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Dossier "Resistance and normalization: uses of the past and cultural discourses in contemporary Catalonia"

The influence of contemporary art on the modern notion of archive*

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that contemporary art has played an essential role both in the transformation of contemporary archives and within the framework of the archival turn (for example, anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler discusses the archival turn in the context of colonial studies, and authors such as Terry Cook and Eric Ketelaar use the term in the field of archival science). More specifically, I will explore this influence from the viewpoint of different artistic movements before concluding with visual art and a case study of the installation *Arxiu d'arxius* (Archive of archives, 1998-2006), a personal archive by the Catalan artist Montserrat Soto. The aim is to analyse how art has both changed how documents are created and displayed and provided new ways of organizing information and transmitting cultural memory, especially with regard to documenting aspects of history associated with pain, oppression and war (generally drawing on oral memory) and with certain groups (women, slaves and minority indigenous communities) that have been excluded from the documentary repositories of traditional archives, whether due to institutional neglect or because they were inevitably silenced and censored.

To this end, I will first offer a brief overview of the origin and evolution of the concept of archive up to the present day, highlighting the main transformations it has undergone. I will then argue that contemporary art has engaged intensively with the idea of document storage and memory. Finally, building on these premises, I will analyse the three archives included in *Arxiu d'arxius* that are based on oral memory: the archive of mass graves from the Spanish Civil War; the archive of American slavery; and the archive of the Aboriginal Australian community.

Keywords

archival turn, oral memory, archives of war and oppression, Montserrat Soto, contemporary art

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La influència de l'art contemporani en la noció moderna d'arxiu

Resum

En aquest article argumento com l'art contemporani ha tingut un paper essencial en les transformacions de l'arxiu en la societat actual i en el marc del gir arxivístic (per exemple Ann Laura Stoler utilitza el terme des de l'antropologia en el context dels estudis colonials i autors com Terry Cook o Eric Ketelaar ho fan en el camp de l'arxivística). Més específicament, em proposo explorar aquesta influència des de diferents moviments artístics fins a arribar a l'art visual amb l'estudi de cas Arxiu d'arxius, de l'artista catalana Montserrat Soto. L'objectiu és analitzar com l'art modifica la manera de produir i visualitzar els documents i al mateix temps aporta noves maneres d'organitzar la informació i de transmetre la memòria cultural, especialment quan es tracta de documentar aspectes de la història que tenen a veure amb el dolor, l'opressió i la guerra (generalment relacionats amb la memòria oral), o bé quan es tracta de documentar determinats col·lectius (dones, esclaus o comunitats indígenes minoritàries) que no han format part dels repositoris documentals dels arxius tradicionals, sigui perquè han estat menystinguts pels poders institucionals o bé perquè han estat inevitablement condemnats al silenci i a la censura.

En primer lloc, exposo molt esquemàticament l'origen del concepte d'arxiu fins avui, per tal d'observar les seves transformacions. En segon lloc, argumento com des de l'art contemporani s'ha treballat intensament amb la idea d'emmagatzematge de documents i de memòria. Finalment, analitzo sota les premisses exposades anteriorment, l'obra Arxiu d'arxius (1998-2006): es tracta d'un arxiu personal que ha fet l'artista Montserrat Soto, en què s'han creat tres arxius vinculats a les fonts de memòria oral: l'arxiu de les fosses comunes de la Guerra Civil espanyola, l'arxiu dels esclaus d'Amèrica i l'arxiu dels aborígens australians.

Paraules clau

gir arxivístic, memòria oral, arxiu de guerra i opressió, Montserrat Soto, art contemporani

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Ceux qui, à un titre ou à un autre, connaissent l'horreur du passé ont le devoir d'élever leur voix contre une horreur autre, mais bien présente, se déroulant à quelques centaines de kilomètres, voire quelques dizaines de mètres de chez eux. Loin de rester prisonniers du passé, nous l'aurons mis au service du présent, comme la mémoire –et l'oubli –doivent se mettre au service de la justice.

