**Vesna Madžoski**

"You know why ants are so successful?" he asked me
for the thousandth time. "They co-*op*-er-ate."
"That's a hell of a good word—co-operation."
Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle* (1963)

# ORIGIN OF THINGS, or: Why archives?

## Searching for the specter

A crucial yet seldomly posed question today is that of the origin of *something.* The prevailing ideological framework, engaged in the production of the adversary, persistently asks about the origin of humans, so establishing more boundaries. At the same time, the simple question of the origin of an object would trigger a cascade of subsequent questions. It would undoubtedly disturb the illusory comfort of the modern subject, confronting them with the circumstances under which something was produced, conditions under which those who produce work, conditions that bring about the necessary raw materials, and so on. Blinded by the notion of immaculate conception, humanity continues to refrain from peering behind the curtain of spectacle and mirage.

On the other hand, we discover traces of things and their origin within the enchanting realms known as archives. Those inflicted by *archive fever*, as termed by Jacques Derrida, can alleviate their suffering by rendering it chronic, for a definite cure is unattainable: "It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there's too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself."[1] Within these realms, seemingly untouched by daylight for centuries, wondrous initiation rituals occur: encounters with fragments of those who, somewhere, at some point, left a trace of their existence, and which come to life in our hands, transforming the archive into a time capsule that irrevocably alters the present. Reality soon becomes surreal.

[1] Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression." *Diacritics*, Vol. 25, No.2 (Summer, 1995), p. 57. http://www.jstor.org/stable/465144

Archives are far from innocent; rather, they are sites teeming with ideological tension. In the context of the modern, human fixation on archiving, Derrida reminds us of the Greek word *arkhē*, which has a dual meaning: beginning (*commencement*) and command (*commandment*). Archives are in the domains of those who command and control, who are not merely custodians of the documents contained therein, but also possess a hermeneutical right and competency that grants them the power of consignment: unification, identification, classification, and interpretation of archives.[2] In other words, this position entails not just power over protected physical items but also power over historical discourse or the discourse of the beginning, or origin, derived from the tangible traces present. The archive's physical location can be regarded as the source from which power is disseminated, bestowing or revoking the symbolic authority to people who seek to access and interpret it.

According to Derrida,

> There is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and the access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation. *A contrario*, the breaches of democracy can be measured by (...) Forbidden Archives.[3]

The ideal archive, which every archivist aspires to create, is one that exists and operates as a singular corpus, a cohesive entity that cannot be fragmented or destroyed. The archival power to storage treats historical documents as larger, coherent stories, distinct images devoid of cracks. Or as Derrida says: "In an archive, there should not be any absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or secret which could separate (*secernere*), or partition, in an absolute manner."[4] Nonetheless, the situation is far from desired. Derrida advises that we identify an event or moment within each archive that facilitates a critical reading through a specific archeological method, as "the origin then speaks by itself."[5] Oftentimes, this moment manifests as a specter—an unidentifiable entity residing in an archive without our knowledge and control, which speaks yet never responds to questions from others. This specter completely destabilizes the archive, undermines the absolutist

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
[3] *Ibid*, pp. 10-11 in the footnote.
[4] *Ibid.*, p. 10.
[5] *Ibid.,* p. 58.

authority of the archivist over precious items, and depicts history as a narrative devoid of tension and contradictions. As Derrida teaches us "the archive always works, and a priori, against itself."[6] The specter embodies this illness, the archive's aspiration for self-destruction.

The archive's desire for self-destruction can be explained by its hypomnesic nature, specifically its origin as an external, technical model of the mental apparatus. According to Derrida, not even the archive can escape the instinct force haunting the mental apparatus—the death/aggression/destruction drive. The archive is built on a shaky foundation, constantly endangered by its inherent contradictions, its desire to remember, and its drive to erase from memory. On the other hand: "This contradiction is not negative, it modulates and conditions the very formation of the concept of the archive."[7] Derrida imagines a future explorer who, unlike his traditional predecessors, is unafraid to engage with the phantom, an entity that survives as a remnant of its own erasure, emerging from the rupture of the archive and caught between worlds. By following its traces, the archive specter allows us to access the archive and make new discoveries, without the control of the protectors.

