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ARCHIVES OF LOSS: DAVID ANTIN, SUSAN HOWE, VANESSA PLACE

In *Walter Benjamin, Archives*, the catalogue from the exhibition held at the Musée d'art et d'histoire du judaïsme in Paris in 2011, one reads:

One is deprived from the best of one's finds if satisfied with inventorying them without being able to assign today's location of the old. Actual memories must proceed less through relations than point out the exact place where the researcher found them. Consequently a real memory must provide in the strictest sense an image, epic and rhapsodic, of the rememberer, in the same way as a valid archaeological report will indicate not only the layers where the found objects come from, but also all these other layers one had to dig through to get to them. (my translation from *Images de pensée*, 182)

The catalogue opens on these words, and immediately sets Benjamin's practice of the archive as one preoccupied not so much with the past and its preservation, but with the significance of this past in the present. If Benjamin simultaneously collected and scattered the notes, postcards, manuscripts, letters, and other infinitesimal objects that compose his archive, if he wrote down a list of these artefacts in a catalogue, it was not so much to keep fetishized traces of his personal trajectory, but to keep track of the ground from which the work of the present was growing: archival conservation aimed at permitting the production of more material and was at no time an end in itself. Thus, Erdmut Wizisla signals that the order one expects from an archive, in terms of chronology in particular, but also in terms of a qualitative hierarchy, is notably disrupted in Benjamin's archive. Working from notecards, Benjamin could organize the material at will, depending on the work at hand and the dialectics envisioned: the classifying gestures could then be multiple and potentially infinite, adumbrating the versatility as well as the finality of the archive. Perceiving the evolution in the management of data that has come to expression over the past decades, Benjamin worked on his "cartothèque" as with a construction game, copying, cutting and pasting to "arrange anew:"

Benjamin's idea of work entirely made of quotations presupposes the possibility of moving the material around as it is collected, and to shift elements at will. In this process everything ranks on the same level to begin with; the knowledge the notecards are supposed to organize is without hierarchy. (my translation of Wizisla, *Walter Benjamin, Archives* 2011, 39)

The notecards are so many letters or cyphers to be played with and reorganized in so many anagrams that spell out both the name of the author and a plural discourse on a mutable world. The heterogeneity and flexibility of the archive as enacted by Benjamin opens the conceptual Pandora's box of concept definition: as the meditation come to bear on the archive, the issue of what is exactly meant by the term becomes more acute.

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And indeed, it is what underpins the whole of Jacques Derrida's long lecture entitled *Archive Fever*, and subtitled "a Freudian impression:" as is his method, Derrida returns to the Greek etymology of the word, *archê*, to link the archive to the archaic, implant it in the past, but also to question this artificial and delusional divorce of the present from the archival/archaic past. In doing this, he summons Freudianism to more powerfully exemplify the archive as the materialization of what is carried over, consciously or unconsciously, biologically, psychologically, culturally, from one generation to the next, sometimes to "impress" the present or at other times to remain latent. To Derrida, the archive is "as much and more than a thing of the past:" "it should put into question the advent of the future" (1995, 26).

And if we still do not have a viable, unified, given concept of the archive, this is undoubtedly not because of a purely conceptual, theoretical, epistemological insufficiency on the level of multiple and specific disciplines; it is perhaps not due to lack of sufficient elucidation in certain circumscribed domains: archaeology, documentography, bibliography, philology, historiography. Let us imagine in effect a project of general archiviology, a word that does not exist but that could designate a general and interdisciplinary science of the archive. (Derrida 1995, 26)

Derrida goes on to assimilate in a large part this "archiviology" he has just coined to psychoanalysis as this "general and interdisciplinary science of the archive," preoccupied with "the economy of memory, and [...] its substrates, traces, documents, in their supposedly psychical or techno-prosthetic forms (internal or external: the mystical pads of the past or of the future, what they represent and what they supplement)" (1995, 26). Well beyond any biological (genetic) archive, that would focus on the anatomy of the brain, this extended conception of psychoanalysis attempts to take into account "the archival problems of oral narrative, and public property, of mnesic traces, of archaic and transgenerational heritage, and of everything that can happen to an 'impression' in these at once 'topic' (*topisch*) and "genetic" (*genetisch*) processes." (1995, 26)

[...] the question of the archive is not [...] a question of the past. This is not the question of a concept dealing with the past which might *already* be at our disposal or not at our disposal, *an archivable concept of the archive*. It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what this will have meant, we will only know in the times to come. Perhaps. Not tomorrow but in the times to come, mater on or perhaps never. A spectral messianicity is at work in the concept of the archive and ties it, like religion, like history, like science itself, to a very singular experience of the promise. And we are never far from Freud in saying. Messianicity does not mean messianism. (1995, 27-28)

The archive as messianic, and thus delivering a cryptic, hypothetical message for the future, would logically become the critical locus in times of crisis. Yet it would not be the stage for desperate attempts to perform the famous Eliotian mission of piling up "fragments" "shored against my ruins" (*The Waste Land*), nor the delusional grand task set out by Ezra Pound to "gather the limbs of Osiris." Rather the archive could be the field for investigations, explorations and experimentations, towards a poetics of messianicity in the Derridean sense of the term, whereby the poetic gesture renews not a specific message but the promise of communication and community. The archive is consequently constructed as this common ground where one can be together, albeit imperfectly (David Antin), get lost and risk obliteration (Susan Howe), or confront collective guilt and mortality (Vanessa Place).¹ Thus, through considerations about three distinct bodies of poetic work, by three very different authors, David Antin, Susan Howe and Vanessa Place, I will attempt to reconsider the significance of the archive in relation to contemporary poetic creation, in the light of a messianic understanding of the archive as of the past, in the present and for the future.

