Online archives: remix the power

Introduction

In this essay I will center my discussion on the relation of online folkloric archives to power and the role of artistic intervention within the archive as strategy for bringing in to them a more human and disruptive logic.

The essay will begin by tracing the archive's historical ties to power and demonstrate how these relations are still present in apparently democratic folkloric online archives. Following that section it will look at online users' intervention within the archive, and how can these constitute a challenge to the archive's authority. Lastly it take at some examples of artistic projects that aim to bring the archive into more human proportions.

Archive and Power

In *Archive Fever* Derrida traces the meaning of the term "archive" to the Greek "arkheion" 'the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded'. It is in this location where official documents are written and safeguarded. The *archons* are not only entitled to secure the official documents, but also to interpret them in order to validate them. From such interpretations the law was called and applied (pp: 9-10).

Foucault's critic of the archive in *The Archeology of Knowledge* follows similar lines. Foucault describes it as a validating system, which determines what is entitled to constitute a statement. The archive is not a repository of remainings from a culture or civilization, but a institution that validates the interpretation of the contained documents; It is 'the reason why so many things, said by so many men, for so long, have not emerged in accordance with the same law of thought, or the same circumstances' (p.145).

The role of the archive as a power institution becomes even more prominent if we consider Foucault's

introductory remark stating that the document has gained a similar status, in contemporary history, to that of monuments in traditional history. Contemporary history takes the documents of the past and studies and organizes them, inserts them into a lineage and a context, makes them relevant (pp:7-8). Such a process will inevitably bring an authority and an unquestionable statues to the document. Those who are given permission to interpret the documents, the contemporary *archons*, are entrusted with the knowledge system that both documents and archive legitimate. The archive gives permission to those reading the documents to impose their interpretation on those who are not granted such privilege. 'No matter how open or repressed, the official archive was the last word ... It was a secular cognate of the divine word: its matter-of-fact was equivalent to the word of God' (Klein) .

Online Folkloric Archive

Although acknowledging the role of the archive as a tool for enforcing law and validating knowledge, Appadurai also takes into consideration the everyday life archive, the archive that belong to the individual, to the family, to the community. In his view, this mutant online folkloric archive, which allows individuals to play an active role 'is gradually freed from the orbit of the state and its official networks'(p.16).

Norman Klein however adopts a more skeptical position, and sees the hidden agendas covered by the democratic possibilities offered by the online folkloric archives. Although allowing, or even being mostly constituted through the users' intervention, online archives are often scripted spaces, with an underlying ideology. By looking at what is excluded from an archive the ideology becomes apparent; The example of Facebook where pictures of smashed heads are acceptable while nudity or "photoshoped" images are censored (Gawker) gives us an idea of the ideology ruling it. In short, the limits of what can and cannot be stated constitute the ideology governing online archives. Such a predetermined space will inevitably restrict the range of possible discourses, and thus turn the online folkloric archive into a ideological space. As a consequence, as Klein notes, 'in the US, archiving has turned into collective schizophrenia; into ten thousand unofficial lies and racist innuendos, guided by wealthy right-wing investors ... a blizzard of factoids that poisoned what remained of our national politics'. It can be said that while creating the illusion of an empowering and liberating space where citizens can openly express their views, the online folkloric archive has the capacity to mislead and control their political efforts. We can classify this process as soft-control, a modulation typical of a society of control as depicted by Deleuze. The individual is not deprived from the right to express her view, but her view will be modulated by the channel used to make it public. If her view fits within the ideology it can stay, otherwise it disappears surreptitiously and painlessly as if it has never existed.

Remixing the Archive

Although most online archives are, like most physical ones, not neutral sites and do play monitoring and validating role, there is a fundamental difference: they exist online. This simple fact can completely change the rules of the game since it allows access to anyone with an Internet connection. Another relevant difference comes from the fact that the contained documents are digital entities, which makes them infinitely reproducible, allowing for their storage in any hard-drive, while they still remain present in the archive.