**Specter-archive**

This article serves as an overview of one particular archive, currently being developed by Milica Pekić and Ana Adamović, which aims to recapitulate their own projects as part of *Kiosk*, an art organization established in Belgrade in 2002. This archive also seeks to document art practices that arose in the Belgrade and regional contemporary art scene throughout the first quarter of the 21st century. The project will result in a series of video recordings featuring interviews with artists and collectives who are redefining the art practice and the role of artists today, expanding their activities to their societal context. Rather than attempting the impossible task of searching for the specter in an archive that has not yet been created, I suggest that we regard this archive-to-come, still a work in progress, as a specter in its own right.

The use of this method is justified by the fact that specific practices that this archive would materialize are largely absent from formal institutions; traces of their existence are hardly found in the archives of prominent museums. This specterarchive may be said to have been born at the

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 14.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 90.

moment that these practices were expunged from the formal narrative of art. Thus, if we see it as a specter of the official art history narrative, we will recognize that it genuinely endeavors to tell us numerous things. At the same time, it haunts and perplexes even those who welcome it, giving unpleasant responses to questions that have yet to be formulated.

One of the questions that arise here is: why archives? Why can we only speak of these practices in terms of archive-to-come? According to Derrida, this should not come as a surprise given that we live in a time when everyone fervently wants to archive, and when everyone has caught the archive fever. The symptoms of this illness are "to have a compulsive, repetitive and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement."[8] One possible interpretation of establishing a new archive is the necessity to return to the nostalgic origins of *Kiosk*: the year 2002, when Serbian society formally started its transition period, which promised the long-awaited entry into the progressive world following the isolation in the 1990s.

However, this specter/archive shows that the situation within Serbian art production was far from ideal, contrary to the official narrative. At the same time, the economic and social order that began to emerge following the collapse of socialism served as an inspiration for artists to develop novel approaches and forms of organization. In a society succumbing to global alienation, a need for collective effort or the establishment of a collective arose, even if on a minor scale: at times, this involved collective action between the artists and the public, while at other times it entailed forming a collective as the entity engaging in artistic practice. Most of the time, these efforts were marked by a highly negligent approach to the archive of their own practices due to the intentionally non-material and ephemeral nature of the artwork, which complicated documentation, i.e., archiving. One way to address this, as proposed by this specter/archive, is to compile a series of interviews that resemble confessions rather than typical conversations conducted by individuals in front and behind the camera. What do these specters have to confess?[9]

At this moment, it is important to emphasize that while these confessions constitute a singular and unique collection for an archive-to-come, they bring diverse sensibilities, different languages, and varying formal strategies employed by each one. This should not hinder us from

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

[9] The author was allowed to look at the draft of the material containing interviews with Maja Bekan, Škart Group, the "Hop.La!" art group, Mladen Miljanović, the Ostavinska Gallery, Branko Cvjetičanin, Rena Rädle, and Vladan Jeremić.

opening the box containing various analogous concepts formulated in their confessions, which can serve as tools for understanding their artistic practices. In this collection, we find openness, inclination to processes, learning, conflict, personal relationships, play, rectification of social injustice, collective rather than participative practice, encounters, collaboration, uncertainty, abandonment of one's comfort zone, artistic-investigative-activistic endeavors, non-gallery approaches, intervention, pointing out new gaps and societal issues. According to the artists, this collection of concepts was envisioned as a counter-response to the prevailing tenets of contemporary art production, characterized by attributes such as closed, rigid, intellectually stultifying, falsely harmonic, alienated, devoid of desire to play, permeated by social injustice, favoring single authorship, lacking contact and desire to cooperate, having a predetermined conclusion, comfortably conformist, preferring the object resulting from artistic practice and a system of galleries that exchange them, non-interventionist attitude, indifference to emerging societal issues.

Initially, it may appear that these practices offer nothing new or original, rather echoing concepts that systems of contemporary art have addressed for decades. Formally speaking, many of these practices can be linked to transformations within so-called Western art from the 1960s onward, or compared to new forms of collective artistic efforts during Western expansion in the 1990s; however, doing so may entirely erase the messages these practices intended to convey. Instead of comfortably opting for the affirmation and glorification of their own artistic ego, and rather than producing works that may be commercialized or decorative pieces to embellish the walls of new authorities, these groups, these individuals, embarked on an unknown path, uncertain of what may lay ahead. Although never explicated, this practice demands complete devotion, submission, and fanaticism, rendering its practitioners unafraid to bring themselves to the brink of existence. They seek responsibility at places where it was promised, demanding opportunities for democratic dialogue and fighting for their right to articulate the Other. Believing in the power of art to transform society the way it transformed the artists themselves, they reveal by example to the world around them the potential that the future conceals. They are undoubtedly engaged in the continuous process of self-inquiry and self-reflection, identifying errors in their own practices that they have previously overlooked. Meanwhile, society around them is left with the task of self-inquiry and admitting errors made against artists, whether intentionally or not. A society that seeks to improve and render these practices more just closes its eyes and ears to the increasingly vocal outcries of workers in this field.

