

Exploring The Archival Element in Tracey Emin's Installation Artworks

ABSTRACT: this paper examines the archival practice in 'Confessional Art' citing Tracey Emin's installation artworks to exemplify the archival elements present in this genre.

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An unmade bed of rumpled white sheets, a duvet and two pillows sit on the floor of Tate Britain gallery. The whiteness of the sheets has faded and gave way to the appalling yellow tint of dirty linen, whilst the shadow of a human's bygone presence is marked by traces of bodily fluids and unremarkable stains. A used bath towel is carelessly thrown on the bed's edge along with a pair of worn nude stockings. Attached to the bed is an azure carpet piece littered with one woman's detritus compiled over several days. Empty cigarette packs, drained vodka and juice bottles, used condoms, dirty tissues and menstrual-blood soiled knickers strew the rectangular carpet; a repository of the occupant's night time secrets and socially condemnable habits on display for all to examine. On the other side of the bed are two chained suitcases whose contents remain a mystery to the viewer (*see fig.*

1).

Tracey Emin's *My Bed* executed in 1998 is a 3D snapshot of a moment in the artist's lifetime. Like a photograph, it records a particular historical



Figure 1 Tracey Emin, *My Bed*, 1998

instant revealing not only the artist's habitual existence but also a select number of cultural products of this particular era. In fact, Emin's *My Bed* is "an archival record ... an analogue of a substantiated real or putative fact present in nature ... that links [it] with the indisputable fact of its subject's existence".¹ Although Emin's archival record does not take on the photographic form that Enwezor refers to in his *Archive Fever* article, it nevertheless fulfils the same recording/documentation purpose of a photograph that testifies to an occurrence in time and space.

This autobiographical account of the artist's life is a genre of art that has gained momentum in the 1990s often referred to as *confessional art*.² Whilst this art form is celebrated for its intimate subject matter and the often provocative subjectivity of its creator, we must not overlook the significance of its archival qualities. For the purpose of this essay, I will explore the archiving practice in *confessional art* citing Tracey Emin's installation artworks to exemplify the archival elements present in this genre.

¹ Benjamin, Walter. 2007. *Walter Benjamin's The Archive*. London: Verso, pp. 1

² Confessional Art "draws on the past and borrows and amends real life. It is based on a selections of autobiographical memories, feelings and events. While both autobiography and confessional art are self-referential, confessional art promises to reveal more. Characteristically, it proposes to share the subject's most intimate and private experiences, events and emotions with the spectator". See Jackson, Ronald L. and Hogg, Michael A. 2010. *Encyclopaedia of Identity*, Vol. 1. London. SAGE Publications Inc. pp. 124

The archiving practice entails the accumulation of personal, organisational or national records over a period of time through the everyday activities of their creator(s). As Mike Featherstone notes, “The archive is the site for the accumulation of primary sources from which history is constructed ... archive reason is a kind of reason concerned with detail, it directs us constantly away from the big generalisation, down into the particularity and singularity of the event”.³ It is this accumulation process of various articles sustained over a period of time that allows us to classify Emin’s *My Bed* as an archive of its own right. Not only are we able to detect the accrual process of multiple objects, but we are also able to witness the unique combination of these pieces suspended in time, whose aggregation culminated into this particular event.

Perhaps this is *confessional art’s* unique strength and distinguishing factor from other *archival art*; its ability to present or re-present historical statements as they occurred with a glimpse of the surrounding circumstances. Enwezor observes that “artists have turned to the photographic archive in order to generate ways of thinking through historical events ... have interrogated the status of the photographic archive as a historical site that exists between evidence and document, public memory and private self”.⁴ In the case of *My Bed*, the object is both the historical site, the evidence, the document and the material manifestation of the private living memory. Evidently, this is not true for all *confessional art*. For example, Emin’s other celebrated piece *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995* executed 3 years earlier in 1995, is to be regarded as a document whose accuracy should be more carefully examined (*see Fig. 2*). Since the tent was not generated in regular daily practice but after careful deliberation and conscious reflection with the intent of generating the document (the tent), it is less of a historical evidence (archival detail) and more of an artwork that can be added into the artist’s general collection.⁵