The online archive also puts in motion a process by which once a document is put online it ceases to belong to its owner, and begins its own online life. As Domenico Quaranta puts it: 'Archives, libraries and museums came into being expressly for this reason: to preserve our collective externalized memory for future generations. However, the Internet does more than refine this process and make it more inclusive. Everything we put on the Web ceases to belong to us' (p.13). If we add to this concoction the

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possibilities offered by digital manipulation, we are in the presence of an open invitation for the appropriation and manipulation of the (digital) documents present in the archive. Such possibility results in the materialization of different versions of a document, as in the image(s) of missiles being fired by coalition forces, portrayed in Olivier Laric's piece *Versions*.

Although the possibility for such an appropriative process marks a clear distinction from the physical archive Quaranta adverts for dangers of letting the majority of online archives be managed solely by databases and algorithms (p.14). Quaranta argues for the necessity of 'professional surfers ... that vast community of people who collect, re-organize, vote, tag, remix, manipulate, and redistribute Internet content'. Quaranta sees them as the human element necessary to the database, which can 'redirect it, discipline it, and make it less mathematical, and more aleatory. In a word, they need to adapt it to human memory'(p.16). One could say that through an incessant activity of appropriation, indexation, and transition, users transform the online database or repositories into living archives.

Let's not fool ourselves and think that the democratization of the archive can be achieved by the mentioned users' activity. The archive administrators are still the ones who decide what stays and what is discarded. Nonetheless storage, transmission, and manipulation are decisively empowering features offered by the online archive.

Digital storage and online transmission makes possible for a document, which has once taken part of an archive, to quickly spreads to other archives, blogs, emails, tweets, and hard-drives. The document ceases not only to belong to its author but also to the archive where it first appeared.

Digital manipulation also allows for the materialization of a multitude of versions of an image, that range from the subtle to the explicit, or even the absurd. These versions have the effect of not only bringing us to ask whether the official "original" document might also have been a product of manipulation, but they also have the capacity to question the archive's authority. In presenting more than one variation of a document the official version might begin to loose its "original" status. Once it began, the questioning process will eventually spread to the figure of the archive as "the last word". And by allowing fictitious documents to enter its space the archive begins to adjust to human collective memory, it starts to become a space of dialogue between facts and fiction, a site of emergence of discourses, rather than a figure that legitimates power and knowledge. According to Klein: 'Archive is often collective memory. It is material culture; which is quite different from a divine instrument of that state. Collective memory is displacement, erasure, evasion and distortion. To some degree, in archives, fact and fiction coexist strangely, in what historians used to call collective psyche'