¹ For the sake of comparison and theorization, this article revisits some of the arguments made in two previous publications, on David Antin and on Susan Howe: "The Continuous Present: A Note about David Antin's Selected Essays." *Golden Handcuffs* 1.15 (Summer-Fall 2012): 158-168; "I [will not] Gather the Limbs of Osiris': Susan Howe's Transcendent History." *Jacket* 40 (January 2011).



Successively one will see how archival preoccupation signals a concern with the present, and the attempt to convey the flitting quality of the present moment as it merges backward with the past and forward with the future: as the modes of improvisation in Antin offer formal options for a recording of the present as the locus of loss. In the case of Susan Howe, the archival impulse seems to stem from a desire to rewrite history and put forward the issues of historiography: the plunge into the library, and the examination of manuscript material from intractable archives (one may think of Emily Dickinson's archive) generate methods of writing that construct the poetic text as archival material in itself: erasure and chaotic typographies evidence what is lost in archivization, to the expense of the more intuitive focus on what is preserved. Archival gestures in the end might emerge as part of our (lost) fight against radical loss and death. This is underpinning Vanessa Place's expansive work on documenting death and the morbidity of social practices: suppression of other and self is central to the texts she appropriates in the composition of her works, reaching a paroxystic dimension in *Last Words*, a project centered on the death penalty, and the electronic archive of the last words of the executed inmates of Texas.

1. David Antin: the poem as archive of the contemporary world

maybe thats the problem with the notion of the avant-garde
that it turns itself from a discourse into a tradition
whose members worry about its decline in a threatening
future and maybe thats why i'm such a poor avant-gardist
because i'm mainly concerned with the present

(Antin 1993, 53)

This concern with the present seems to contradict the very action of anthologizing a selection of essays about art and literature, focused on avant-garde works and spanning four decades, as in Antin's last self-constructed anthology, *radical coherency*, published in 2011—unless the present which David Antin is grappling with is not the flitting interstitial moment between a receding past for which we are inexorably nostalgic, and a looming future filled with uncertainties and hopes that can be as daunting as threats. Since the early 1980s, David Antin had systematically worked along a process which is his own: the talk poem, a method of composition based on performance and improvisation, and the ensuing transcription of recordings, so that each book of poems participates in an archival enterprise whose temporality remains uncertain. Could it be the continuous present in which Gertrude Stein claims to be writing? A continuous present which is staged and enacted by the text itself, in the ways it keeps track of the difficulties of its composition and makes us experience the difficulties of reading. In the ways also the text absorbs all the variety of life itself and transfigures the autobiographical into "everybody's autobiography" (Stein 1937).

On the front cover of *radical coherency, selected essays on art and literature 1966 to 2005*, whose title is derived from a talk poem included in the collection, two recognizable figures face each other: standing where we stand as readers and looking back, David Antin watches himself climbing up a path in the brush of a California canyon. The montage seems at first fairly innocuous, expressive of the movement of the book: a look back at the path taken to reach the present of retrospection, and a look forward to what the future may hold, something which neither Antin nor we can clearly envision. This photograph, however, is also a statement on method, an image inscribing David Antin's constant preoccupation with the relationship between the agent of creation and the spectator: the addressees are part of the picture in the strong sense of the phrase, and as participating in the poet's project to articulate an exchange based on cohabiting with the reader. In the on-going project of the talk poem, now a very long-term *action poétique* dating back to the early 1970s, David Antin proposes an organization and a rationalization of the communication between poet and reader: the talk poem emerges from a live performance to be edited taking into account, among other criteria, the reactions of the public. Thus it is interesting to closely compare the recording of "talking at blérancourt," published on a CD along with the proceedings of Jacques Darras's 1999 conference on fifty years of American poetry, and the poem "talking at blérancourt," published in 2005 in *i never knew what time it was*:



someone asked me once a simple question an absurdly simple question and i gave an
absurdly simple answer whats an
artist he asked and i said somebody who does the best he can
by now ive said this so many times ive begun to believe it
because when you think about it there are very few people in this
world that do the best they can
you know if general motors makes
a lemon of a car its your problem but if an artist makes a lousy
art work its his problem or her problem so it turns out that artists are the last people in this
world who have to do the best they
can because their life is at stake
you say you know a plumber who does the best he can i say he's an artist you know lots
of artists who dont do the best they
can? its very simple theyre not artists anyhow thats
how i answer the question because up to now thats the best i can do for an answer
now as a poet thats the term i get stuck with²

