

## CUMMA PAPERS #18

CUMMA (CURATING, MANAGING AND MEDIATING ART) IS A TWO-YEAR, MULTIDISCIPLINARY MASTER'S DEGREE PROGRAMME AT AALTO UNIVERSITY FOCUSING ON CONTEMPORARY ART AND ITS PUBLICS. AALTO UNIVERSITY IS LOCATED IN HELSINKI AND ESPOO IN FINLAND.

# SUSPENDING THE ARCHIVE

## AN INTERVIEW WITH STEFAN NOWOTNY

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Working with archives is a central issue in curating—the rules and limitations around what is called an archive influence most of our practices. Contemporary theory and philosophy questions the archive to render it inoperative, rather than making it operate in new ways. Stefan Nowotny is a researcher, philosopher and lecturer at Goldsmiths in the University of London who also engages in translation projects and collaborations with visual and performance artists. He visited Aalto University in autumn 2014 with a workshop and lecture as part of CuMMA's Discourse Series. In his conversation, Nowotny pondered the problematic notion of cultural translation, the difference between language and culture, and the dimensions of an archive.

DURING THE DISCOURSE SERIES LECTURE, YOU TALKED ABOUT ARCHIVE AND TESTIMONY, PRESENTING FOUR CONDITIONS INHERENT TO UNDERSTANDING THE ARCHIVE. THIS LED YOU TO SPECULATE ABOUT THE NEED TO 'SUSPEND THE ARCHIVE' IN ORDER TO ACTUALISE ITS UNDERSTANDING. CAN YOU EXPAND ON THESE FOUR CHARACTERISTICS AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE 'SAYABILITY' CONDITION?

In line with a number of recent theorisations about the archival function, I wanted to highlight the fact that archives are always more than just collections of documents or 'knowable' contents. Concurrently, in order to counter the limitations of a given archive, it is insufficient to simply add new documents or accounts to existing archives, or replace material with others considered 'more appropriate'. Rather, archives perform a regulatory function around what we can or cannot know—or say.

This can be learned from works like Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge*. And this is also why I spoke about the critical task of 'suspending' the archive's functionality, because if we understand that the archive regulates what we are able to know or say, then we need to suspend it—or make it inoperative—in order to know differently. However, I imply that to 'know differently' is not the same as simply learning, knowing or communicating new and other things that weren't part of our (or someone else's) prior knowledge.

Defining the following characteristics of the archive was an attempt to provide a conceptual framework that could articulate some crucial contemporary concerns.

- The archive is 'logological' in that it both provides and imposes a logic onto what is said, what can be said, and what counts as a meaningful statement. However in doing so, the archive operates on a threshold which, as Foucault clearly stated, "separates us from what we can no longer say, and from that which falls outside our discursive practice". Hence, the archive regulates not only what we can say, but also what we can not say.

- Yet the archive not only separates us from “what we can no longer say”, but also from what we cannot listen to. It seems crucial to expand the scope of Foucault’s argument in this way, because how can we listen to something that doesn’t ‘speak to us’? How is it possible to make sense of something said by someone other than ‘ourselves’ when it ‘falls outside our discursive practice’? And finally, who are ‘we’ in all of this? Or how is a discursive ‘we’ supported or even constructed through archival practices? To be considered here is, for example, Gayatri Spivak’s claim that “the subaltern cannot speak” because “she is not able to be heard?” More generally, this expansion introduces a relational dimension into the question of the archive.
- The archive is hypomnesic, not anamnesic. This is in direct reference to Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever* and draws upon a distinction made especially in Platonic philosophy. This distinction reminds us of the importance of an external and material carrier of whatever might be registered in an archive, and thus of whatever we may memorise or commemorate through an archive. We don’t simply ‘recall’ things or snatch them from oblivion (anamnesis). Rather, we engage in certain “techniques of repetition” (Derrida) when we memorise or commemorate; and these involve external materialities, which profoundly affect or even configure the very ways in which we memorise or commemorate.
- Rather than a passive container of records and registers or a set of protocols set up to account for things, the archive is a whole dynamism, a ‘doing’ through and through. In a way, this sums up the three previous points, but it also specifically reminds us that archives will always ‘actively seek’ to defend themselves against anything that cannot be processed in accordance with their operating principles. They will do so by regulating significations, categories, predications and enunciative positions, and by making whatever is not recognisable (and thus challenging) conform or be discarded. As Derrida suggested, it may well be that a self destructive drive operates in the very heart of the archive’s “repetition compulsion”. The flipside of this, however, is that the archive will also not cease to defend itself, even to the death.

