To read, as if for the first time.

A review of *Archive Fever – Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* – International Center of Photography, New York. January 18- May 4 2008.

A few months ago messages went around the internet, saying things like "The phaonmneal pweor of the hmuan mnid, it dseno't mtaetr in waht oerdr the ltteres in a wrod are, the olny iproamtnt tihng is taht the frsit and lsat ltteer be in the rghit pclae."

In comparison to the way we scan web pages or typed print, reading handwritten pages in an archive is a curiously intimate experience. It is not just that often, such as in the colonial records from Mathari mental hospital shown in the photograph below, the English used is archaic, it is also that reading handwriting far removed from you in space and time proves oddly difficult. In the records I was looking at, the scrawled pen of the doctors on the reports of Mau-Mau insurgents became oddly personal. I grew to recognise the way certain f's curled, began searching for deviations in handwriting, in the sense of the records. It was as if I was reading for the first time, recognising that actually, none of the words made sense, and the struggle for comprehension – of a different time, of a different person – had to begin anew.

[IMAGE ONE]

The difficulty in understanding the handwriting of a colonial doctor fifty years points to a difficulty with the archive that does not lessen if the archive in question is composed of images, videos, or the printed word. In each case, there is a *handwriting;* a subjectivity in the archive that cannot be understood simply in terms of the formal rules in which the archive is embedded.

The archive's resistance to itself is one of the principle focuses of Okwui Enwezor's latest exhibition. As you descend into the mazy warren of rooms beneath the International Center for Photography, one is immediately confronted by Christian Boltanski's *Lessons of Darkness: Archives: Detective*. A series of boxes, each with a picture on the front: the context of the images suggests that these are the mug-shots of criminals – the left over case files of a tired policeman. In fact, we have no way of knowing if these images are fictional: those of the victim of a crime, those of the criminal, or just snapshots of random people, arranged in such a way as to depict them as criminals.

Let us try a brief thought experiment. I construct a fictional person: find a possible name, make sure he or she has a believable history of social services payments, insert a record of these payments into the relevant government records, and ensure our fictional character worked for a conveniently defunct organisation with few other employees. It is perfectly possible to create a 'real' archival person in such a fashion: because we construct our character in terms of the rules of the archive, he is not disprovable within the domain of the archive itself. These rules include both the formal rules, such as where a signature should be placed on a document, but equally the informal forms of life present in the archive: we should ensure that our fictional character has a nice median income as taken as an average of the archive, so as not to arouse suspicion.

Now imagine an archive where every single character is fictional.

This is actually the case of every archive. For in our entirely fictional archive, all we could ever do – without correlation from outside the archive – is prove that each record was faulty, contained contradictions to other records, without ever proving the fiction of the entire archive.

Many of the exhibits in *Archive Fever* play with these notions, exploring the sense in which the archive is a fiction of its own – in a more academic language, that recalls the Foucault of *The Order of Things*, we would say that the archive is the systematisation of its own enunciability.

The artist here, at least intuitively, works in a similar manner to the historian. As Carlo Ginzburg sets out in *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, the historian searches the archive, not for confirmation of what is already known, but for clues; glimpses of the past that rupture our expected sense of history. Such is the case with Andy Warhol's *Race Riot* (c.a.1963), a series of silkscreen paintings made from Charles Moore's photographic essays for *Life* magazine of the riots in Alabama.

[IMAGE TWO]

In the original image, the violence is arresting: the intensity of the image focuses on the dog, the bite: the moment of contact. In the silkscreen version, the distinctions leak away; the dog is as white as the background, the immediate violence recedes into an abstract geometry of white and black. Despite himself, Warhol produces an exemplary Marxist artwork, where the moment of violence is reworked in terms of its structural conditions. The violence of the police dog biting the protestor is unsettling, *Race Riot* suggests, not because of the immediate violence suggested by the archival image, but because this violence is normal, part of a broader political economy of structural and racial violence that endures long after the wound of the bite has faded. The canvas here is absolutely incommensurable with its background

(the photograph, the context in Alabama) – it opens up a space between the photograph and its archival meaning that allows us to look at our history again in a new light.

Race Riot is perhaps the purest example of this sort of artistic practice in Archive Fever, but other artworks function in an analogous fashion, Glenn Ligon's reworking of Mapplethorpe's images of black men in the *The Black Book* opening up a space where we can destabilise the underlying eroticism of the images. Constantly, the artworks test the rules of the archive, opening up new meanings, destabilising others, creating fictions that function as truths: both within the system of the archive, and in those wonderful moments, such as in Race Riot, where they break through the truth of the archive to reveal the structural inequality revealed behind the rules of the archive, that in this case present a moment of violence as singular, rather than embedded within a broader system of racial discrimination.

