

*The following letters continue a correspondence between the artists Uriel Orlow and Ruth Maclennan that had a starting point in their mutual interest in the archive and which was published in their book *Re: The Archive, the Image and the Very Dead Sheep*.¹ The new letters continue their interrogation of the position of the artist in relation to the archive.*

Dear Ruth

Since our conversation the other day I've been thinking about what got me interested in archives and the archival. Apart from my first brush with systematic accumulation as an avid collector of numerous useless things such as erasers, bells etc. when I was a child, I also remember that my first studio was a bit like an archival antechamber of organised junk. But it wasn't until later, when I was asked to accompany a film-maker friend of mine on a trip to archives in Germany, that I began to think of them more consciously. My friend was writing a script about Herschel Grynszpan, the Jewish boy who shot a German embassy official in Paris in November 1938, in exasperation at the news of the deportation of his family from Germany to Poland.² Because I understand German, French and Yiddish, my friend asked me to co-ordinate and lead the research at various archives in Germany. We visited archives in Hanover, where Herschel's family lived; the photo and film archive in Koblenz; and various departments of the Bundesarchiv in Berlin. My role was strange in that I was facilitating someone else's research rather than doing my own. This meant that I was focused on procedural aspects of navigating catalogues and ordering documents but I also had to locate relevant information in them. What struck me while doing this research was the level of detail preserved – we saw taxi and dry-cleaner receipts from the murdered, minor embassy official. We also came across a number of documents that hadn't been consulted since 1945, some of which had only recently joined the archive from the former GDR [Deutsche Demokratische Republik]. Not working academically, I began to think about our roles as witnesses of these documents and about the sheer materiality of the collections, beyond the specific information its documents contain. How are we to imagine or comprehend such a collection, if the extent of its size and subject matter exceeds our grasp? Indeed,

1 Uriel Orlow and Ruth Maclennan, *Re: The Archive, the Image, and the Very Dead Sheep*, London: School of Advanced Study/The National Archives/Double Agents, 2004

2 This was the first deportation and was organised in haste, as a response to an ultimatum set by the Polish government which threatened to strip all Polish nationals living abroad of their nationality. Herschel's desperate and impulsive act of revenge was of course construed by the Nazis as part of a conspiracy and used as the pretext for the already planned November pogrom, the so-called Kristallnacht, which a few days later saw synagogues and Jewish shops all over Germany go up in flames.

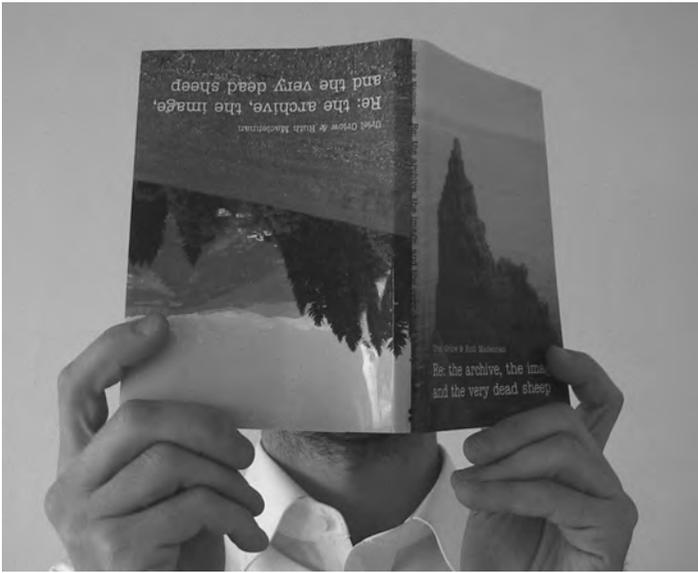
what is the meaning and status of the archive as a whole, operating as it does like a memorial behind closed doors? And how do we engage with the dialectics of documents with seemingly pointless detail and others with huge historical or emotional significance? Historians and other academics that use archives for their research have developed strategies to deal with these questions. But beyond the specificity of a research project, the questions remain largely unanswered, waiting for a different approach, an entrance through the back door of the archive, as it were... Perhaps this is where artists come in. The freedom from pursuing specific research in the archive allows the foregrounding of other, material and conceptual aspects of the archive. But then again, every time I do go to an archive, even if my focus is the archival itself, I get drawn to the documents, to browsing the catalogue and letting myself be directed by associations, which often produce the most amazing constellations, where, for an instant, things connect in the strangest and most meaningful ways. Perhaps this associative principle is what is at work in artworks in general – and so the archive operates both as a model and as a prompter for art.