(Antin 2005, 49; Darras 2002)

Listening to the recording, and reading along in the book, one soon comes to notice that alterations do not appear at random, that they are not developments that the poet added *ad libitum*, but that they occur quasi systematically at moments when the unfolding performance elicited reactions from the audience. In the beginning of the talk, the added sentences bear on the stakes of art making: a recurring issue in David Antin's work, and one which the *Selected Essays* address in a very useful and pointed manner. The talk-poem, like the essays in Antin's collection, raises the issue of reception, and its complex relationship with an author's intention. With the talk-poem and its sometimes uncomfortable, and always problematic position as oral and written text(s), David Antin is continuously questioning the very chronology of composition, and asserting over and over the contingency of the work of art as final object. The results of the poet's work can take a variety of forms: they can remain recordings as in *The Principle of Fit 2*; they can be lost but for a contact sheet of photographs taken during the performance without text, date or location; they can become the objects of dream and imagination as the "sky poems" evoked in "Fine Furs:"

My image of those beautiful white letters, formed so elegantly by the plane and over such a long time, that I had to wait to find out what the words were, and had to remember them as they began to disappear—by the time it said FURS, FOX had begun to blur and the "I" had begun to vanish—my sense of sitting on the beach, in the bright light of a clear blue sky, and the new pleasure of reading, gave me such a physical experience of the act of reading that I thought it would be nice to do a poem that way, a skypoeem. (Antin 2011, 292-293)

What remains of the poem is telling, a photograph that ironically does not reveal the text of the poems (Antin and Bernstein 2002, 120); what remains is what Antin evokes as "a simple memory" (Antin 2011, 292) in the opening of the essay. Of course, "Fine Furs" is included in the selected essays, concurring to the demonstration that there is no such thing as "a simple memory," in the same way as there is no simple composition nor simple reception. The expansion of the field of action of the poem is, according to Antin in his comments about Allan Kaprow's practice and legacy, the correlative of the painters and sculptors' "enrichment and expansion of their field of action from the virtual space of the gallery wall and off the base of traditional Modernist sculpture out onto the floor and into the environment" (Antin 2011, 146). In this expanded field of action, the "boundaries" between the arts, tested and questioned in Antin's "talking at the boundaries," are porous, and poetry as the "language art" acquires the omnipresence of the disseminated, at the same time as it calls for its reconfiguration into a variety of archival modes.

To be "postmodern" in David Antin's book is then indeed to accept the "very enlarged repertory of possibilities" (Antin 2011, 185) which the Modernists have bequeathed us, so that the matter, the form, the

² My italics to signal the text added in the 2005 written version of the 2002 recording.



context of poetry hold infinite variations, in a very Cagean manner. Once de-sacralized, by such as Kaprow and his notion of “un-art” (Antin 2011, 158) as well as by such as Ezra Pound or Robert Duncan in their search for alternative theories (Antin 2011, 188), the work exists less in its palpable, reified or commodified results, than in its telling. To this extent, the difficult and complex enterprise of the *Selected Essays* is a narrative, a remembering in the strongest sense of the term, in which the scattered members of a body of work are gathered to take a new life and take relevance in the continuous present.

The *Selected Essays* can as a consequence be read as an avatar of the archive, with the Benjaminian dynamics and versatility enhanced by the fact that it is a talking archive, resonating with the work of a poet, one among the many *media* in which David Antin’s message conveys itself. Or they can be seen as one of the modes in which an extremely consequent poetics expresses itself, as it both promotes and enacts the freedom and constraints of a committed, democratic, non-dogmatic practice. Far from being spontaneous and easy, the practice is mapped, planned and calculated, as the different objects it leaves to us to combine them to form a modelization of poetic action today. In the same way as an exploration of David Antin’s archive at the Getty Research Institute yields notebooks and drawings to establish the continuousness of his work over the years and in many places, the essays provide the constellation composed by the plural works. As a poetic gesture, the *Selected Essays* encourage the reader to see the poet’s condition as one of an on-going struggle for polyvalence, for a hypothetical poem that is action in time (against loss), and in space (against emptiness), in flux in the Bergsonian sense of the term, as we begin to perceive our relation to time and place in terms of duration. In conversation with Charles Bernstein, to whom the *Selected Essays* are dedicated, David Antin looks back on the coherence of the chaotic, in the happenings of the ‘60s, indirectly commenting on the diversity of his own work:

I didn’t see happenings as chaotic. Almost every happening I saw or took part in was carefully scripted. There is certainly in the ‘60s work a kind of baroque painterly quality to surfaces. But Robert Whitman’s work, Ken Dewey’s, Allan Kaprow’s work in particular, were tightly scripted. Allan’s performers usually received very precise instructions and had specific jobs to carry out. The chaotic appearance resulted from the collision of many precise tasks. (Antin and Bernstein 2002, 46)

The archive for the poems evidences this “collision of many precise tasks,” as well as the potential, the “promise” in Derridian terms, of a “radical coherency.” Antin’s collections are not reactionary as the collections decried by Walter Benjamin, but rather are to be related to the “gift of thinking poetically” and transfigure the world and our lives into precious archives.