Radio Liberté, Equalité, Beyoncé

My recent project [Liberté, Equalité, Beyoncé (LEB)](#) constitutes of a prototype of an online radio station, created from audio material continuously retrieved from [archive.org](#) , and arranged in a semi-random stream of hourly programs.
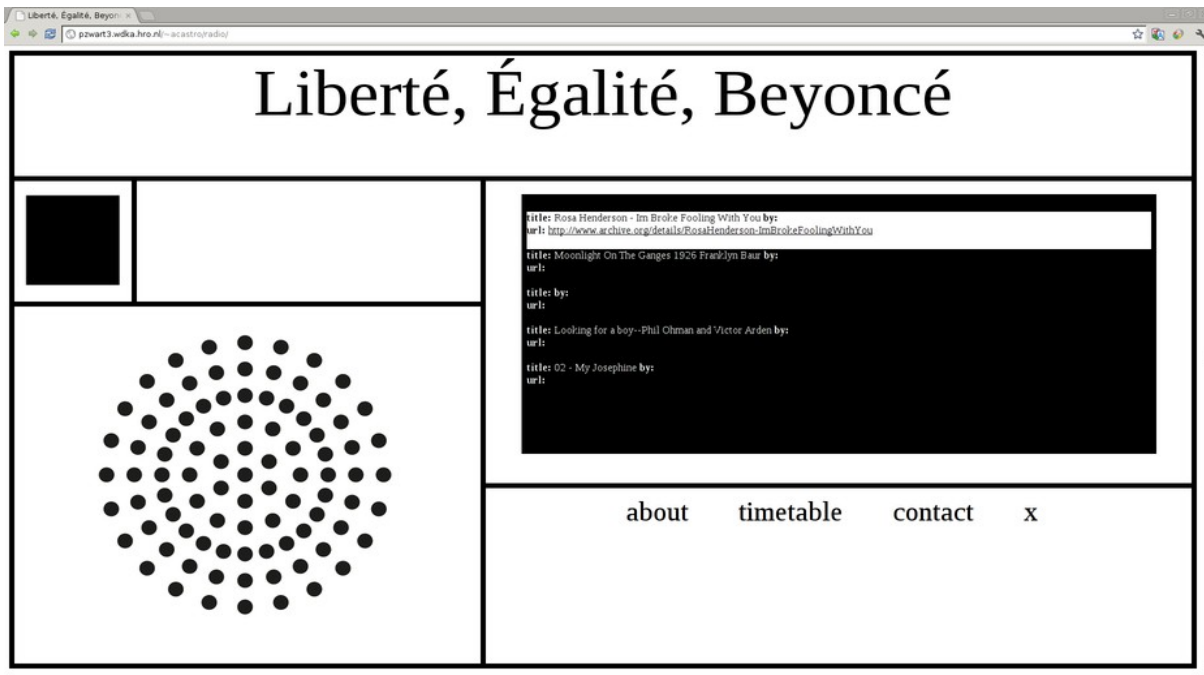
My decision to employ the resources and content offered by archive.org to create LEB was based on the fact that this archive offers a great diversity of easily accessible of audio-visual material, mainly collected and maintained by an active community of users; and so far it has appeared as a fairly neutral and non restricted (although religious content thrive and one comes hardly across nudity).

While exploring the possibilities of archive.org I began to ask myself whether it could be considered an archive, or if it was an online repository of audio-visual material. If we follow Quaranta's previously mentioned statement that the online database can only become an archive if it adapts to human memory, through a process of appropriation, manipulations, indexation and transmission, archive.org, as well as many other online projects such as Wikipedia, Open Street Map, or even Youtube, can be considered as archives, since the users intervene heavily on its contents. The community of users determines if the database is a repository or an archive.

Nonetheless, I see LEB fitting within a different type intervention within the archive. LEB tries to approach the archive at large, by taking as its material the whole audio collection. It does so not by picking random items from the entire audio collection, but trying to form groups of coherent document, which are turned into programs. However, this is just one among many current artistic projects which deal with online archives by approaching vast areas of their databases. I believe these works have the potential to open cracks within the mathematical logic and overwhelming dimension that characterize these structures and mold them into humanly comprehensible forms. They are able to create other types of interfaces to the database. Examples of these artistic approaches to the archive's database can be found in the project such as James Bridle's *The Iraq War: A Historiography of Wikipedia Changelog 2006-2009* in which the change log of the Wikipedia article on the Iraq war is compiled into several books. Or *Search by Image* by Sebastian Schmieg where Google Image Search service is used to create

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algorithmic videos, based on Google's "understanding" of the fed images.

It is nonetheless curious that these works employ algorithms to deal with the database, in order to re-arrange it under a less mathematical and algorithmic logic. And it is even more ironic the inherently narrative structure that these projects adopt – a radio station, a book collection, and a video – that seems almost opposed to the horizontal and nonlinear nature of the database. As pointed out by Lev Manovich 'the world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts, and other data records, it is only appropriate that we will be moved to model it as database - but it is also appropriate the we would want to develop the poetics, aesthetics, and ethics of this database' (p.40). It seems that in order to approach the database in a meaningful away, to make sense out of it, to question it, we are still recurring twentieth century media and narrative formats. Nonetheless, these approaches seem to constitute answers to the question posed by Manovich of how can the new possibilities for storage and organization offered by digital databases lead into new kinds of narratives (p.54). Probably in near future we will see the artistic exploration of databases break away from the narrative, and finding other ways to critically and critically approach these colossal data collections.

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