Nostalgia also arises from substantial loss, so the beginning of *Kiosk* may be seen as a traumatic juncture in the narrative of contemporary art in Serbia amid considerable political and social transformations. The defining characteristic of each attempt to establish a single identity (Serbian or any other) is violence, as Derrida tells us:

> The gathering into itself of the One is never without violence, nor is the self-affirmation of the unique, the law of the archontic, the law of consignation which orders to archive. Consignation is never without that excessive pressure (impression, repression, suppression) of which repression and suppression are at least figures.[10]

The chief mechanism of violence, whether it pertains to the archival urge or the unifying process of creating a Self, is repetition: "The One, as self-repetition, can only repeat and recall this instituting violence. It can only affirm itself and engage itself in this repetition."[11] The archive serves as a record of this violence, but it is also a way to control future events, as it not only documents previous events but also produces them, establishing criteria for the archiving of events to come.[12] Therefore, controlling the archives means not only controlling the past but also the future.

Trapped in a cycle of repetition, the question that begs to be raised is, what alternatives are left for the subject to evade repetition and its inherent violence? Derrida establishes a short yet theoretically significant link between the establishment of an archive and the creation of art through the activity of the death drive: "The death drive tends thus to destroy the hypomnesic archive, except if it can be disguised, made up, painted, printed, represented as the idol of its truth in painting."[13] One possible way to interpret these words is that the repetition and destruction of memories can be evaded by transforming the death drive into art, creating traces that are „memories of death."[14] The open issue is whether Derrida's historians of the future are possible: historians unafraid of the archival specter's monologue, those honoring the "future to come of the future to come," no longer being classic historians but rather *historians of the promise*.[15]

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[10] *Ibid*., pp. 50-51.
[11] *Ibid*., p. 51.
[12] Cf. *Ibid*., p. 17.
[13] *Ibid*., p. 14.
[14] See: *Ibid*., p. 14.
[15] "To let a photographic specter or Freud's phantom in the monologue speak, it is the sign of a respect before the future to come of the future to come. Thus he is no longer a historian. Good sense tells us there is no history or

At the conclusion of this brief overview, I feel compelled to remark upon the global threat that archives currently face – the complete destruction of digital repositories. Prominent portals housing digital copies of centuries-old knowledge in written form are at risk of being destroyed due to the greediness of publishing houses. The positive potential of the internet, long overshadowed by big capital, would thus be irrevocably destroyed. However, there is always a solution; as Henry Warwick articulates, these valuable documents, which every individual must access freely, can be saved through collective action: "Thus: the most permanent option is tactical and commutative – as I noted over a decade ago – *people curating personal libraries and sharing them.* Online libraries require offline repositories of their content."[16] Capturing these libraries will only benefit their captors, augmenting their control of the information and knowledge contained within. Consequently, familiarizing oneself with archive specters will be almost impossible, as will contesting official historical narratives. A lesson derived from observing fragments of art practices in our specter/archive is the significance of authenticity compared to originality prioritized by the contemporary art system: how to be genuinely authentic and remain true to oneself, regardless of circumstances. The loss of archives will result in the disappearance of many messages left by our predecessors, intended to prevent us from wandering as they had wandered. In terms of collaborations, a significant topic in contemporary art practices, archives continue to remind us of the distinction between collaboration and collaborationism.

archive of the future to come. A historian as such never looks to the future, which in the end does not concern him. But meaning something else altogether, is there a historian of the promise, a historian of the first door?" *Ibid*., p. 46.

[16] Henry Warwick, The Slow Cancellation of Online Libraries, Institute of Network Cultures, September 22, 2024, https://networkcultures.org/blog/2024/09/22/henry-warwick-the-slow-cancellation-of-online-libraries/