The true method of making things present is to represent them in our space (not to represent ourselves in their space). (The collector does just this, and so does the anecdote). Thus represented, the things allow no mediating construction from out of “large contexts.” [...] We don’t displace our being into theirs; they step into our life. (Benjamin 1999, 206)

In this respect, the poet becomes what Hannah Arendt calls a pearl diver when she comments on Benjamin’s practice:

And this thinking, fed by the present, works with the “thought fragments” it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. [...] What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things “suffer a sea-change” and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living—as “thought fragments,” as something “rich and strange,” and perhaps even as everlasting *Urphänomene*. (Arendt 1969, 106-107)



2. Susan Howe: “I [will not] gather the limbs of Osiris,” or the mystical archive

This dialectics of disjunction and conjunction that is constitutive of the archive is a common trait with the poetic practice of Susan Howe: her 1990 collection of poems, *Singularities*, opens on two quotations, one by D.H. Lawrence, and one by H.D. Is it purely a coincidence that the very names of the two poets can be seen as mirror images of each other? Isn't it symptomatic that the quotes oppose each other with D.H. recognizing the impossibility of gathering the fragments of Osiris, when H.D. mentions a hidden book, whole and cohesive? And with the reference to Osiris also sending the reader back to Ezra Pound's article “I Gather the Limbs of Osiris,” and his attempts at making history cohere, the paradoxes suddenly abound. The double reference to D.H. and H.D. is in the connection to the modernist impulse to write “a poem including history,” but with a major twist: no inclusion of history is sought in Susan Howe's poetry, rather it is the prevalence of history at the same time as its disquieting instability which is foregrounded through the exploration of the archive.

As she runs the gamut of the possible intrusions of history in the poem, Susan Howe asks her readers the same questions over and over, without ever providing more than adumbrated answers. Is history coherent? Is it the poet's domain to make it cohere? Shouldn't one accept to live among the uncertainties of impossible coherence? How is one to understand the persistence of assemblage and composition even in the face of scattering and decomposition? Her modes of conveying a poetics of history are caught between an acute awareness of the individual's constant efforts at recomposing the past into visible, if not always legible, configurations, and the recognition of the re-composition's provisional relevance to the present.

History is not to be cancelled in the process, though: it might rather emerge as mystical and chaotic. In this respect, Susan Howe constructs herself as a poet of the archive, with an archival vision of history as forever on the move, elusive, a promise of history rather than a stabilized discourse.

In *Singularities*, Susan Howe inscribes a signature in capital letters at the bottom of one of her trademark collage poems: “the reviser” (Howe 1990, 70) In the angled five lines one can read a geometric mapping of her poetics: “Human [authoritative] human!” exhorts the reader to acknowledge the delusions of humanity. The claim to be human brackets the assertion of authority and initiates a relationship of subservience which the line “They cumbered the ground” reasserts. However, this line drags the primary claim away from its original abstractness, to “ground” it precisely in history. One cannot but remember, in the etymological sense of the term, a history of conquest and of taming the land which is America. What is the poet to do? “Record” stands as an imperative or as a noun, alone in one line, parallel to the first one. As an imperative, it orders the minimal gesture of inscription and conservation; as a noun, it deprives the whole poem of its assertive quality to turn it into a record, a notation, “a secret fact a title given.” What links the first three lines to the last and the signature is cryptic, “Freak inside the heart,” but it intimates Howe's very personal involvement with the more generic commitment to “unsettling” American history. If Howe sees the poet as “the reviser,” one revealing and putting words, be they defective and partial, on facts, she is also one whose text will be a vision. History revised is thus history re-envisioned; the specificities of the vision being conveyed by the idiosyncrasies of their projections on the page.

Images, or documents, in Howe are not illustrations, they are not factors of fragmentation, and they are not content coexisting with other texts and configurations for the sake of “defying syntactical logic” (Nicholls 1996, 596). We are not presented with aporetic provocation. Conversely, we are exposed to a radical questioning of the novelty of the new, be it new poetry, new art or the novel discourses of New Historicism: the new is not just made new in the Poundian, modernist manner; the new does not just reside in the finding of a new form to present the work, along broken lines, jumbled pages or apparently disconnected materials assembled; the new “enjoins an attention not only to these myriad ‘other voices’ but also to the hegemonic forms of language in which, customarily, we invite them to speak” (Nicholls 1996, 600). At the same time, it points out the possibility of an arbitrariness that would originate in and increase with each and every transmitter.