(Tzvetan Todorov, *Les abus de la mémoire*)

The changes in how information is documented and archived today are largely related to the new context of the information and knowledge society. Recent times have witnessed profound changes in how we manage information and acquire knowledge, and this has led to a new social way of archiving culture.

The importance that new information society narratives have taken on has sparked an interdisciplinary debate that radically breaks with the classical definitions of archive and document championed in the field of archival studies. The Catalan artist Montserrat Soto (1961) has worked in the context of these paradigm shifts in both the concept of archive and new emerging archival cultures, using video and photography in her installations.

Thus, technological advances, the development of new hardware and software, and social movements both recent (eg hackers, open culture) and not so recent (eg post-colonialism, feminisms, sexual liberation, etc.) have all helped to enable a

new way of understanding both archives and documents and the traditional definitions thereof. The polysemic nature of the archive stems from its dual meaning of both origin or beginning and the actual building in which the superior magistrates once lived. The distinction between this physical space (the building where the documents of power are kept) and the sources of memory is critical in the work *Arxiu d'arxius* (Archive of archives), which Soto completed over the course of eight years, between 1998 and 2006.

Today, new ways of creating documents and archiving information have emerged involving interfaces that make it possible to display a wide variety of documents and formats. The influence of contemporary art on archives can be felt not only in how traditional archives are conceptualized and represented, but also in the transition involved in moving from an administrative and bureaucratic understanding of archives to a creative one that suggests new ways of organizing, representing and displaying information. Moreover, within this process, the concept of information itself has been modified: whereas it once adhered to a centralist and Euro-centric view, it now encompasses – and concerns itself with – the peripheries (that is, everything that has been excluded from the archive for different reasons: situations of war, censorship, dictatorships, or the documentation of subordinate identities, among others).

If we trace the term back to its Greek origin, we can see how the archive was both the home of the powerful (commandment)



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and the origin and beginning (commencement) (Derrida, 1995). In subsequent Western thought, archives have often been associated with the *logos*. This tandem between the principle and the word has led to an association of ideas among terms that designate different things. It has also led to a specific way of transmitting memory and knowledge, generally by means of the written word. It was this fact that inspired Soto's search to establish classifications within different types of memory. That, in turn, allowed her to link memory to absence, presence and the image.

The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard has proposed, as a counterpoint to the archive, the family space of the *domus*: where emotions, feelings and issues of a more private nature take place. Thus, the limits between the archive, which occupies a central position, and its periphery, between the public sphere (official documents in the archive) and the private one (documents ignored or censored by the authorities), are clearly defined.

This distinction, as discussed below, is relevant to the archives that Soto has created, especially with regard to her conceptualization of those sources of memory (generated in this hidden space beyond the glare of the public light) that have been neglected by political and/or cultural institutions. She thus calls the archives of oral memory that she has created *Secrets*, and they bear a certain relationship to the space of private memory (to personal accounts and to the memories of family members killed in a war), which, in turn, is inextricably linked to the space of emotions and attachments.

Very briefly, the modern archive evolved as something impenetrable, a form of control, an arsenal for the authorities. It was an archive shrouded in secrecy and inaccessibility that used powerful sorting systems to organize information based on ideas of rationality and progress. Indeed, it was not until the year 1860 that governments chose to open their archives to historians and researchers. This decision gave rise to the figure of the archivist (information professional). At the time, archives were still strongly bureaucratic in nature.

The nineteenth century was also critical to the formulation of two fundamental rules of archival science: the principle of provenance and respect for origin. When jointly applied, these principles ensure that the original order of documents is reproduced in accordance with a relationship of dependence and interrelationship between groups of documents that is faithful to their natural order or origin. In 1950, the International Council on Archives (ICA) was created with the support of UNESCO, among other things, to raise awareness of the role of archives in the construction of cultural memory and of their contribution to the conservation of world heritage. However, it was not until 2003 that UNESCO explicitly recognized, in a convention, the need to

safeguard intangible cultural heritage in order to ensure respect for the cultural heritage of communities, groups and individuals..