TAKING INTO ACCOUNT MICHEL FOUCAULT'S NOTION OF THE ARCHIVE AS "THE SPACE OF SAYABLE", HOW CAN WE CONTEST THE ARCHIVE, SINCE WE ARE WITHIN ITS RULES AND ARE SPEAKING FROM KNOWLEDGE BASED ON THAT SAME ARCHIVE? ARE THERE PROPER QUESTIONS WE COULD USE IN ORDER TO DISCOVER MORE AND 'SEE THE INVISIBLE'; 'HEAR THE INAUDIBLE' AND 'SAY THE UNSAYABLE'?

First of all, I would like to emphasise that in spite of what has been stated about the archive, it does not coincide with everything that is enunciated. The archive may limit the realm of the 'sayable', but it does not completely confine the realm of the 'enunciable', 'talkable' or 'gesturable'. Enunciations that do not comply with the archive surround us all the time, as a polyphony that is not (and cannot be) recognised or represented by any archive. In view of this, I would describe the task of contesting the archive through an amazingly condensed passage from Stefano Harney's and Fred Moten's book *The Undercommons*: "Our task is the selfdefense of the surround".

Secondly, the task to question or contest the archive not only involves considerations about what we're able to say or ask, but also what we're able to listen to. The aforementioned quote suggests a significant shift with regard to the acting subject. The task is precisely to enable this shift: 'our' task is about a defense of something that is not 'ours', a "selfdefense" of someone who 'we' are not. In the same way, listening involves the task of paying attention to things we might be unprepared for, which may be expressed, gestured towards or even wrapped in silence despite the questions we've asked. In this sense, there are no 'proper' questions if what we deem to be a 'proper' question confines what we are ready to listen to. Or to put it differently, raising questions—which, in a more radical sense, are actual questions rather than gentle ways of imposing registers of eligible responses—always involves the task of questioning ourselves, both as the one asking questions and receiving answers.

Of course, the archive will constantly interfere with this because, as you say, it forms and informs the knowledges on which our questions are based. This is precisely why I wanted to talk about possible ways of suspending the archive. After all, every ability (hence also the ability of 'doing' the archive) is tied with the capacity to not actually be performed, but suspended.

There are multiple forms of expressions, enunciations and exchanges which constantly "surround" the archive from outside and within. They coexist with or even precede archives, yet do not translate into knowledges or statements produced and governed by the archive. The term suspension relates to an activity in which we are already engaged or involved. Usually we would simply continue this engagement or

involvement, and even if we suspend it, we may very likely reengage in this activity sooner or later. Suspension, however, may allow us to consider, weigh and contest not only its results and outcomes at a given moment, but the activity itself and the ways in which these results and outcomes are constituted and regularised through an engagement that is usually our own. In this sense, we are only ever able to suspend the archive precisely because we are always already speaking, or listening, from within it.

YOU NOTED THAT WITH THE UNSAYABLE COMES THE ISSUE OF TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION. YOU ARGUED THAT THE TRANSLATOR SHOULD NOT GIVE AN INTERPRETATION OF WHAT'S BEING SAID OR WRITTEN WHEN TRANSLATING PHILOSOPHICAL TEXTS. DO YOU THINK IT IS POSSIBLE TO NOT TAKE A CERTAIN STANCE, EVEN IF THE TASK IS JUST TO TRANSLATE?

I didn't mean to suggest that the translator should not give an interpretation, or not take a certain stance. This would most probably be an impossible task, and it is not coincidental that the English word for a translator who facilitates oral communication is 'interpreter'.