So Susan Howe would not be “the reviser” of *Singularities*, but a “revisioner,” one that triggers a vision some steps beyond the disappointed assertion of unstable truths and an unknowable past, beyond the claustrophobia of a world of rewrites, and beyond the exile out of the world and into language, that has become the much-too-convenient criticism against the Language poets. Far from hijacking the voices of the formerly silenced to be recorded by posterity, a strange point made by Megan Williams in an article for *Contemporary Literature* (1997, 119), Susan Howe shifts the lines of our vision of the past, advocating a



comparison of discourses that installs her visual poems in the field of historiography, and enforce reading modes that are akin to archival investigation.

The “sheet of water” in *Secret History of the Dividing Line* (Howe 1996, 113) points backward to another lake, Lake George, the deep-blue flat surface in Georgia O’Keeffe’s 1921 painting and the metallic glint separating sky from land in Alfred Stieglitz’s 1931 photograph. Stieglitz’s photograph, entitled “Later Lake George,” inscribes the landscape in a chronology of representations, hinting at a reflection on the revision/revisitation of the same place. Are we surprised to find the autobiographer of *Singularities* renting a cabin on Lake George in 1987 (Howe 1990, 46)? The one page is in two tones placed under the sign of an investigation that retraces the process of an invasion: Howe’s “regions of indifferentiation” are a powerful reminder of Jorie Graham’s “region of unlikeness.” Are they that much its opposite? Both presuppose contrast, and the desire for differentiation. Both seem to be uncertain places where one is “looking for what is looking.” On the verge of the tautology that marks the impossibility to make past and present concord, be it in difference or in indifference. The “search for what Howe calls ‘trace-stories’ rather than for origins” (Nicholls 1996, 588), can be seen as the asymptotic desire for knowledge, as an epistemological adventure into the infinite archive; it can be seen as enacting the recognition of the impossibility to remember the past, and the compulsion to keep offering rememberings, but as Rachel Tzvia Back remarks,

The writing-over-writing technique produces the additional and no less significant effect of simultaneity of voices—and of tales—speaking at once, cutting into each other and being, visually and aurally—as well as thematically—at cross-purposes. (Back 2002,139)

The voices seem to speak at cross-purposes because they speak of crossed purposes: if one is to deal with history and the search for facts, failure is at hand—which does not prevent anyone from trying none the less. But if one is to deal with the poem as a “graph of history,” along the same line as Ezra Pound saw the poem as “the graph of consciousness,” one dwells inevitably, but not necessarily painfully, in contradiction.

So that to “demilitarize the syntax of her verbal units” (Perloff 1989, 525), “to jettison historical narrative [and to refuse] to let go of the past, to give it up to ‘discourse’” (Nicholls 1996, 597), to see “language [as it] constructs the ‘reality’ perceived” (Perloff 1999, 432), “to reposition the power relations between [poetry and history] by providing poetry with an entry point into history, into what hitherto has always been the sealed authoritarian discourse of history” (Ma 1994, 719)—these are all ways of describing Howe as a historiographer. With the splicing and reorganization of a letter into lines in “Dear Parents” (Howe 1996, 120), or the ironical autobiography, complete with pictures and anecdotes, as it appears in “zoo” (Howe 1990, 232-233) or the compressed and depressed blocks of “Leah Was Wedded to Me in the Night” (Howe 1996, 35) however, she becomes what I would call a ‘historiographer’: a poet graphing, designing, perhaps advertising, the necessary engagement with history that can be thought out in terms of loss and error, or in terms of the Blanchotian inescapability of the “ungraspable.”³ Nevertheless, this tragic perception of the dead-ends of the historiographic adventure is qualified if one cares to shift the focus of attention from the lost object of knowledge to the practice of re-activating those “lost” texts and putting them back into circulation.

So, in the library, Susan Howe does not seek truth, nor the origins of the fictions we take for history, rather she searches for the conditions, vagaries and intermittenencies of transmission, in the hope that the knowledge re-transmitted will be freed from the shackles of hegemonic authority, and will in turn allow for the composition of texts that will set the reader free. In this sense, the poet librarian which Howe comes to embody is a libertarian, a questioner of order, classification and categories. A “libertaire,” then in the sense given to the term by its creator, Joseph Déjacque in his open letter to Jean-Jacques Proudhon, published in New Orleans in 1857. The historical libertarian opposes the misogyny of Proudhonian anarchism, promoting

³ On this, see Nicholls 2002, 456: “[...] we are left, says Blanchot, with a relation that ‘is not [one of] cognition, but of recognition, and this recognition ruins in me the power of knowing, the right to grasp’ (31). Howe’s injunction to ‘Wait some recognition’ rather than accept some easily grasped ‘form’ seems similarly weighted. In each case, in Blanchot’s words, ‘art is linked... to what is ‘outside’ the world’ (75), and so ‘The act of haunting is not the unreal visitation of the ideal: what haunts us is the inaccessible which one cannot rid oneself of, what one does not find, and what, because of that, does not allow one to escape it. The ungraspable is what one does not escape’ (Gaze 84).”



equality between the sexes... Is this purely coincidental? Of course, Susan Howe might tell us—but it so happens that the very freedom she advocates at least is inscribed in the Latin homonymy of “liber,” the book, and “liber,” the free, and trickles down to link library and liberty.