Individual works are successful in doing this, but as a whole, the exhibition functions as a collection of parts. Too many works, such as Hans-Peter Feldmann's collection of front pages from around the world on 9/12/2001, are merely surface reflections of the phenomenon they mean to explore. In Feldmann's case, the collection demonstrates a powerful proof that history has become merely the manifestation of its own spectacle, but allows us no way to puncture this, to move through this in the powerful way *Race Riot* allows for the events of Alabama.

More important than the failure of individual works however, is that the exhibition offers no serious self-criticism. It is astonishing that

an exhibition that deals with the archive – with the arranging and ordering of material – offers no thought on how the art world arranges its own materials. Such a reflection should include on how such work came to be given a (fictional) coherency in the exhibit, how, for instance, Felix Gonzalez-Torres' piece has now moved through three exhibitions (at least) to inhabit the space at the International Center for Photography. On the sign at the beginning of the exhibition, Enwezor claims to be constructing a meta-commentary on the archive. To do so properly would have meant analysing the process of archive construct in the exhibit itself; this would have allowed the works to live together, rather than seeming to be a collection of parts.

Mal d'archive

Thankfully, the archive offers a model for understanding more than simply the rules of its own creation. That is does so is suggested by the title, *Archive Fever*, a silent homage to Derrida's book *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (the book is mentioned nowhere in the exhibit, though if you look hard on the website, you can find one mention of Derrida's name).

While I would not want to criticise Eric Prenowitz valiant translation, the original French title, *Mal d'archive*, is much more suggestive that the phrase Archive Fever would allow. The *mal* of the title suggests not simply fever, but illness, and also, something malicious: *tu me fais mal*. There are at least three mal's suggested by Derrida's title.

There is the feeling of finding something unpleasant in the archive – the discovery, for instance, of someone's hidden Nazi past, or of a letter your lover wrote to his mistress. Mal d'archive - something that burns us if we read it. Exemplary of this sense of the archive is Anri Sala's video work *Intervista* (1998). A detective story of Communist Albania, it charts Anri Sala as he struggles to decode a lost video of his mother at a Communist party meeting, the lip reader he employs at the end to give life to her words is the paradigmatic example of the archive's burning power.

Why do we look, if this is what we will find? The incessant compulsion we have to look through our own records, to desperately search for something that we know will cause us pain, is one if fevers of the archive to which Derrida's title alludes. It is perhaps closest to Derrida's own understanding of the archive as not the construction of a system, but its disjuncture with itself; the archive occurring at the breakdown of memory, when we realise the archive for what it is, a fiction constructed according to rules of which we are only dimly aware.

Aware, however, we are, and this dissatisfaction with our own memories conditions our search for their disruption. Ilán Lieberman's uses of the archive in his work *Niño Perdido* (*Lost Child*, 2006–7) is a poignant reflection on this search. His pain-staking drawings of photographs of missing children function as pre-obituaries. Whereas the archival photographs of the children function to present an absence, and in so doing makes this absence only more apparent (the double death of the photograph), his drawings mark a dissatisfaction with the archive, a search for life in those photographs that mark an endless mourning for what is absent. In so doing, they also work as a commentary on the nature of the photograph itself. The photographic moment, as commentators from Barthes to Sontag have remarked, is always dead, lost, and what we have, when we hold the photograph in our hands, is a small testament to this death. By redrawing the photographs of missing children, Lieberman adds a density to the images that denies the finitude of the

moment, which asserts, against the mute equivalence of the archive, the hope of redemption.

Looking at his photographs reminded me of Afghan miniatures from the Timurid dynasty in Herat.

[IMAGE THREE]

Each miniature was supposed to be an exact copy of those that had gone before it; the labour involved was painstaking and exact. So exact, that many miniaturists went blind, and it was only then, when they were thought to be apart from the temptations of innovation and the tricks of vision, that they could paint pure replicas and embody the essential truth of the work. Such refusal of the evident truth of the archive, and insistence on the work of time present in the artwork, is embodied in the quiet determination of Lieberman's images.

