

Opening up the Image of Possibilities through Archival Gestures

by Anik Fournier

Processes of archiving are becoming ever more pervasive with online platforms that enable greater access to, and manipulation of, audio visual material. Whereas the word archive points to the notions of preservation, origin, order, and authority, images circulate through increasingly entangled mediascapes via acts of appropriation, displacement and remediation performed by artists, advertisers, official media, and web users alike. Indeed, the artistic practice of media appropriation has never been closer to the practices of everyday life.ⁱ That said, in the past few months I have come across two artworks that offer a meditation on how new datascares challenge the general understanding of the archive and of acts of preservation in the art world and society at large.

As part of the 'Now is the Time' lecture series that recently took place here in Amsterdam, Kaja Silverman discussed an intervention that James Coleman staged in a Leonardo da Vinci show at the Louvre in the summer of 2003.ⁱⁱ His creation consisted of a wall text, four editing monitors, and a projection of the *Last Supper*. The wall text explained that Coleman's creation was meant to restore or reproduce [*restitué*] the works by da Vinci that could not otherwise be presented in the exhibition.

Coleman's *Last Supper* was projected above two doors in the exhibition space, recalling the emplacement of the fresco in the dining hall at the Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. Coleman entered set coordinates of the fresco into a database which then streamed a sequence of images fading into one another in live time. Close-ups revealing details of hands, paint peeling off the wall, gestures, and folds were interwoven with pans that moved slowly across large portions of the image, and even shots in which the fresco was presented in its entirety. Coleman's intervention was ephemeral and as soon as the exhibition ended, the database was destroyed.

This act completes the critique that the artist successfully initiated through the intervention. Far from simply representing a work that could not be exhibited, the reproduced images of the *Last Supper* raised question as to the nature of preservation and restoration of an art work and simultaneously drastically undermined the very notion of the original. The work brought to light the cultural conventions specific to the medium of painting in the Western tradition of art and revealed how these conventions are now inseparable from the image, one of the most reproduced images in the Western canon. The multiple perspectives perform this process, embodying years of scrutinizing art historical gazes and interpretations that invest the *Last Supper* with meaning. The art historical gaze is reinforced by the allusion to the slide projector, a practice that has recently gone digital in art history classes.

The close-ups reveal the textured surface and the layers of restoration and attempts to preserve the works authenticity. Coleman's intervention points to the fetishization we still have for the original image and the mourning that accompanies

its loss in our digital age. And yet, the close-ups of the traces of decay together with the idea of changing perspectives clearly point to the fact, as Silverman has argued, that the original image was lost the second da Vinci added his last touch to the work. Coleman's intervention therefore demonstrates how images are always already in a process of transformation.

The artwork of Linda Wallace, an Australian-born artist now living in Amsterdam, also consists of reusing preexisting images, creating databases that serve as the basis for her installations.ⁱⁱⁱ While working through archival processes, Wallace operates a slippage, whereby the archive no longer serves to preserve the past, but rather works through the transformative characteristics inherent in images to open-up the present into possible futures.

Living Tomorrow (2005) is a three channel database-driven installation piece in which Wallace has created an archive of images taken from the soap opera *The Bold and The Beautiful*, Dutch landscapes and architecture, surveillance cameras, and Muslim veils. The images are all subjected to a kaleidoscopic effect that turns them into geometric textured surfaces. A program designed by the artist randomly streams the images to three projectors and underscores them with subtitles, scripts that Wallace has written, or excerpts taken from "The Coming Wars" in the *New Yorker*, "A New Breed of Islamic Warrior is Emerging" from the *Wall Street Journal*, and a speech by Osama Bin Laden from 2004.^{iv} The result is a rough story line where the soap opera protagonists discuss the "world of appearances," our "dark age," and "spiritual vacuum," the "problem of oil," and where they claim they are "fighting networks with networks." Through the shuffling of images murders takes place, marriage proposals are made, and some refused because the blond protagonist claims that "she wants to wear the veil." Woven into these threads of narrative through which a fictive but distinctly Dutch social-cultural landscape emerges, is the highly mediated murder in 2004 of the Dutch Film producer Theo Van Gogh.

Whereas the juxtapositions and connections in *Living Tomorrow* strike the visitor as fictive and humorous, as the piece unfolds she is confronted with something more complex: the many social, cultural and political threads of a society being woven in a new way. Wallace's database does not document society, but rather, the morphing images together with haphazard connecting and disconnecting of audio visual material, speak of transformation and becoming. This shift has significant implications as to our concept of the archive. Here we see how imagery and narratives that are both local and yet tied into the global through mediatic networks can be reused to accommodate and shuffle the pluralisms of a society coming into being.

Although my analysis of each work could have been elaborated on extensively, my goal is to demonstrate the significant revisiting of the archive and archival processes they put forth. The question raised here is not to ask what is lost or what needs to be preserved in the image or work as it circulates through various databases, but rather what transformations occur in the image and what possibilities the emergent characteristics enable. If we can value an image for its immanent characteristics, and accept the fact that it is always already in the process of transformation, then there is no need to mourn the loss of the original. We need to see the beauty in the fact that "each form takes physical shape as it wanders," to borrow

Silverman's conclusive remarks on Coleman's intervention. "If we follow the logic of the images," as Bruno Latour has suggested, "they themselves pass into one other image"^v and in the process shed light on what forces are at play as they do so. While it is true that media reuse as an aesthetic practice is becoming indistinguishable from the practices of everyday (media) life, the two examples here are among many that demonstrate that it is still possible to open up a critical space from within this flow that reflects on, and contributes to, the ever shifting ontology of the image in our pervasive media landscape.

ⁱ For a nuanced discussion of the current shift from mass consumption to mass cultural production see Lev Manovich "The Practice of Everyday (Media) Life" in *Video Vortex Reader: Responses to YouTube*. Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures 2008.
<http://networkcultures.org/wpmu/portal/files/2008/10/vv_reader_small.pdf> , viewed 23 February 2009.

ⁱⁱ Kaja Silverman, lecture delivered at *Now is the Time: Art & Theory in the 21st Century*, organized by the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, University of Amsterdam, W139, SMBA and Metropolism. Amsterdam, 3 Oct. 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Linda Wallace has written extensively on media reuse in her doctoral dissertation, *media material: artefacts from the digital age*, Australian National University, Canberra, 2003 <<http://www.machinehunger.com.au/phd/index.html>> viewed 23 February 2009.

^{iv} <<http://www.machinehunger.com.au/LivingTomorrow/LTlinks.html>> , viewed 23 February 23 2009.

^v Bruno Latour, interviewed by Geert Lovink, "There Is No Information, Only Transformation" *Uncanny Networks: Dialogues with the Virtual Intelligentsia*. London: MIT, 2004 157.