To be in the library is to be at “home in a human knowing,” and Susan Howe’s library has very little to do with the public library of Paterson, which the poet sees as a place of confinement and oppression to be destroyed by fire. Only burnt white does Williams’s past writing become operative and seminal. For Howe, in contrast, the library is a “thresh[old] of beginning.” The freedom granted by the library opens up a wealth of poetic potentialities, which are not separate in nature from the texts they burrow in and borrow from. As alternately “compiler of Memories” and “Disposer of events,” the poet must beware of the dreamed power of her words: ascending to heaven (for having caught a cold?) or writing the future by altering the past both pertain to the ambivalent activity of the poet in the archive. When authoritative, she remains bogged in the immanence of puny though deadly struggles; when non-dogmatic, her work might open onto a dreamed Derridean free play of signs. Howe’s rewriting of history is a scattering more than a gathering, but it is not an undoing: this poetry of history is “affirmation in negation” (Howe 2007, 138) “with its centrifugal trajectory hurtling not into nothingness but into a space-time where a new, more comprehensive order already exists in embryo” (Ma 1994, 735). If Howe’s history were a dichotomy of “archetypes and outcasts,” it would be under control, and would pass into the large body of ordering structures which the discourses of history have been providing. By transforming the writing agent into an intuitive though voracious archivist, Howe posits history within the field of desire, “beyond the control of-and transcending-the individual” (Adamson 1997, 115-116). Consequently, “ERRATA” will be acknowledged only if “desirable,” and “history [may be] a [relentless] record of survivors” (Howe 1993, 47), a text of the fittest and a place of survival.

3. Vanessa Place: documenting the end

What happens then when the poetic text changes status and becomes what Franck Leibovici, in *des documents poétiques*, calls a “redescription” (Leibovici 2007, 55)? When it integrates the entire process presiding over the collection of facts, their narrativization and an account of the obstacles to their intellection and interpretation? In the introduction to Leibovici’s book, Christophe Hanna attempts the characterization of the document, outlining the conditions for an artefact to acquire a documentary function:

- it should effect the creation or desinvisibleization of a public issue;
- it should be recognizable and liable to be processed as the object of various types of discourse;
- it should not be confined to immanence, but susceptible to integration into other media, and to circulation over diverse communication networks, to the extent that this does not cancel its significance but on the contrary gives it consistency;
- its enunciation should allow for its commuting from a particular mode to an indeterminate collective mode, turning the subject that produced it into a mere *position*. (Hanna in Leibovici 2007, 11, my translation)

Many of Vanessa Place’s books proceed from a double movement, one in keeping with Hanna’s definitions, the other addressing the “public issue” of “the end.” they seem fascinated with the moment of interruption in cycles or processes that are construed as endless, or whose end is endlessly postponed or ignored. Thus, in *Dies a Sentence*, the entire book is based on the idea of a man’s last breath, the endless moment when time seems to expand just as it comes to an end for the individual.

The maw that rends without tearing, the maggoty claw that serves you, what, my baby buttercup, prunes stewed softly in their own juices or a good slap in the face, there’s no accounting for history in any event, even such a one as this one, O, we’re knee-deep in this one, you and me, we’re practically puppets, making all sorts of fingers dance above us, what do you say, shall we give it another whirl, we can go naked, I suppose, there’s nothing to stop us [...]. (Place 2005, 3)



Place propels the reader into a dying Civil War soldier's psyche, adding the dimension of an integral transcription to the more canonical compassion of Whitman's elegies or Crane's realistic free indirect speech. It is an uninterrupted, rhythmic, continuous flux that takes both life, and the Modernist technique of stream of consciousness to their ends.

With *La Medusa*, a stochastic mapping of Los Angeles's intricate sprawl as the apocalyptic stage for the end of a man-sized environment, creative work occupies a more and more threatened space, as Place works on documenting the end of the poem (since the very definition of poetry is radically obliterated through the proliferation of more and more alien texts that defy categorizing). Actually, many of the processes used by Place, from transcription or collage to the reformatting of *Gone with the Wind* into 140-sign tweets, make her work fall into the domain of procedural poetics, and involve archival activity. Her resorting to found material, "documents," may be construed as a retreat from authorship or creativity, but it rather shifts the burden of authorship from the production of the text to the modes of its circulation. The material borrowed is not emptied of content and significance, to remember Hanna's criteria for the document, as it is in fact turned into what Place and Robert Fitterman call "allegorical writing:" the process allegorically reactivates appropriated texts in a context that underscores its unacceptable implications.

Allegorical writing (particularly in the form of appropriated conceptual writing) does not aim to critique the culture industry from afar, but to mirror it directly. To do so, it uses the materials of the culture industry directly. This is akin to how readymade artworks critique high culture and obliterate the museum-made boundary between Art and Life. The critique is in the reframing. The critique of the critique is in the echoing. (Place and Fitterman 2009, 20)

In *Notes on Conceptualisms*, Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman define the practices of conceptual poets as modes of appropriation and allegorization of endemic discursive modes that fail to question their own sources and validity to impose dogmatic ideological diktats. To rethink the notion of allegory, and to imagine their own techniques of composition as "allegorical writing," they relocate the nodal points of poetic creation in a way that symptomatically eschews the poetic as result or product.