The actual images from Afghanistan in the exhibition are perhaps the worst work on display. Fazal Sheikh's photographs of Afghan refugees holding small portraits of young men are gestural images that left this reviewer with just one burning question: what strange obsession leads us to collect these images, to parade these private archives in public (at Sheikh has also done with images from Kenya, Somalia, Brazil, Sudan...the list is endless)

[IMAGE FOUR].

This is perhaps the most pressing sense of mal d'archive – not the pain the archive inflicts on us, nor the unsettling search for the disruption of the archive within itself, but the feverish making of the archive. What compels us to keep accumulating images and documents, images of images, documents about documents – to keep arranging and sorting the fragments of our memory?

The work of art distorts – it transforms materials that we think we know, that we classify and understand, and transports them to a singular place. The effacement of aura we see in the photograph does nothing to reduce this fundamental magic. The photograph opens up new horizons on what is shown on its surface just as the painting does for the material forms from which it is constructed. Given this rupturing effect of the artwork, one would expect an exhibition on the archive to attend to the question of our fanatical compulsion to store documents and images, arranging them in patterns: our search to give order to existence.

That the exhibition does not offer us a meditation on this is perhaps not surprising when we remember that it offers no commentary on its own archive – its practice of taking disparate materials and transforming them into yet another Enwezor exhibition. As a counterpoint to our story, I can offer only an image, and the brief poignant story that lies below it. In this story, the compulsive need of the Guatemalan police to preserve the documents that incriminate them stands in testament to the importance of questioning our compulsion to archive, and attests to the opportunity that *Archive Fever* missed. *Mal d'archive*, indeed.

[IMAGE FIVE]

The Cobweb (Joshua Craze: 2007)

On the outskirts of Mathari, a Nairobi slum that saw some of the worst violence in the recent Kenyan elections, sits Mathari mental hospital. The institution houses hundreds of documents: from colonial records of interned insurgents from the Mau-Mau rebellion, to the contmpoorary records of mental patients still living at the hospital. Chronically underfunded, the patients are left to wander around the building, and are often sent to search in this sea of paper for their own records.

Race Riot (Andy Warhol: 1963)

The pictures on these eleven pages are frightening. They are frightening because of the brutal methods being used by white policemen in Birmingham, Ala. against Negro demonstrators. They are frightening because the Negro strategy of "nonviolent direct action" invites that very brutality--and welcomes it as a way to promote the Negroes' cause, which, under the law, is right.

"They Fight A Fire That Won't Go Out," Life, May 17, 1963, 26-36.

Fifteenth Century miniature from from Timirud Dynasty, Herat.