Uriel

Dear Uriel

It is great to receive your letter and to feel the beginnings of a new correspondence. As I read about your first encounter with the archive, I am reminded of my first encounter with what retrospectively has become an archive. Just after I graduated from university, I went on a trip to Western Siberia with a group of five Cambridge students and our teacher. We joined academics and students from the University of Sverdlovsk (now Ekaterinburg again, its Tsarist name, and the site of the execution of the last Tsar and his family). In exchange for bringing an enormous computer for the history department, they took us with them on an archaeographic expedition to Old Believers' villages in remote areas of Western Siberia. The word 'archaeographic' is a transliteration of a Russian word that doesn't exist in English, but which certainly has a ring to it, and draws together many of the strands that we discussed in our book.³

This field trip, expedition, ethnographic survey, scavenge, was an annual event when twenty or so students and faculty would pile into an armoured truck and drive out into the wilderness to set up camp and do hands-on research and conservation work with Old



Re: the archive, the image and the very dead sheep, Uriel Orlow and Ruth MacLennan, published by Double agents, London, 2004

Believers. We would meet with an elder of one of the Old Believer sects and find out who had died, and who was still around in the village. The purpose was to establish whether the deceased, or the near-deceased, had left any religious books that could be given to the University's collection, to be preserved and studied, and saved from thieves or from the children and grandchildren who might sell the books, thus committing a mortal sin. For Old Believers' devotional books and manuscripts are passed down the generations, and are the sacred foundation of worship. They are even more important than icons, in that they are the means of communicating and preserving a religion which has few if any churches, no priests, no seminaries, and no official, formal means of teaching and keeping alive its doctrines and traditions.⁴

By 1991, there weren't many Old Believers left in Western Siberia; we made it our business to track them down and help them with small amounts of money and food, in return for relieving them of their books in order to preserve them for posterity. Was it a fair exchange? One seventeenth-century illuminated manuscript, two early printed Bibles from the eighteenth century, and half a dozen nineteenth-century texts, for a couple of tins of tushonka (tinned beef), a tin of condensed milk and the knowledge that their books would be poured over by academics and students for years to come, and their religion would not be completely forgotten.

On this expedition I used a video camera for the first time. It was lent to me by a keen BBC cameraman who asked me to take

- 3 Orlow and MacLennan, op. cit.
- 4 The Old Believers originate in a schism in the Russian Orthodox Church in the seventeenth century, following reforms to Church ritual and texts. Those who refused to accept the innovations became known as the Old Believers. There are numerous sects, some with only a handful of worshippers. Persecuted under the tsars and then under Stalin, many of them ended up in Siberia, working in Peter the Great's steel factories or living as subsistence farmers.



lots of footage that could go into their archive, and might be used for some future story. I filmed several old women, a few of their grandchildren, some scenes of izbas and rural dilapidation. Many of my subjects had never even seen a photographic camera. I had the strange and disturbing feeling – which I’ve also read about – of being a cause of the destruction of their way of life; that filming them in their traditional clothes, posing for the camera, or hiding behind a glass door, or singing psalms, was turning their precarious lives into a performance, an image of a way of life that vanished as soon as it was fixed. At the same time, their way of life was pretty tough, and perhaps wasn’t worth preserving. Much of what I saw and heard wasn’t picturesque, just grim.

This journey to Siberia is very important to me, to the story I tell myself of my life, and more nebulously perhaps, to my work, to the way I think and see and put things down. There is a tension between the idea of Siberia and the physical reality of being there. We camped, sleeping three to a two-person tent, cooking cabbage and potatoes for twenty, fighting the mutant mosquitoes and hornets. We drove long distances along impassable roads, in an armoured truck designed to resist chemical attack. One felt lost in

From the series 'The Railway Workers', anonymous archival photographs from the State Documentary Film and Audio Archive of Kazakhstan, 1939–61

the unencompassable hugeness of the land. The Old Believers carried on practising their faith, despite every obstacle, and despite the fact that there were hardly any other believers to practice with them, and yet they were still persecuted, despite barely existing, stranded – or rooted – in this vast landscape, cut off from the rest of the country.

This is a digression that has taken me back to the archive. My interest in the archive and the archival derives from this experience of the archival in extremis: the Old Believers' near extinction and the preservation of their culture in their stories and their manuscripts; the deep connection between geography (on a big and small scale) and the archive. Geography here means the way the landscape affects the stuff of the archive – the people who make it, the way things are stored, the way stories are told, the way they are forgotten, and the way they are put back together again for someone else to read and interpret.

Our new correspondence I think takes us beyond the book, beyond our experiences of the familiar landscapes of our childhoods, and our daily lives, and into other places. Perhaps this is important to us now because of the work we each are doing in Kazakhstan and in Nigeria.