This article aims to provide neither a detailed history of archives nor a timeline of archival theory, despite the importance of such basic historical knowledge to understanding the evolution of archives in recent times. Likewise, I will not attempt to analyse the importance that archives have had as objects of representation and conceptualization from a contemporary art perspective.¹ Instead, the aim of this article is to examine the influence that contemporary art has had on changes in archives, specifically in situations of oppression and war in which personal accounts and records have not been documented. To achieve this, I will focus on the concepts introduced in the preceding section: the idea of storage and physical space and the concept of the sources of memory.

Generally speaking, contemporary art has had a significant influence on the transformation of modern archives and their transition towards a new way of creating and displaying documents. Avant-garde movements can be described as pushing the limits of language: first, they have contributed to modifying the idea of the modern archive, how it is represented and conceptualized; second, they have done this based on the ideas of temporality, memory, and language. The Surrealist movement was a direct critique of the principles of provenance and original order inherent in the traditional understanding of archives (Spieker, 2008). It modified the image-text relationship, as well as the temporality between objects and elements. In contrast, Dadaism worked with the concepts of division and fragmentation based on an archaeology and reconstruction of the past, shattering the ideas of order, control, and power implicit in the archival principles of precedence and the natural order of documents (Spieker, 2008). In Dadaism, the idea of decontextualization was reinforced through the introduction of collage and the recycling of assorted materials to create different types of documents. Finally, performance art – or happenings – introduced the concepts of performance, immediacy and performativity to archives, endowing them with a strong subjective bent and a political positioning (Hart & Phelan, 1996). In the cultural context, performance art has strongly influenced the changes in the notions of archive and document, making it possible to establish connections between the rights of a given culture and its intangible cultural heritage and linking ritual and technology (Taylor, 2003). At the same time, it broke with disciplines and critiqued institutional hierarchization, advocating instead different uses of language, a shift from object to action, and the idea of process (eg Gertz: culture as “an acted document”).

1. See recent publications on the topic, such as the book by Anna Maria Guasch *Arte y archivo 1920-2010*.



From a different analytical perspective, document storage has been a recurring idea in the work of many artists (Guasch, 2011). In his work *612 Time Capsules*, Andy Warhol filled cardboard boxes with a wide variety of mundane personal items. The boxes were then sealed and dated to create a registry. Warhol used them to build a monumental archive that was at once private and social and that bore witness to his everyday personal and professional life.

Whereas Warhol explored the idea of the archive in relation to time, in the 1990s, the artist Candida Höfer used photography to represent archival imagery in relation to space. Her photographs depict institutional buildings as emblematic apparatuses of power (eg Dublin Library, the Rijksmuseum archive). These works contrast with those of Martha Rosler, in which small symbolic details are used to underscore the connection between archives and daily life, linking the public and private spheres (Spieker, 2008).

In analysing archives, it is important to note the work of artists who have, even if involuntarily, helped to shape the distinction between collection (the storage of documents) and archive (the organization of documents). This distinction is critical to archival theory and its implementation in classification systems and documentary languages (which are absent from the idea of a collection of objects). In this regard, attention might be called to the work of the French artist Christian Boltanski (1944), who has sought to highlight the relationship between archives and memory. To do this, he explores the limits of documents, integrating the personal items of anonymous and absent owners. He thus replaces the vocabulary of documentary signs with symbolic language. In *Archives de l'année 1987 du journal "El caso"*, he gathers photographs of murderers, victims and missing persons from the archives of the newspaper "El Caso" in a single place. In both *Le réserve des suisses morts* (1995) and his installations on holocaust victims, he has moreover explored the ideas of archive and memory in relation to the construction of identity, absence and death (Boltanski, 2006).

