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### Specific Constellations: Lacunae and the Postmodern Archivist Tendency

The Post-war era saw significant change in the way artists work with, around and within the increasingly fluid structure of the contemporary archive. Scholars like Hal Foster identify a shift from 19<sup>th</sup> century institutional approaches<sup>1</sup> to emerging methods that fundamentally de-center history, revealing information gaps (or *lacunae*<sup>2</sup>) of investigative importance. Newer tactics allow artists to use the once-monumental, sterile structure of the archive to deconstruct and re-contextualize masses of information and their relationship to cultural memory. Lost or displaced information becomes central to these contemporary archivist tendencies, which salvages them from institutional entombment by means of their fluid, active form of inquiry (Merewether 10). Reconsidering the static nature of the archive allows examination of specific constellations<sup>3</sup> of information—spontaneous networks uncovered in the process of information accretion.

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<sup>1</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> (and early 20<sup>th</sup>) century archive was centered on process, physicality and an attempt to solidify subjectively ‘important’ material in monumental form. Emphasis was placed on the preservation of data that passed out of active use, or on the crystallization of ‘accurate’ history (Merewether 10, 12) (Spieker ix, xi).

<sup>2</sup> Scholar-artist Renee Green uses the term “lacunae” to identify a particular “negation in abundance” that characterizes archival structures (and masses of material in general). When faced with an avalanche of data, impossible to process due to its consumptive volume, material gets cross-canceled, limited and conjoined with absence. The lacunae, then, are “holes which occur in the midst of densities of information, as well as amidst their lack... [lacunae] allude to that which is beyond understanding, and understanding can be thought here in terms of how it might be possible to perceive as well as the boundaries of such perception” (Merewether 49). Lacunae inadvertently reveal the location of limitation, the boundary of information fatigue, while revealing in-between spaces in a broader sense. Voids may exist between the data that’s included and excluded, between what is said and how it is received and understood—even between social, cultural and political distances.

<sup>3</sup> “Specific constellations” are clusters of context-bound clues, deriving meaning from the topography in which they are found, with relation to space, place and time (Spieker 19). Spieker likens these information (or elemental)

These data constellations are composed of context-bound clues, themselves forming networks within networks. Treatment of the archive as *process* (not interment<sup>4</sup>) is primary to artists like Renee Green and impacts my current, quasi-archival series, *The Cascade*. When the archive transitions from storehouse to investigative platform, it allows for the personal and obscure—engaging remix, recombination and mutation, mediating cultural transmission through relation and collation. By taking lacunae into consideration when producing stills for *The Cascade*, I analyze specific constellations that emerge, making use of clusters and voids as a fundamental field of exploration.

In 2004, Hal Foster identified this shift in archival approach as a significant impulse in contemporary art, embodied by a range of international artists, including Renee Green, who “share a notion of artistic practice as an idiosyncratic probing into particular features, objects and events in modern art, philosophy and history” (Merewether 143). This emergent, pervasive desire to deal with information, its infinite sources and myriad recombinations, and even the nature of historicity itself, allows artists like Green to mount a discourse in alternative history. This “will to relate,” where bodies of work “probe a misplaced past” through collation (and even appropriation) of its signs, (Merewether 145) become crucial to Green and other artists-as-archivists.<sup>5</sup> For Foster, “archival artists seek to make historical information, often lost or

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networks to the way Dr. Rudolf Virchow treated pathological tissue: “in exactly the way that an archaeologist treats a fragment he finds in the ground or the way that a nineteenth century philologist treated words as discrete, isolated pieces of evidence that can be understood only in the context of the place (and the time) where they were detected, a place where they lie side by side with other discrete objects in specific constellations” (Spieker 19).

<sup>4</sup> Formerly an act of “entombing” dead, non-circulating materials, archiving became a monument of memory and history: dry, inactive, fetishizing linear time (and reality) as a giant filing cabinet (Spieker ix, 1).

<sup>5</sup> Other artists-as-archivists named by Foster include Douglas Gordon, Tacita Dean, Thomas Hirschhorn, Liam Gillick and Mark Dion (Merewether 143). Likewise, scholar Sven Spieker identifies Andy Warhol and Ilya Kabokov

displaced, physically present. To this end they elaborate on the found image, object and text, and favor the installation format” (Merewether 143).

Green approaches the archive as a mutable negative space. The distance between events and their reinterpretation, and holes left by data fatigue and exclusion, become points of dialogue. Building work that emphasizes these gaps, or lacunae, enables Green to manipulate a tangled mesh of perception (personal and cultural) which questions the role of site and non-site in artwork; a kind of archival landscape. Works like *Partially Buried in Three Parts* (1999) investigate the capacity of media to retain (or regain) access to lost, displaced or politically excluded information, while questioning how the quasi-archival landscape of site/non-site function in this regard.<sup>6</sup> Essentially, Green is “finding what isn’t being sought” (Merewether 49). *Partially Buried...* is largely filmic; an archive of collated cultural phenomena, filtered through the artist. She says of the work, “each part is an overlapping exploration of ways in which we attempt to reinterpret the past...” (Merewether 50).