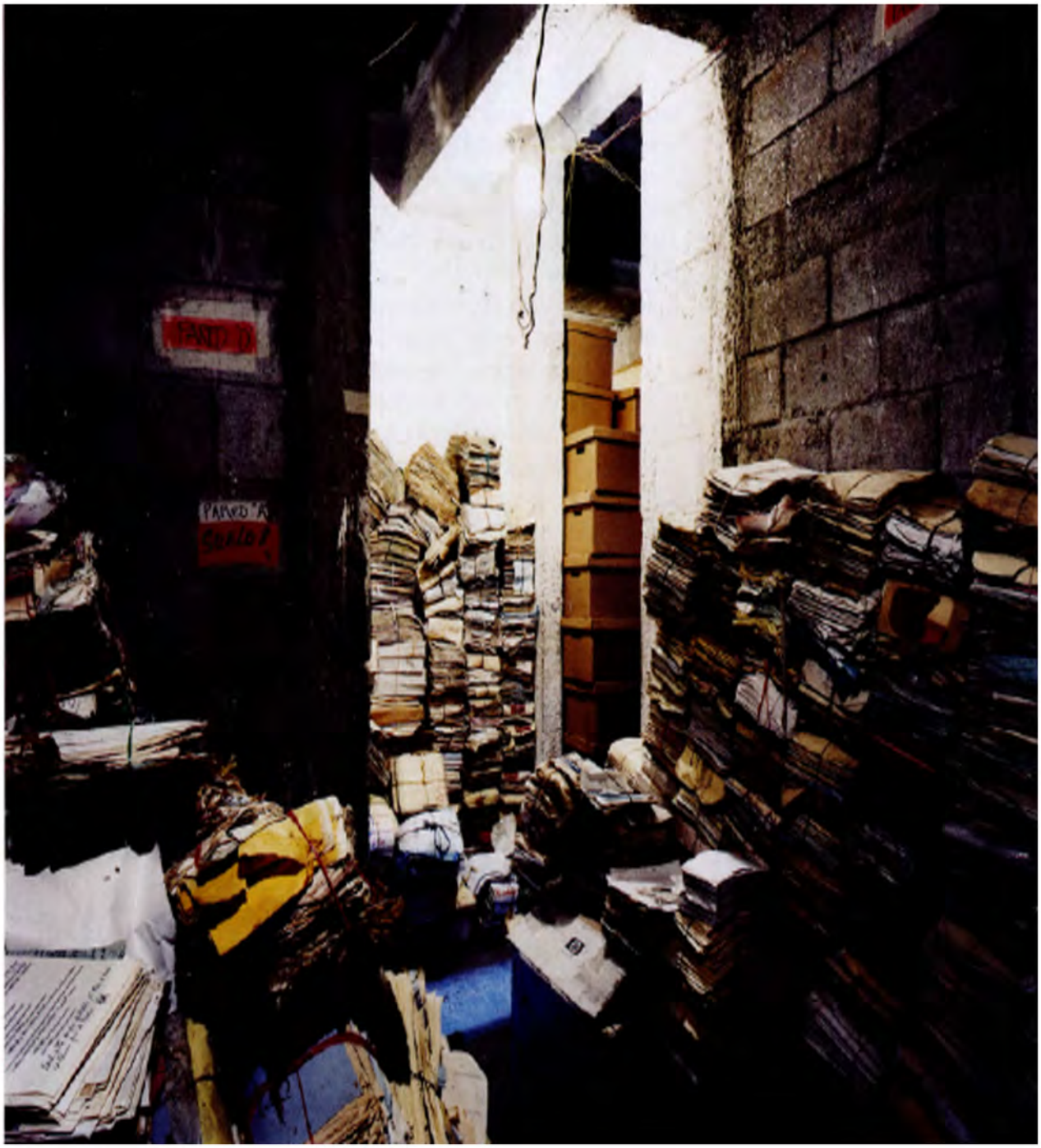
The intellectual picture of the atmosphere of craftsmanship from which the storyteller comes has perhaps never been sketched in such a signfilcant way as by Paul Valéry. He speaks of the perfect things in nature, flawless pearls, full-bodied, mature wines, truly developed creatures, and calls them the precious product of a long chain of causes similar to one another. The accumulation of such causes has its temporal limit only at perfection. This patient process of nature, Valéry continues, was once imitated by men. Miniatures, ivory carvings, elabourated to the point of greatest perfection, stones that are perfect in polish and engraving, lacquer work or paintings in which a series of thin, transparent layers are placed on top of the other - all these products of sustained, sacrificing effort are vanishing, and the time is past in which time does not matter. Modern man no longer works at what cannot be abbreviated.

Walter Benjamin. *The Story Teller: Reflections of the work of Nikolai Leskov.*

Fazal Sheikh (from The Victor Weeps: 1998)

I don't see the ruin as a negative thing. First of all, it is not a thing. How can one love anything else? One can love a monument, a buliding, an institution, only in the experience of its own fragility: it was not always there, it will not always be there, it is finite. And it is because of all this that I love it in its finitude, through birth and death, for its ghosts and the silhouette of its ruin, and of mine - which it already is, or already prefigures. How else can we love except in this finitude? Where would the right to love, or indeed the love of right, emerge from if not here?

Jacques Derrida, Force de Loi: Le Fondement Mystique de L'Autorité (Force of Law: The Mystical Foundations of Authority) [reviewer's translation].



Bundles of Police Records that have not yet been scanned or catalogued. Misty Keasler: 2007.

Anyone perusing the police documents quickly perceives a habit of writing that sounds strange to the ear - the persistent use of the passive voice to describe everything. Police do not kidnap suspects: a suspect is "kidnapped" (se secuestro). Security forces do not assassinate; the victim is shot and killed (se disparo y se murio). A police report from November 1983 reveals that this grammatical tic was a matter not of dialect but of deliberate choice when one agent, describing his surveillance outside the home of a suspect, slips unchararacteristically into the first person. "Approaching the house, I was able to observe a young woman", he writes, "who, when she noticed my presence, jumped up and looked at me suspiciously, so i decided to retreat." This section of the report is cordoned off in red ink and a note is written in the margis: "Never personify- the third person must always be used."

Harpers Magazine. December 2007. The atrocity Files: Deciphering the archives of Guatemala's dirty war. By Kate Doyle.