In allegorical writing (including both conceptual writing and appropriation), prosody shuttles between a micro attention to language and macro strategies of language, e.g., the use of source materials in reframing or mixing. The primary focus moves from production to post-production. This may involve a shift from the material of production to the mode of production, or the production of a mode. (Place and Fitterman 2009, 16)

This rather obviously echoes and prolongs the Duchampian problematic, but also sends us explicitly back to Walter Benjamin, and his reflections on the status of the work of art in the age of mechanical representation. However, Benjamin's idea of the allegorical status of art, and of a devaluation in the processes of art's commodification retains the Romantic nostalgia for an "aura" of the original and a fascination for the genius that produced such beauty. Duchamp does away with pathos, and asserts the no-return situation of a modernity that has cancelled genius, uniqueness, and even beauty itself, to become the allegory for the unfolding history of capitalism, and postcapitalism. The poet's incursion into the ever-expanding corpus of existing texts composes possible scenarios for this history.

Place's critique has in fact been on-going with such works as *Statement of Facts*, and more recently *Last Words*: she confronts the reader with the great paradox of dissemination and contamination which is one of the crucial issues of the age of social networks. Yet intermedial hybridity is not the only import of conceptual experimentation. Place's project cannot be summarized into the emergence of a "new formalism," which would equal a "new institutionalism" (Place and Fitterman 2009, 51); it actively participates in the ideological and political debate.

So Vanessa Place is not providing new texts but re-circulating and thus re-contextualizing pre-existing texts in other forms: these gestures, if they do not necessarily provide new texts *stricto sensu*, construct alternative discourses that may prove complex to parse and elucidate, and provide reconfigurations for the virtual archive from which these texts are lifted. The focus of this "critique" that might at times be received as "not a critique" (Place and Fitterman 2009, 51) is varied, and global, as it undermines the entirety of



established discourses and rampant misconceptions, while leaving the readers to their own devices as to what to make of the critique, how to verbalize it, and how to stabilize it.

With *Last Words*, one discovers a book that it is devoid of printed text. Each page unfolds a frieze of mug shots from the dead, and one needs to listen to the recording to access words, that are their last words, as recorded in writing on the Texas Department of Criminal Justice website. The website is the archival repository of these proofs of execution, an incremental testimony to the retribution enforced by the State. A major shift occurs since it is Place's voice that sounds these last words out loud, so that the alienation is duplicated and doubled by being filed in an alternate medium. Several filters may separate us from the executed inmates of Texas, but they do not seem to attenuate the intense malaise of being faced with man's ruthless enforcement of something that calls itself justice. In places other than Texas, the death penalty as a punishment is banned as it is deemed "cruel and unusual," and implicitly forbidden by the Eighth Amendment to the American Constitution. Place's enactment literalizes both terms and makes them acquire full portent. The cruel in the vengeful, rather than lawful, distribution of death; the unusual in the outlandish realization of the suffering, physical and mental, the lethal injection inflicts. Place as medium for these words imposes a reflexive questioning on us, as a social constituted body, as perpetrators of these pains.

With her reactivation of these "documents," Place strategically threatens the collective fantasy of a privileged status for the poetic text, pure and untouched by the contradictions and violence of social interaction. Her investment of the electronic archive narrativizes it, maximizes it and thus undermines the collective fiction of a guilt-free individual.

In her 2010 essay entitled *The Guilt Project: Rape, Morality, and Law*, there already emerged her commitment to a surgical dissection of the assumedly lawful as we collectively failure to face the impossibilities of compensation, retribution, and the construction of a moral society.

Pretending that certain men are inhuman, or that evil lies outside logic, excuses us personally and politically from calculated mercy. At heart, mercy is simply the steady responsibility to safeguard the humanity of all, including those we hate. There will always be people guilty of great evil. But evil is an act, not a cultural metaphor, not a social backdrop, and not entertainment. As a people, we have to resist the temptation to make our morality contingent on anybody's innocence. (Place 2010, 10)

Perversely, the very mechanisms of correction reenact and reactivate the malfunctions, enforcing them rather than suppressing them. The "guilt" might also fall on the side of the innocent by-standers, the upholders of law and morality, that have staged so many obscene exhibitions of deviance, documenting the end of justice rather than its accomplishment.