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(among others) as Postmodern archivists making use of the archival promise of time as sensory, experiential place (Spieker ix, 3).

<sup>6</sup> Many of Green’s pieces, like *Partially Buried...* start with a “genealogical trace” tied to the artist as an individual-- in this case, her childhood and her mother’s professorship at Kent State (Merewether 50). The work then takes on external associations, including the student protest of the bombings in Cambodia, which permanently marked the Smithsonian work, tying it to four students killed on campus in 1970. Since no action was taken against the guardsmen involved, the fate of the students (and cultural remembrance of their deaths) is tied to a land-arts work which bears the date of their demise, and which itself now only exists as photo documentation, the structure having since been demolished (LUDB).

Thus, the photographic document is the only remaining tie to a series of memory-resident events. Green makes effective use of the absentia by including the remnant photos in *Partially Buried...* She copies the documents from a book, intentionally leaving her hand in the re-photograph, thus inserting herself into the image (and back into the memory), while reminding the viewer the original marker of the massacre now exists as archived media (Coulter-Smith). In this way, media allows the viewer to *regain* a sense of access to past events. It also suggests the way media affects personal and social memory. Information is retained and memories may be generated or reclaimed through the use of photography, video, and related sources (Merewether 53).

Part 1 ties Robert Smithson's now extinct land-arts work, *Partially Buried Woodshed*,<sup>7</sup> to Green's personal relationship with Kent State, her childhood in the 1970s and the performance of land-art as ruin, probing notions of "sites of memory" and "site specific work" as functional spaces (Merewether 50). Contemplating *Woodshed* triggers an avalanche of relational memories, indicating the site serves as an active platform, further imagined through *Partially Buried in Three Parts*. Green probes the essential nature of the missing (geographical and spatial) in Smithson's work<sup>8</sup>, its transformation as non-data through memory and distance, and its relationship to other time-triggered events of the 1970s.<sup>9</sup>

Part 3 blurs boundaries between past and present, proximity and distance, the self and the other (Merewether 50) by using photographs Green took in Korea. Also based in new media, this part of the virtual archive manifests "the complexities of how we find ourselves entangled in relationships to countries, nations, nationalities and people, to locations in time, and to the ensuing identifications" (Merewether 52). All three parts are concerned with how we reinterpret

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<sup>7</sup> Robert Smithson built the site-specific work, *Partially Buried Woodshed*, at Kent State University in 1970. In May of that same year, four students were shot attending a protest rally and the building was tagged with the phrase "May 4, 1970," causing the *Woodshed* to take on significant new meaning and function (Merewether 50). The *Woodshed* is physically extinct, though it exists (and is known) through photographic documents—another call-out to Green's angled use of the archive. What does it mean to examine works whose existence is now predicated on the document, the record?

<sup>8</sup> By probing the essential nature of missing information (in this case, the literal destruction of Smithson's land-arts work), Green also suggests the importance of examining other lost or displaced pieces of information (in some cases, seeking what is not even being sought). This includes the physical erasure of objects, software or filmic data loss and information excluded from preservation.

<sup>9</sup> Part 2 of *Partially Buried in Three Parts* examines the United States as imagined and experienced from afar (during the 1970s), raising questions of nationality, geographical place and location-tied sensory experience (Merewether 50).

the past and how space-place<sup>10</sup> functions in the contemporary field where a “sense of place and time can depend largely on where one’s computer screen is”<sup>11</sup> and the effect of digitization (or archivization) on memory (Merewether 50). These data accumulations form specific clusters, with relationships between photographic entries—which begs the question: does the archival format allow us to regain the missing, or to mediate history through individual filters? Green’s oblique answer is tied to the alternate and overlapping accounts she assembles.

Another of Green’s works exhibiting archivist sensibilities is *Some Chance Operations* (1998), which behaves as “archival form in ruin: film as convincing and porous container” (Merewether 52).<sup>12</sup> *Chance* makes use of filmic images, referencing lost data in ‘archival’ format. It questions how we retain history, memory and associations with (and within) time and

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<sup>10</sup> I use “space-place” to allude to scholar Marcus Doel’s assertion that located encounters reside in a fluid relationship between *space* and *place*. Doel suggests that space is actually a “post-structural form within which the event of seeing takes place,” whereas “place is an event: it is verbal rather than nounal, a becoming rather than a being” (Doel qtd. in Richardson 63). Place, then, is not strictly geographical or physical, but is itself an event of perception and understanding, made possible through conceptualizations that occur in *space*. I would argue that the relationship between space, place and the images tied to our notion of physical space and location become complicated and hypertextual in the information era.

