



## *critical reviews of history exhibit practice in an age of ubiquitous display*

SUNDAY, JULY 25, 2010

### You give me fever?

I would like to consider a selection of contemporary artists who utilize archives and history in their work as a method of reconstituting the meaning of history, past, place, identity, exhibitry and authorship. Since there are many interesting artists working with history and archives I will concentrate on a couple and continue with more in my future reviews.

I had the opportunity to see the exhibition "[Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art](#)" in the spring of 2008 at the [International Center of Photography](#) in New York City. A piece from the "Archive Fever" show titled *Intervista* (1998) by [Anri Sala](#) is a twenty-five minute documentary video which takes place in Tirana, Albania, several years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Returning home from his art studies in Paris, Sala finds a reel of processed 16mm film while helping his parents move into a new house. He takes the film back to Paris and restores it.



The footage is situated in communist Albania and shows his mother, Valdet, at about the age of thirty meeting Albanian communist leader Enver Hoxa and delivering a speech followed by an interview for the Communist Youth Alliance. Sala is unable to understand what his mother is saying in the interview because the audio reel is missing. With Valdet having very little memory of



### Off the Wall

is sponsored by the [National Council on Public History](#) as a way to expand critical discussion among public historians about the growing range of contemporary historical display.

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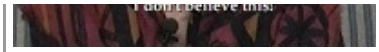
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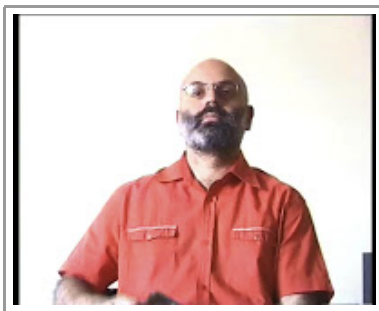
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the interview, Sala must search for other sources of information to uncover the mysteriously missing audio. Sala questions the film interviewer and several political officials that were present at Valdet's interview, but he is still unable to get any worthwhile information. In a final attempt, Sala takes the film reel to a school for the deaf and a team of people agree to work with him on deciphering his mother's words by reading her lips. The film continues with the newly translated audio subtitled over the original footage and interspersed with conversations of Sala and his mom in the present day watching the restored film.

The film exists in the present while also living as a historical document of communist Albania and revealing his mother's forgotten past. She goes through stages of denial, embarrassment and eventual acceptance of the historical footage, which implicates her as a youth party member saying the predictable slogans of the Communist Albanian era.



Another piece in the "Archive Fever" exhibition by artist [Lamia Joreige](#) titled [Objects of War](#) (2000-2006) consists of various video testimonials from Lebanese citizens living in Lebanon during the fifteen year

Lebanese War. Joreige has each of the interviewees choose a personal object that reminds them of the war and then describe their memories associated with the object and of that time.

Both the object and the testimonial of the individual act as evidence. The collection of videos seemingly attempts to paint a picture of a collective experience of those living through the Lebanese War. However, while each account is true to the individual recounting it, the intention of the archive is not to provide a statement of truth. Rather, its purpose is to show a diversity of discourses and testaments of what happened during the war. This highlights the question of how accurate history can be with devastating events such as war when personal experiences can be so wide ranging.

The title of the ICP exhibition "Archive Fever" was appropriated from a paper delivered by French philosopher Jacques Derrida at a conference at the Freud House in London in 1994. In the paper Derrida traces the etymology of the word "archive" to its Greek origin, "arkhe," to illustrate the power structure of the archive.

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Here, documents are collected and sorted into an ideal system and put into a repository, which are presided over by an authority. The documents are seemingly publicly accessible yet sheltered away. Those entrusted to watch over the documents yield the power to interpret them as they please.

The “fever” of the archive Derrida refers to is not so much an obsession with using the archive as it is with presiding over it and looking for an absolute beginning. The search is infinitesimal and Derrida relates the repetition in archiving to the Freudian death drive. He states that archive fever (*mal d’archive*) is a desire to return to the origin, the most archaic place that preceded our birth. In a sense, looking for a way to obsessively memorialize or restage something/oneself is a means of moving toward an earlier stage of life. Derrida theorizes that this tendency of archive fever would also cross over into computer information technology, especially email.

The relationship between the title of the exhibition and Derrida’s theoretical paper suggests parallels with artists attempting to undermine the authoritative power of the archive and make information democratically accessible to the public. With grand hopes of emancipating a forgotten past, the pieces are still trapped within the art institution that houses them, another kind of archivist. The pieces might also be considered to invoke nostalgia and an aestheticizing of the past (and illustrate archive fever itself?). Regardless, I think that the attempts to produce an alternate archive, as shown with *Intervista* and *Objects of War*, make poetic and powerful attempts to shake up and redefine history.