Technically, the challenge of translation moves back and forth between a certain demand for rigorousness and the demand for 'making sense', which we can only do from some kind of situatedness. In theoretical accounts of translation, this tension has long been discussed in terms of the problem of 'fidelity' and 'license' in translation. These terms seem to highlight the relationship between an individual translator and the text to be translated. However, the practice of translation may also be conceived of as a social relation. And if we think of various contexts in which translation is indispensable—from plenary sittings of the European Parliament to interviews with asylum seekers conducted by state officials—then it becomes very obvious that translational practices not only 'render' texts more or less faithfully, but indeed articulate social and political relations in very different ways.

Therefore, I suggest a move away from focussing on 'interpretation' in discussions around translation. Instead, I draw on the work of translation theorist Naoki Sakai to rather think about translation in terms of modes of address. Here, the question about the stance we take in translation always requires we ask ourselves other questions, such as: How are we being addressed when translating? Or how do we make ourselves into addressees when translating a text that hasn't been written to us in the first place? And how are we addressing those who will read or listen to our translation?

DURING AN INTERVIEW FOR THE 2011 EXHIBITION *TRANSLATION AS A MODE* HELD IN VIENNA, YOU SPOKE WITH CURATORS BIRGIT RINAGL AND FRANZ THALMAIR ABOUT THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF “CULTURAL TRANSLATION”. WHAT DOES THIS TERM MEAN, AND HOW DOES IT INFORM MUSEUMS AND CURATORIAL WORK?

In this interview, I was trying to problematise the very notion of “cultural translation”. I didn’t say that it was impossible, if only because I would rather work with other notions and concepts. It is true that the term “cultural translation” has had a strong presence in a number of recent debates, but it seems to me that it is predicated on an unreflected analogy drawn between ‘languages’ and ‘cultures’. This analogy has its own problematic history if we consider, for example, its role in the political construction of various nationalisms.

Moreover, even if thinking about translation as a linguistic phenomenon, it is hard to escape the understanding that translation is something taking place between two pre-given unities (for example languages and linguistic communities) that are homogeneous in themselves. However such ‘unities’ (insofar as they exist at all) are already the result of processes of standardisation, which in turn depend on certain regimes of translation. Translation never simply ‘bridges the gap’ between languages without simultaneously confirming, consolidating, defining and codifying, or even establishing this gap in the first place.

The idea of ‘culture(s)’ poses its own very complicated problems, which I can’t discuss here in detail. However we may ask ourselves, as I suggested in the aforementioned interview, “how it came about that everything is translated today into issues of ‘culture(s)’”. There is indeed a translation that takes place here as well—not between different ‘languages’ or ‘cultures’, but in the ways in which we picture and conceptualise the world we inhabit. And this translation certainly informs museums and curatorial work— indeed, it operates at their very heart.

IF WE CONSIDER AN ARCHIVE TO BE ORGANISED, CATEGORISED RECORDS WITH A SPECIFIC ORDER AND LOGIC TO THEIR COLLECTING, AND AT THE SAME TIME WE KNOW THAT EVERY ARCHIVE IS INCOMPLETE (THAT ALL UNSAYABLE HISTORICITY IS NOT INCLUDED), THEN HOW COULD WE WORK WITH THE DOMINANT EMPTINESS WE ARE AWARE OF AND THINK ABOUT ARCHIVES AS HEGEMONIC AND AUTHORITATIVE COLLECTIONS? IN OTHER WORDS: HOW DO WE WORK WITH SOMETHING WHEN WE DON'T KNOW WHAT IT IS?

In general terms, I would say that there are two main approaches. The first is to try and destabilise dominant or hegemonic categories, discourses and modes of display, which is not an easy process because the mere fact that we might have embraced the idea 'that every archive is incomplete' does not assure us that the archive, as a dynamism, is not continuing to perform its function. The second approach is that we try to engage with the 'surround' of the archive, that is, the enunciations, gestures and practices which "fall outside our discursive practice" (Foucault). Of course again, this is all but an easy task.

On the other hand, we engage with things or persons that 'we don't know' all the time: we encounter them when going to other places or just around the next corner, we learn about them, we become friends with them, we fall in love with them—and in all of this we keep encountering what 'we don't know', even in our most intimate relations. So why shouldn't we 'work' with what we don't know in order to explore what our work is all about? The point about contesting the archive is not that we understand its incompleteness and then try to make it complete. The point is precisely that we learn to suspend it when we encounter a trace of something (or someone) we don't know, instead of instantly trying to incorporate such traces into what we know. This of course involves processes, experiences, and also a readiness to become someone we haven't been before encountering these processes and experiences.