Finally, in the field of audiovisual documentaries, again in the context of the archival turn, scholars have pointed to the importance of Claude Lanzmann's film *Shoah* (1986), both for its narration of the holocaust's past by means of personal testimonies and for calling attention to the absence of archives in the reconstruction of certain traumatic past events (this impossible archaeology has also been called the anti-archive) (Friedman, 2007).

In the Catalan context, the contemporary artist Montserrat Soto reflects on the emergence of new archival cultures in her work *Arxiu d'arxius* (1998-2006), a large private archive of photographs and videos compiled over the course of eight years. In it, she

explores the possible types of memory, starting with the notion of the archive as a transmitter of codes that is used not only to convey but also receive information: "We sought out the original sources and reinterpreted them, as an inspiration for understanding the new concepts of memory currently being developed with new technologies"² (Soto, 2007, p. 6).

In this article, I will focus exclusively on the treatment of oral memory, specifically, on the three archives that Soto created under the title "Secrets". "Secret 1" (The mass graves of the Spanish Civil War) is a video installation showing a mass grave being opened in Villamayor de los Montes (Burgos) in June 2003. The audio track reproduces the voices of the family members and children of one of the men who disappeared. In the video, his son offers a biography that was recorded one year after the grave was opened and the family recovered the body of the murdered father. His siblings' voices and the dialogues were recorded as the family recovered its lost memory. The bodies were exhumed by a team of 46 archaeologists, sociologists and anthropologists. Soto was able to film the process, and it is shown together with the narrated testimonies.

The second part of the exhibit is "Secret 2", a video installation about slavery in the United States that gives a visual language to the original voices of the people interviewed. The drive to record the voices of former slaves began in 1929 as a private initiative. It culminated in an archive created by the US government under Franklin Delano Roosevelt between 1936 and 1938. Today, the archive is kept at the Library of Congress in Washington. Soto's archive draws on the project *Born in Slavery*, which aimed to prevent the stories of the last American slaves from being lost forever. Soto documents the accounts of the former slaves based on typed letters, such as the one below:

"Yassum, I kin tell you things about slavery times dat would make yo' blood bile, but dey's too turrible. I jus' tries to forgit.

"I could tell you 'bout bein' run myself wid dem nigger dogs, but I ain't gwineter do it (...) I ain't never tol' nobody all dis an' ain't gwine tell you no mo'. Amy Chapman" (in Soto, 2007)

Finally, the third part of the exhibit is "Secret 3", an archive about the Aboriginal Australian community. Also an audiovisual document, it includes the reading at the 2011 Barcelona Poetry Festival by the Aboriginal poet Lionel G. Fogarty, born on the Cherbourg Aboriginal Reserve (Australia). In this case, the oral memory consists of, first, the transmission of the community's historical past through the sharing of dreams – the community lacked a written language – in the immediate present, and, second, the oppression of the Aborigines forced to live under harsh

2. Except where otherwise noted, all translations are the author's own.



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government control on a reservation. Because the Aborigines were nearly wiped out, many of their languages have been lost (whereas in 1788 there were some 700 tribes speaking 250 languages, by 2000, only 20 to 25 languages were actively being taught to children) (Soto, 2007).

The oral memory in *Arxiu d'arxius* is an oppressed, forgotten and damaged memory. Indeed, for Soto, when oral memory is sealed in a documentary archive, it loses its inherent spontaneity, freshness and creativity. However, such archiving makes it possible to record things that would otherwise soon be lost. Thus, the family and domestic sphere (the *domus*) – eg people's private lives and the memory of a loved one kidnapped and killed by the pro-Franco forces during the war – enable the construction of an archive that takes into account all that which previously existed only at the margins, hidden and forgotten, thereby allowing us to record information from history (or from a history) that was otherwise doomed to fade away forever, to be censored during the dictatorship with the ensuing repercussions. Ingenuousness, fear and self-censorship also play an important role in the perception and experience of war. The transitions have led people to believe that the dictatorship (in the case of the first archive) and the slave system (in the case of the second) were lesser evils (Soto, 2007). . Thus, orality cannot be pursued in periods of oppression and trauma. Instead, it is reserved and stored. In the case of the archive of the Aboriginal Australians, oral memory was recovered through the community's own transmissions, which were not broken by the pain it endured. However, the community itself was repressed, invaded and all but annihilated (its rights were not recognized until 1976) (Soto, 2007).