Another trace of Emin’s archival practice in her confessional art is when she seeks “to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present ... [She] elaborates on the found image, object and text and favour[ed] the



Figure 2 Tracey Emin, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995*, 1995

³ Featherstone, Mike. 2000. "Archiving Cultures." *British Journal of Sociology* 51 (1). Pp. 168-169

⁴ Enwezor, Okuwi, and Willis E. Hartshom. 2008. *Archive Fever: Uses of Documents in Contemporary Art*. Gottingen: Steidl, pp. 26

⁵ Evidently, Emin had re-created her bed to produce *My Bed* and hence it is not a 'genuine' forensic-like evidence which you will find in police archives, but the intention is that it replicate real and 'genuine' evidence as archival details. See main body essay of Hal Foster's entry.

installation format” as Hal Foster notes of archival artists.⁶ Had the bed been made, the sheets washed and the dirty tissues, empty bottles and used contraceptives discarded as they should, there will be no archival record of this turbulent period in the artist’s lifetime. In addition to learning about her activities inside the flat during these turbulent days, we gain insight into her emotional state as we are enticed to extrapolate from the visible conditions on display. The fact that Emin chose to elevate these mundane objects and banal existence to art status enabled us to learn about the life of a woman “with all its embarrassing glory”.⁷

Emin employed this process of identifying and retrieving common items in many of her earlier installation pieces. For example in the installations of *Uncle Colin 1963-93* (see Fig. 3) and *May Dodge, My Nan 1963-93* (see Fig. 4), Emin retrieved old photographs, letters, a newspaper clipping and personal memorabilia of the deceased then framed and arranged them on a wall. This enabled the viewers to learn about the parted figures who were clearly dear to her and more importantly the



Figure 3 Tracey Emin, *Uncle Colin 1963-93*, 1993

artworks like any archival document ensured that their memory lives on. In these two artworks, probably more than any of her other, Emin played the role of the archivist who “recalls lost souls ... in a variety of mediums” in the same manner that Tacita Dean creates her *archival art* as Foster notes. “All these archival objects ... serve as found arks of lost

moments in which the here-and-now of the work functions as a possible portal between an unfinished past and a reopened future”.⁸ From these small and ordinary mementos, the viewer and reader is able to utilise his/her own reasoning and construct a narrative in the same way we formulate conclusions when examining documents in ‘proper’ archival institutions.

In fact, new trends in archiving “has shifted from archiving the lives of the good and the great down to the detail of mundane everyday life”. We now recognise that “rather than see the archive as a specific place in which we deposit records, documents, photographs, film, video and all the minutia on which culture is inscribed ... we [should] seek to extend the walls of the archive to place it around

⁶ Foster, Hal. 2004. "An Archival Impulse." *October 110*, Fall, pp. 4

⁷ Ellis-Peterson, Hannah. 2015. "Tracey Emin's Messy Bed Goes On Display At Tate Britain For First Time In 15 Years." *The Guardian*, March 30.

⁸ Foster, Hal. 2004. "An Archival Impulse." *October 110*, Fall, pp. 12 and 15



Figure 4 Tracey Emin, *May Dodge, My Nan* – 1963-93, 1993

the everyday, the world”.⁹ Emin and other archival artists from Hirschhorn to Dean are at the forefront of this new archiving structure. Through their art practice which disrupts our common understanding of the archive and its purpose, they question the existing order and our system of preserving cultural memory. Enwezor observes that “while the status of the archive today may not be ambiguous, its role in the historical determination

of public memory remains unsettled by mnemonic ambivalence”.¹⁰ Unlike Enwezor, these artists question both the role and the status of the archive. They recognise our archival impulse; our drive to document and preserve lost moments in time and sought alternative means outside the system to do so. They pushed the boundaries between private and public memory and blurred the lines between fact and fiction.