Like *Statement of Facts*, that transposes the legal memoirs of Place as appellate lawyers to the domain of literature and, potentially, assimilate the body of her creative work as a lawyer into the body of her creative work as a poet, the performance of *Last Words* (Place, 2015) functions as an extremely disturbing reminder of the unspeakable violence and coercion inherent to what was planned as a system ensuring the freedom and autonomy of the individual and the community. The particular documents, to return to Hanna's words, produced by the legal system to enforce its legitimacy commute onto such a compelling level of collective significance, that they jeopardize the system, turning both the performer and her readers into unwilling witnesses thus putting them at high risk:

Note: when the word is the wound (the site of failure), there are two extreme forms of mimetic redress: isolate and seal the word/wound (pure conceptualism), or open and widen the word/wound (impure conceptualism and the baroque). The first is the response of the silenced subject, the second, the screaming subject. ([*Sic!*] Place and Fitterman 2009, 55)

Despite the apparent minimalism of her gestures, as she documents these individual and collective ends, Vanessa Place's management of the archive of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice constructs herself and us as "screaming subject[s]," participants and witnesses to the demise of justice, diminished subjects condemned to the reified status of objects, as justice collects the evidence of its failures and mistakenly as well as deceptively exhibits them as signs of effectiveness.



4. Conclusion

The individuals as participants and witnesses are in fact a key idea to begin to understand our interaction with the archive. In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Paul Ricœur pedagogically warns us to bear in mind that the flexibility of the archive does not impinge on its materiality. As history is written, and in our case, as poems are composed, they remain grounded on this Benjaminian “soil” of factuality, defeating the radical and arbitrary doubt of negationism.

Yet we must not forget that everything starts, not from the archives, but from testimony, and that, whatever may be our lack of confidence in principle in such testimony, we have nothing better than testimony, in the final analysis, to assure ourselves that something did happen in the past, which someone attests having witnessed in person, and that the principal, and at times our only, recourse, when we lack other types of documentation, remains the confrontation among testimonies. (Ricœur 2004, 147)

The poems we have been looking at witness to the variety of strategies to assert the relevance of poetic activity to an understanding of our modes of living, and verbalizing the experience of living in its defiant as well as aporetic moments. The fascination with the archive has unquestionably gained urgency with the proliferation of instances of its impossible exhaustivity. However global the project of recording, investigating, accounting, it seems that its significance stems from its blanks and indeterminacies, and their negative and defective inscription in the present. In *Remnants of Auschwitz*, Giorgio Agamben reflects with Primo Levi on the witness by proxy that is the defective witness of the Holocaust: beyond the horror, one must confront the paradox of witnesses whose reliability is compromised by the very fact that they remain as witnesses. The “value of testimony lies essentially in what it lacks” (2002, 34). The total witness cannot rise from the dead to bear witness; the testimony of the defective witness is threatened because it is mediate. It is threatened but not cancelled, however, since it falls into the category of speech acts. According to Agamben following Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), the testimony is valid as a verbal event, an enunciation that can be studied as a positioning of the subject, beyond the linguistic modes of text analysis, by focusing on the “taking place” of discourse (2002, 145). The archival impulse in David Antin, Susan Howe, and Vanessa Place presides over this reinvestment of the position of the poet as subject in an enunciative relationship that is transformative not only of the material it involves but and above all of the parties that interact in its context. Their discourses are Foucauldian “propositions” to address the defectiveness of our relationships to the mass of archived discourses that await reenactment.

To eventually return to Derrida, and Freud, the part played by the archive in this process is to struggle in vain against the destructive power of the death drive. It is a prop to the enunciative work of the witness, a prosthetic memory to counter the silent “archivolithic” action of the death drive.

It will always have been archive-destroying, by silent vocation.

Allowing for exceptions. [...] the archivolithic drive is never present in person, neither in itself nor in its effects. It leaves no monument, it bequeaths no document of its own. As inheritance, it leaves only its erotic simulacrum, its pseudonym in painting, its sexual idols, its masks of seduction: lovely impressions. These impressions are perhaps the very origin of what is so obscurely called the beauty of the beautiful. As memories of death. (Derrida 1995, 14)

In the dialectics outlined by the works of David Antin, Susan Howe and Vanessa Place, the relationship to the archive produces these threatened simulacra, whose endangerment is signaled notably through iterativeness in Antin, illegibility in Howe, appropriation in Place. One might thus read the paradox of the archive as it expands and grows exponentially while remaining incomplete, defective and self-defeating, a sign of the fundamental fault in “archive fever” as it relentlessly (and expectedly) fails to counter our mortal condition.

And let us note in passing a decisive paradox to which we will not have the time to return, but which undoubtedly conditions the whole of these remarks: if there is no archive without



consignation in an *external place* which assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression, then we must also remember that repetition itself, the logic of repetition, indeed the repetition compulsion, remains, according to Freud, indissociable from the death drive. And thus from destruction. Consequence: right on what permits and conditions archivization, we will never find anything other than what exposes to destruction, in truth what menaces with destruction introducing, *a priori*, forgetfulness and the archiviolithic into the heart of the monument. ...The archive always works, and *a priori*, against itself. (Derrida 1995, 14)

The poetic practices that involve the archive tend to become the common denominator to many poetics over the past century, and they threaten the previously admitted pleasure principle of art to the benefit of a reality principle. They remain polemic and are relentlessly questioned in their creative dimensions because they produce the *simulacra* of a self-destructiveness that is inherent to the archive, and that are symptomatic of our collective death drive.

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