In archives of situations of oppression and war, oral memory is not recorded until years after the events occur. Fear, threats and oppression cause people to turn to orality to safeguard their memories against oblivion (Soto, 2007). In Spain, the process of reconstructing memory began quite late due to the fear during the war and post-war period and the need to overcome the horror itself. As a result, much information has been lost: graves are now being reopened, and the written documentation of the military tribunals and firing squads is being reviewed (Soto, 2006). The self-amnesty granted in the decree of 23 September 1939 declared that the murders committed between 14 April and 18 July 1936 by members of the National Movement were not crimes. Moreover, the political transition to a parliamentary monarchy legitimated by the 1978 constitution cemented silence as the price for basic freedoms (Soto, 2007).

In this case study, I used the analytical framework of philosophical postmodernism as applied to information science, drawing on Ketelaar's work on archives in the post-custodial era and the new documentary formats resulting therefrom to narrow the focus of this theoretical substrate to archives. Additionally, I built on the phenomenon of the archival turn and Stoler's contributions in

the field of postcolonial studies to offer a perspective that is at once anthropological and epistemological, focusing on people and oral accounts as sources of knowledge and memory. This anthropological and epistemological approach to reviewing archives makes it possible to document these identities, so often rendered invisible, and to analyse them as a source of memory.

To address the relationship between oral sources of memory and archives, I focused on research on oral memory as intangible heritage (Solanilla, 2009). This line of research makes it possible to establish links between oral memory and new technologies. At the same time, it highlights the relationship between personal memories and the Internet and memorial websites. Recording oral memory is a particularly complex task with traditional archives (both conceptually and formally), but it is increasingly common in the new social forms of archiving information. This brings questions of truthfulness versus falsification and the univocity of the original document and primary sources of history into play.

The archives mentioned here use new technologies and heterogeneous documentary formats (video, audio, analogue photography, digital images, projected text, printed documents, catalogues, installations, art exhibits). They thus represent a different understanding of the archival document from that of modern archives. Everything confined to the margins under the modern concept of archive (eg gender, colonialism, ethnicity) is here part of the cultural memory of communities and individuals.

In this article, I have focused on the work *Arxiu d'arxius* by the Catalan artist Montserrat Soto, which both explores the double meaning of archive as both a physical space for storage and a source of memory and presents the archive as a selective agent that determines what should be remembered and preserved. It is an archive made with audio media (the sound of water, the voices of the witnesses, the poetry reading), text (the police records from the Central Prison in Burgos, the typed letters of former American slaves, printed verses of poetry), and visual media (images of the first-person accounts, the film of the archaeological exhumation of the mass grave, images from the Barcelona Poetry Festival, photographs of the former slaves). New technologies are then used to integrate this wide range of formats into a coherent whole. Finally, the archive is displayed as an audiovisual installation both at museums and art centres (physical spaces) and online (virtual space).

Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1994) triggered a proliferation of publications on the subject of archives in a wide variety of fields, in which both anthropology and contemporary art featured heavily. The analysis of the contribution of art to the phenomenon of the archival turn highlights the changes in how archives are conceptualized, as well as the emerging archival cultures referred to here.

Doubts remain regarding how we have archived and preserved the memory of our time. What have we archived? And why did



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we choose what we did? Nevertheless, in the words of Soto, "one person's memory allows us all to remember" (Soto, 2007, p. 5).

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