<sup>11</sup> Green’s compelling suggestion that our “sense of place and time” can be affected by, or mediated through, a digitized experience is a thread that runs through current discourse on Post-Postmodernism, or “Digimodernism” (Merewether 50) (Kirby). The ubiquitous nature of computer connectivity and digital interaction shifts our understanding of past, present and future (especially since digital activity takes place in a constant *present*, continuously reconfigured by database queries and information packets) (Kirby). Even the nature of the text itself has changed, relying more on interactivity, individual engagement and a sense of the “non-reproducible and evanescent” moment, always in a state of flux, with no fixed location and no hardwired chronological anchor (Kirby). In fact, simply sitting in front of a computer screen allows access to nearly any point on earth, almost any moment in time and an infinite number of ideas, people, places, events and considerations in a single click. Information itself, and our ability to access it, can alter our sense of place, time and identity.

<sup>12</sup> *Some Chance Operations* is a time-based installation that combines aspects of film, video and photography as a multilayered experience (E-Flux). The project explores the nature of the filmic archive as an “unstable memory receptacle that can vanish” both physically and from the minds of viewers over time (Jaschke). Green focuses on the lost and/or forgotten films of Italian filmmaker Elvira Notari and whether or not Italian-American immigrants have vague or distorted memories of the original film contents. The once-popular films have developed lacunae that punch through the original format to emerge as ephemeral traces (Jaschke).

how the archive plays a role in remembering. The archive seems to function as a practice of ordering in the chaos of modernity—a bastion against forgetting and loss, recalling scholar Benjamin Buchloch’s question about “the impact of the photographic image on the construction of historical memory” (Merewether 91).<sup>13</sup> For Buchloch, the photo devastates memory—a point Green inverts by using filmic and photographic installations.<sup>14</sup> For Green, building work that exposes (and integrates) lacunae is necessary for space-place investigation. Lacunae, therefore, are active platforms of manipulable negative space—making the transition from passive to active possible.

These voids—variously described by Foster and Green, can function as spaces in which Postmodern archival work takes place, especially when it involves preproduction and remix “concerned less with absolute origins than with obscure traces” (Merewether 144). Artists are freed to draw from the corpus of mass culture, itself a giant archive,<sup>15</sup> constructing Foster’s idea of “alternative knowledge” or “counter-memory” using sampling, sharing and even appropriation (Merewether 144). More than just monikers of data fatigue or political exclusion, they are the

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<sup>13</sup> Buchloch sees the archive as a model of historical memory, representative of a kind of continuity of experience: an anomic, or social, archive. Image accumulation relates to collage and montage as method of investigating collective social memory through visual output. Context, dynamism, contingency, serialization are important aspects. These lead to a construction of meaning, rather than simple assembly of form. History is fundamentally de-centered and the archive becomes a sandbox for the construction of memory structures without particular emphasis on nostalgia (Merewether 99).

<sup>14</sup> Green questions the way the archive and memory can serve as an *active process* for continual reconsideration, rather than a process of entombment (Merewether 54), essentially a method of making the lacunae performative. Void becomes vital.

<sup>15</sup> Hal Foster identifies mass culture as an archival source of shared information. Artists like Douglas Gordon, who sample material from the cultural pool, using the films of Alfred Hitchcock and Martin Scorsese in a way that ensures recognition and legibility, while reframing the material as a process of counter-memory (Merewether 144). This also calls to mind scholar-activist Eli Pariser’s suggestion that within Postmodern convergence culture, specifically media flow, each participant is exposed to “a unique universe of information” as we navigate and extrapolate information and experience from the filtered mass cultural experience (Pariser 9).

fertile void where things take shape. Green asserts that her “probing of in-between spaces, which can appear to be holes, aporias, absences” leads to the production of pieces like *Partially Buried...* and *Chance* (Merewether 49)—and to the transitional space between these bodies of work, which she identifies as an “intersection of references” that occurs when she investigates “presence in what appears to be absence” (Merewether 52).<sup>16</sup>

Like Green’s work, my digital hybrid series, *The Cascade*, grapples with physical, social and imagined landscape as plastic archive, mediated through mass culture. In *The Cascade*, landscape is relative, performative. Tied to our sense of geography, time and shifting notions of history, it serves as a physical anchor and a philosophical boundary—the innate experience of linear time tied to the measurable boundary of social space. *The Cascade* engages landscape as a permeating condition—a collage of interpretive macro and micro understandings, always in a physical and socio-political state of flux. It constructs a hypertextuality of time, space, matter, and information, addressing the collapse of linearity and the generation of personal mythology.<sup>17</sup>

Rooted in a personal connection to the landscape of Southern California which permeates American television from the 1960s-80s, I excavate fluid instances of the conceptual space found in fleeting media backdrops. This transitory landscape punctuates television narratives, tied to production, reception and even a shared, macro-level cultural understanding of time and location.