IF HISTORICAL ARCHIVES ARE ORGANISED 'SAYABILITIES' (FOR EXAMPLE, 'OBJECTIVE' HEGEMONIC STATEMENTS), THEN WHICH TOOLS COULD THE SUPERSTES DISCOURSE USE IN ORDER TO MITIGATE THE ARCHIVE'S NEUTRALITY? ALSO, CONSIDERING THAT THE CONTEMPORARY ARCHIVE IS IN THE MAKING, DO YOU CONCEIVE OF ARCHIVE SUSPENSION AS A POSSIBILITY TO HELP LIBERATE THE FUTURITIES BURIED IN THE PAST?

I spoke about the superstes—which in Latin means both 'survivor' and 'witness'—in order to address in more detail a type of enunciation which, to a certain extent, falls outside a given discursive practice: testifying speech. I suggested that we consider the following fragment from a lost work by Roman playwright Plautus as an important reference to this subject: *Nunc mihi licet quidvis loqui: nemo hic adest superstes* ("Now I am allowed to say everything I would like; there is no witness present").

It seems clear that these words are spoken by someone who has an interest in maintaining a certain order of sayabilities, whereas the sheer possibility of a superstes being present in this speech situation evokes some kind of 'fear of suspension' of these very sayabilities. In the presence of a witness, there is no longer undisturbed license to say everything one wants to say—even if the statements put forward may be well-ordered according to a given order of sayabilities.

This may help to clarify what I mean by "suspending the archive": I am not dreaming about dismantling the archive altogether. I would even be very hesitant to claim there is such a thing as a 'discourse' of the superstes, which could challenge the discursive order of the archive. And I am also somewhat sceptical about strategies that attempt to transform existing archives by alternative ones: even if they take into account that an archive cannot easily be dismantled, they often tend to ignore or downplay the fact that not all enunciations easily translate into a discourse. What I am interested in are moments of suspension, like the one evoked by the quoted fragment.

And yes, this is also about futurities buried in the past, because whoever and whatever was silenced in the past was not only violated in a bygone moment of time, but also deprived of a possible future. I don't think, however, that these futurities buried in the past can actually be 'liberated'. History is not reversible, if only for the fact that it is not a collection of things that happened, but lives that have been lived, and deaths that have been died.

LET US FOR A MOMENT INSIST ON THE MATERIAL DIMENSION OF WHAT CURATORS OFTEN CALL ARCHIVES AND/OR COLLECTIONS. DO YOU PLACE ANY IMPORTANCE IN SEEING AND LEARNING FROM PRIMARY SOURCE DOCUMENTS? IS THERE ANYTHING OTHER THAN HEGEMONIC PROMISE WHEN ENGAGING WITH OBJECTS, THEIR CATEGORISATION AND ORGANISATION?

Let me first say that I think the question of the archive, as discussed here, should not be too quickly conflated with other—albeit related—questions about collections, corpora, bodies of possible references or evidences. The concept of the archive raises an important and specific question. This question is not primarily about the materials assembled or accounted for, but about the principles which govern the very act of assembling or accounting (and hence also the precise function attributed to whatever has been assembled or accounted for). We should not forget that the Greek word *arkhe*, from which ‘archive’ is derived, translates into both ‘principle’ and ‘rule’. Or, in Derrida’s words, that it “names at once the commencement and the commandment”. I quote Derrida here because his *Archive Fever* opens with suggesting an important, only seemingly paradoxical, consequence to be drawn from this if one wants to problematise the archive: “Let us not begin at the beginning... ”

To more directly answer your question, yes I do consider ‘primary’ sources and documents highly important. Referring to such sources and documents, however, doesn’t exclude us from asking in which sense they can be called ‘primary’, how they were produced and preserved so as to bring something to our attention in the first place, and which other sources and documents weren’t produced or preserved. And it doesn’t prevent us from questioning which precise function existing sources and documents are given in the production of knowledges. For example, ‘primary’ sources certainly have a crucial function in order to establish historical facts or counter ‘revisionist’ attempts to deny such facts on the basis of arbitrary arguments (for example, by simply trying to raise vague suspicions against what has been established as a fact, regardless of whatever amount of research and complex consideration may have been undertaken about the subject in question). Yet there may still be a point in questioning beyond the sources or the facts themselves—the ways in which their specific function might dominate the kind of knowledges we endorse, thus hindering our access to, or interaction with, other possible knowledges (for example, the lives actually lived in given circumstances, and the experiences and potentialities expressed through these lives).