Ruth

Dear Ruth

It's wonderful but also chilling to read about your extra-archival experience in Siberia. Your account points to the other side of the materiality of the archive I was describing in my first letter, namely the archival in the world at large. To be sure, the dialectics of storage and retrieval and the master-discourse of classification operate in an altogether more opaque manner out there; histories are stored in oral testimony, dilapidated buildings, mould-infested books, and the landscape itself is a document waiting to be consulted. On the one hand, these archival ephemera elude the domiciliation or house arrest that for Derrida defines the archive: documents being localised and given a guardian.⁵ Yet, on the other hand, in their non-intentionality they operate exactly like archival documents: they are unpublished, raw traces of life which were never expected to be read out of their original context, in the archival realm.⁶ Sophie Calle following unknowing strangers and recording their every move creates an instant archive of the everyday (for example in *Suite Vénitienne*). Mark Dion's *Thames Dig* retrieved from the

5 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, trans. by Eric Prenowitz, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996, p.2

6 Arlette Farge, *Le goût de l'archive*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1989, p.12



From the series 'The Bitterlake Chronicles'; document by Horst Wagner, 1967

river outside the Tate Modern a heap full of unintentional documents, a lost-property cabinet of curiosities, ranging from bicycles to sets of false teeth. The artist and the archaeologist seem to share an insatiable curiosity and sense of adventure. Like the pre-archival documents they attempt to read and retrieve, both artist and archaeologist are exposed to the elements. Arlette Farge, in her book *Le goût de l'archive*, describes working with archives as a rendezvous with the sea or extreme weather conditions: a dive into immeasurable depths, the joy of immersion, the fear of drowning...⁷ Think of Tacita Dean's epic archaeology/archivology of Donald Crowhurst's failed circumnavigation of the globe without stopping in 1969, her documents being the sea itself, the stranded trimaran, the logbooks. There is no space here to describe any of these works further so I might as well give myself over to the list, that oldest

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.10

form of collecting (words) and describing collections (property): Bernd and Hilla Becher's water-tower photographs, Peter Greenaway's 'Physical Self', Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* are all strategic collections, retrieving non-documents, digging for unmined sources. Another list would include Christian Boltanski's and the Atlas Group's pseudo-archives, or Michael Landy's anti-archive *Break Down* which creates an inventory of destruction rather than preservation.

I am beginning to imagine an über-archive of archival artworks and wonder what its organisational principles might be: artists' collections, artists' histories, artists' classifications, artists' meta-archives, artists' anti-archives, artists' invisible collections... The list could go on endlessly.

Uriel

Dear Uriel

Your last letter brings up many thoughts about why artists are lured by the archive and its effects. The works you describe point to the age-old question of the relation between an artist's life and the art works that she makes. It is almost banal to refer to this art-historical truism, and I don't wish to analyse the psychology of any of the artists you list. I can't speak for anyone else, but my feeling is that the power of the archival for artists lies in this tension between matter and meaning: does the stuff that I accumulate mean anything, and how much control can I, or do I want to, have over that meaning? The archival document is a seductive metaphor for an object/fragment/trace that is not yet (and may never be) an art object, or an art idea. Artists are surrounded by potential things that carry meanings which they may or may not put to use in a context that will endow them with many other meanings, through association, and make them art. The artist senses the power to choose to make meaning out of the seemingly random thing that she encounters. As you say, the archival carries within it the idea of space, and placement within it, which is so important to artists, particularly since they have had more control over placement after the separation of art from cult. And since DADA and then Minimalism, Fluxus and conceptual art, the context has become more and more important in the making of the work as well as the reception of it.

But more important than the analogy between the archival document and the stuff with which the artist works, I think the

archive is a central component of the ambivalence that artists can feel towards making things at all, and situating them in the world at large, and within their own story of their life and work. At some point in their life artists usually confront, and answer in their own way, the following questions: “Why add anything more to the already overburdened culture?” And, “Why produce more stuff, which is going to become a commodity and lose all its original, critical meaning?” And then there is the urge to clear the decks, to destroy old work, to destroy the archive in order to start afresh and be free of one’s past works and the future they seem to determine. Michael Landy’s *Break Down* is perhaps the most systematic and consistent work to enact this desire and evoke the pathos and liberation of the destruction. But other artists have destroyed their work only to be reborn as a different kind of artist altogether. This need to destroy the archive in order to start again is felt by other people too (with sometimes radical results: emigration, changed identities, or the more routine divorce or plastic surgery), but with the artist’s destruction of artwork, the archive is being directly invoked.

I didn’t mean to end with artists destroying the archive. But perhaps I’ve arrived here because it is the most dramatic encounter of art with the archive. The deliberate destruction of the archive has very dangerous connotations as far as politics and history are concerned, but that is dealt with elsewhere. And with the Old Believers it is they themselves who disappear as their archive comes into existence – not the cause of their demise, but the testament to it. Within art however, to destroy the archive can be a more subtle, playful or radical experiment, a means of disrupting orders and plans, beliefs and expectations (in the audience, and in the artist herself). There is of course always the chance that the phoenix won’t rise again from the flames, but the thrill is in the risk.

Ruth



Uriel Orlow, Inside the Archive, 2005–7