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<sup>16</sup> Essentially, scholars like Foster, Green, Spieker and Buchloch recognize the archival impulse as method *and* methodology, incorporating intentional and inadvertent voids, a shift to an active process of accumulation and processing vs. the historical entombment of memory as history, changes in physical output (from archaic cabinets to installation and new media) and the ability to allow new context from the recombination of material. The archive has become a mediation of cultural transmission, relation and collation itself.

<sup>17</sup> As we encounter the data cascade, scholar Henry Jenkins suggests “each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow... transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives” (Jenkins 3).

*The Cascade* freezes a trace of this literal and ephemeral physicality in an instant—folding the moment back in on itself as distorted screen captures that undergo myriad transformations.

The stills that make up *The Cascade* form a virtual archive<sup>18</sup> that engages site, information and time relativity. It suspends geographic (and linear) traces as photographs once removed from their physical location by the original filming and again removed by the act of capturing a temporal instant.<sup>19</sup> The archived environments inhabit the actual, the imagined and the transient place of recollection, emblematic of a collapsed space conflating personal history, geologic reality and cultural production. Both an experienced and imagined sense of place adopt non-linear roles, existing within the relativity of deep digital space.<sup>20</sup>

The archival subtext is essential to the work's inherent topography and contingency. It emphasizes the non-precious nature of the accumulated still, using recombination and digital

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<sup>18</sup> I did not set out to make an archive. Instead, the specific constellations of *The Cascade* formed as a natural result of data accretion, becoming apparent over time. Thus, its quasi-archival nature emerged concurrently with its physical and performative structure (Spieker xi), like a feedback loop. My fascination with capturing, saving and cataloging frozen moments became an obsession, as did tracking their single-paned movements through layered manipulations, not unlike Foucault's idea of the dynamic archive “whose rules constitute themselves together with (at the same time as) that which they help formulate” (Spieker 12).

<sup>19</sup> I quite literally sit in front of the television, screening material while snapping rough shots with a cell phone camera. The camera has a short depth of field, resulting in data loss, moiré patterns and conflicting light sources. The stills then undergo digital manipulation. Some elements are drawn or produced using printmaking techniques, then folded back into the digital version. Stills are also output on paper, manipulated, re-scanned and returned to digital format.

<sup>20</sup> Characters and commerciality are de-emphasized in favor of transitional space (conflicting narrative time) and regional collision, though inevitably present. The project currently makes use of stills from *The A Team*, *Knight Rider*, *Emergency!* and *MacGyver*, filmed across Santa Clarita, Valencia, Topanga Canyon, Carson, the Antelope Valley and greater Los Angeles County, California. Clusters of related images emerge, yet resist narrative reading, forming their own alternative (shifting) history instead.



integration for emphasis.<sup>21</sup> Like Green's *Partially Buried*... the series unites varied, manipulated elements and takes into consideration the role of film as memory.<sup>22</sup>

As with Green's pieces, *The Cascade* becomes a platform of investigation, probing collective memory traced through layers of cultural transmission, (Spieker 87) emphasizing transitional moments and resulting lacunae. It makes use of serialization, multiplicity and image accumulation, allowing counter-memory to emerge as stills excavated from the "porous container" of film. These stills are linked via specific, emerging constellations—developing their own terrain as they adopt an archivist sensibility. The space between the original filming, its presentation as cultural object, its excavation and manipulation, and its relation to the past allow for a dematerialized ambiguity that underscores the distance between storytelling and internal cognizant space. The lacunae in *The Cascade* are voids between landscape and archive, mass culture and personal mythology, figuring prominently in the work and serving as the vital structure into which contingent constellations can grow.

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<sup>21</sup> Serialization, multiplicity and mutability are important within *The Cascade*, as with Green's works. As scholar Sven Spieker says of archival bases: "every picture can become the base for another layer of image," (Spieker 139) an idea of fundamental importance to the series. Each still becomes stretched, mutated, chopped and otherwise used as a base for the next transition, the next integration.

<sup>22</sup> Green says of this unique role, "many people's earliest recollections now include films and TV or films on TV or played by VCRs. Memories include social and private recollections—how old I was, who I was with, where I was. Films themselves not serve an indexing function to assist in gaining access to memory" (Merewether 53).

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