After all, hegemony never resides in ‘objects’ themselves, but precisely in how we engage with them.

TODAY WE SEE AN INCREASING AMOUNT OF NEW ARCHIVES, INCLUDING MARGINAL KNOWLEDGES AND SUBALTERN COLLECTIONS. HOW DOES THIS CHANGE THE DISPROPORTIONAL RELATION OF INSTITUTIONALISED, HEGEMONIC ARCHIVES AND SHOW NEW WAYS OF DEALING WITH HERITAGE? AND DOES THE NEW TECHNOLOGY GIVE THOSE SUBALTERN CONTEXTS A CHANCE TO COLLECT, WRITE AND OPEN THEIR OWN MEMORIES AND HISTORIES, OR ARE THEY LIMITED TO FRAMED METAPHORICAL SPACES THAT LEAVE TRACES TO BECOME OBJECTS OF OTHER PURPOSES (KEEPING IN MIND THAT THE PERIPHERY IS NOT FREE OF HIERARCHIES ITSELF)?

To my mind, there is an enormous ambivalence towards the role of new technologies which extends beyond the immediate context of our discussion. On one hand, it's true that new technologies enable marginalised voices to express themselves, maintain or build social relations that are important to them, and provide new circuits of communicative exchange. On the other hand, this doesn't in itself mean that hegemonic relations are actually being transformed. More importantly, these technologies conform with new regimes of representation and self-representation, which have an impact not only on existing proportions or disproportions of representation, but also on how subjects and groups invest themselves into new modalities of (self)representation.

So yes, I do believe that it is necessary to think carefully about contemporary ways of framing symbolic spaces, and certainly not only with regard to what you call the 'periphery'. Like institutions, technologies were never simply a means to facilitate the achievement of predefined ends; they transform the lives we live individually, relationally, and in terms of our sense of belonging. To give a very simple example: social media may help us to have, or keep in touch with, a great number of 'friends' while simultaneously modifying or even transforming the meaning 'friendship' has to our lives. And why shouldn't something similar apply to the 'heritage' we assume or renounce, the 'history' we commemorate or question, or the 'archive' we intend to construct or deconstruct?

## BY SUGGESTING THE SUSPENSION OF THE ARCHIVE, WHAT DO YOU (WE) HOPE FOR?

What I hope for is that through practices of suspension (or ways of rendering the archive inoperative), things that are not sayable may to some extent become sayable, or at least interfere with existing regimes of sayability. However, importantly, 'becoming sayable' is not simply about the replacement, complementation or countering of existing sets of statements through new ones. It is about abilities and about ways of enabling new modes of both saying and listening. Moreover, I would like to recall a sentence Arthur Schnitzler wrote in 1911 that significantly resonates with Freud's psychoanalysis: "The soul is a vast domain." Anarchival enunciations are a vast domain too, and I would hope for new ways of relating to them: ways that go beyond the alternative, between the outright dismissal of such enunciations, and the type of foreclosure that can be operated through even the most well-intended archival strategies of accounting for them.

**STEFAN NOWOTNY** is a philosopher based in London. He teaches at Goldsmiths, University of London, and is a member of the Vienna-based eipcp (<http://eipcp.net>). He has published widely on philosophical, political and art-related topics, coedited several anthologies, and coauthored the volumes *Instituierende Praxen. Bruchlinien der Institutionskritik* (w/ G. Raunig, 2008) and *Übersetzung: Das Versprechen eines Begriffs* (w/ B. Buden, 2008). He is also a coeditor of the book series 'Es kommt darauf an. Texte zur Theorie der politischen Praxis' and is a translator from both English and French into German.

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