Foster recognises this dissension in archival art and observes that this art form does not only involve the congregation of various materials accumulated over time, but also can produce material and stage them as archival evidence, “the work in question is archival since it not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well, and does so in a way that underscores the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private”.¹¹ Documents or as Derrida calls them historical statements, are produced by people. Although as observers we are detached from the entire material and intangible phenomena that led to their creation and their incorporation into the archives, we must not undermine the subjective element involved. For the truth can have many facets and opinions can be presented as absolute facts: the angle from which an event is photographed, the means by which a figure is portrayed, the mementos/documents/films etc. that the archivist chooses to preserve all contribute to a constructed narrative. Archival artists understand this and challenge the process by introducing manufactured documents into their archival art practice.

⁹ Featherstone, Mike. 2000. "Archiving Cultures." *British Journal of Sociology* 51 (1). Pp. 161

¹⁰ Enwezor, Okuwi, and Willis E. Hartshorn. 2008. *Archive Fever: Uses of Documents in Contemporary Art*. Gottingen: Steidl, pp. 30

¹¹ Foster, Hal. 2004. "An Archival Impulse." *October* 110, Fall, pp. 3

There was wide conjecture on whether Emin actually slept or used the bed as it is presented to us. Critics were interested in the authenticity of the event in the same manner they would be interrogating a historical document, for standard art practice allows room for artistic imagination and creativity, as Deborah Cherry notes, "The question that most preoccupied London critics was whether Tracey was telling the truth. If art is no more and no less than the artist's life, then authenticity becomes a key benchmark for a critical practice that judges the artist rather than the work".¹² Emin has repeatedly insisted that the bed was pre-existing in the 'real world', but because it travelled to multiple exhibitions where it was packed and reassembled numerous times, we know for a fact that its absolute authenticity was compromised as Neal Brown notes, "its values were altered as a result of the various changes and additions she made to it as it evolved through exhibitions throughout the world".¹³

Emin's entire oeuvre which revolves around her personal life can be regarded from the vantage point of the ethnographic conditions of the Archive. Her furious urge to photograph herself and document her surroundings and life events resulted in a mini *iconomy* where her entire existence is coherently acknowledged as Enwezor observes, "the archive's ethnographic condition ... be it the scripted space of *homo Sovieticus* or the drive toward the amassment of snapshots, domestic photography allows us to see the archive as a site where society and its habits are given shape".¹⁴ This view mode of Emin's practice along with the archival elements outlined above drove many art critics to question her artwork status. Many preferred to consider it as a creative documentation and archiving process as Cherry observes of critic Mathew Collings opinion, "Nor did Mathew Collings dissent from this opinion, confessing to his belief that her exhibited work 'told her life in notes and diary and memorabilia form'".¹⁵

Emin's artistic practice was severely interrogated within the art circles, but her archival practice was acknowledged by all. In her own words, Emin reiterates, "when the tent ... burnt, everyone asked me if I was going to make another one; how could I? The thing about the tent in 1995, it was just a woman who nobody knew or cared about making a record of part of her life".¹⁶ Although the majority of her artworks (particularly the installation pieces) are not stored in a sealed box in the public archives, they are undisputedly Archive material. Enwezor notes,

Against the tendency of contemporary forms of amnesia whereby the archive becomes a site of lost origins and memory is dispossessed, it is also within the archive that acts of

¹² Cherry, Deborah. 2002. "On The Move: My Bed, 1998 to 1999." In *The Art of Tracey Emin*, by Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend, 134-154. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, pp. 142

¹³ Brown, Neal. 2006. *Tracey Emin*. London: Tate Publishing, pp. 102

¹⁴ Terry Smith coined the term 'iconomy' to describe the Archives economy constituents of production, exchange and transmission of images. See Enwezor, Okuwi, pp. 40

¹⁵ Cherry, Deborah, pp. 144

¹⁶ Fortnum, Rebecca. 2007. *Contemporary British Women Artists: In Their Own Words*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, pp. 56

*remembering and regeneration occur, where a suture between the past and present is performed, in the indeterminate zone between event and image, document and monument.*¹⁷

Tracey Emin is a practicing archivist who brought the Archive alive. Her photographs, patched quilts and hung memorabilia prompt our memories, whilst her grand installations like the tent and bed enshrine our lost emotions and banal activities.

¹⁷ Enwezor, Okuwi, pp. 47

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