*Intervista* and *Objects of War* are examples of alternative historical displays that I believe are contemporary and engaging compared to many historical site-seeing exhibits that I have seen in my travels. While art exhibits like “Archive Fever” may not be taken totally seriously as places to learn about history, I think that we are seeing increasingly blurred lines within historical exhibits. Many exhibits are taking the form of becoming more interactive, creating immersive environments, and using art and performance to engage their audiences. Historical exhibits have often used art such as sculptures to mark a place of importance and provide a monument to memorialize an event. This kind of exhibitry seems slightly outmoded to me and I think there will be an increasing trend toward more interactive installations and video based exhibits.

- Melissa Boyajian

Posted by [Off the Wall Editors](#) at [7:36 PM](#)



[hisisttepokrest](#)



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Labels: [archive fever](#), [archives](#), [photography](#), [video](#)**4 comments:****Wesley** [July 29, 2010 at 6:12 PM](#)

Melissa,

Your final comments on trends in historical exhibits are interesting, especially if one adds public art to the mix.

In Spring 2010, my artist collective John Q presented Memory Flash, a series of public interventions in Atlanta, GA. Framed by notions of discursive memorials and contemporary public art practices, the event used archival materials to highlight four queer historical moments in their original locations as a way of producing new memories.

Our essay on discursive memorials and public spaces can be found online at Southern Spaces ([www.southernspaces.org](http://www.southernspaces.org)), a multimedia, interdisciplinary journal published by Emory University.

Kindest regards,  
Wesley Chenault

[Reply](#)**Off the Wall Editors** [July 30, 2010 at 6:04 AM](#)

Posted on behalf of Modupe Labode -

Thank you, Melissa, for this thought-provoking post. I'm heading over to my local library to check out a copy of the catalogue.

I followed the link and watched an interview from Objects of War in which Bassam Kahwaji described, with a great deal of specificity and insight, the National Panasonic radio which his father used during Lebanon's Civil War. As Melissa notes, many people may not take contemporary art exhibitions seriously as sites of historical education, but I believe that many viewers learn a great deal about the people of Lebanon by watching and listening to Kahwaji as he discusses his father and the radio. Moreover, because people in the U.S. tend to be preoccupied with our national history, an exhibition like this might be one of the few public venues in which visitors encounter non-U.S. history. I found myself wondering what makes this "art" and not "oral history."

*6 years ago*

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Research...  
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**Bursting @ the Seams**  
Textile Workshop March  
20th in Brockville  
*8 years ago*

**The Bygone Object**  
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Good Idea for Today's  
History Sites  
*8 years ago*

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Perhaps it is the artist's specific intent, which was to provide a space for people to reveal memories which aren't captured in official records or history books. Unlike oral histories, the interviewer is absent, there is little context, and by watching a person recount the past, we are forced to acknowledge that this is a project about recovering one individual's memory of a long civil war, as mediated by the radio. I am sure that for Lebanese viewers this project has meanings that are lost on me. As an American, with no knowledge of Arabic or Lebanese history, there are sharp limits to my understanding of Bassam Kahwaji's testimony--I have no understanding of his particular accent, the meaning of his dress, or other resonances of what he's really saying. Even with these limits, I understand that Kahwaji was discussing something that he might not bring up in ordinary conversation. A sense of vulnerability, emotion, and testimony comes through the film. Perhaps the vulnerability, the sense of riskiness, and artist's putting something out in public for alternate interpretations are also factors that distinguish this piece as "art." Certainly these elements can and do occur in historical exhibitions, but I don't think that they are considered necessary or sometimes even desirable. But like Melissa, I agree that there is a great deal about exhibiting history (and the nature of the past) that can be gleaned from this sort of contemporary art. Perhaps it's time for more dialogue about memory and history between public historians and artists.

- Modupe Labode

[Reply](#)



[melissa boyajian](#) [July 31, 2010 at 5:39 AM](#)

Wesley,

Thank you for your comments and as a matter of fact the other area I was interested in exploring for this blog happens to be queer archives. I will definitely check out your artist collective and southernspaces.org.

Best,

Melissa

[Reply](#)



[CATHY STANTON](#) [August 2, 2010 at 4:58 PM](#)

Following on Modupe's comments, it occurs to me that public historians also have something to learn from oral historians' discussions about the aesthetics of doing and presenting oral

histories - for example, Charlie Hardy's work on sound as art and the art of working with sound. Here's one recent piece by him on the subject:

“Painting in Sound: Aural History and Audio Art,” *Oral History: The Challenges of Dialogue*. Marta Kurkowska-Budzan and Krysztof Zamorski, eds. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2009): 147-67.

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