables next to the shelved boxes opened up the *foundation's* play with historical material, a temporal process of editing and montage so crucial to an understanding of Warburg's strategies: from individual 'signature' to collaborative authorship, from working with a personal family album to the appropriation of orphan photographs, from the absence of writing to the collage of text and image, from the incorporation of an 'original' print to the reproduction of images using a photocopy machine.

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<sup>17</sup> Eva Schmidt, Foreword and Acknowledgements, In *Dear Aby Warburg, what can be done with images? Dealing with photographic Material*, 13.