Pearl Diving: A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting

An archive, an ark oriented towards a future, classifies and preserves against threat.
A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting, a project initiated by artist Amy Balkin in 2011, is an ongoing collection of contributed objects from global locations that may disappear under the impacts of climate change.
Returning to us from a speculative, or perhaps inevitable future, the project intervenes in our present as material witness, rhetorical gesture and ethical demand.
This Archive addresses not only future loss of place, but loss of once-stable grounds of knowledge, of locating ourselves, our place, our future. And the future of what is *not us.*

The archived objects are labelled using familiar terms: named locations, local then national; coordinates of longitude and latitude, not without histories and vantage points of their own. Then there are new cartographies and hierarchies of global positioning: the UN indexing of resilience to climate change. From Annex 1 and 2 industrial nations, to non-Annex 1, more vulnerable, or low-lying, to the least developed and able to respond.[1]
Antarctica, remains *unlisted*, an aporia in global administration.
Fig beetle, seaweed, butterfly wing, fossil dugong fragment, their fragility is bolstered by Latin classifications: specimens of kingdoms down to species, ordered and nameable.

Others - a plastic ring with barnacles and string - are assemblages, contingent.
A stained dollar bill from a flooded New York basement in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, now a symbol of *insecurity*. Objects listed by material, former usage or simple description, often with testimony from their contributor - stories of place, event, memory.

Although found in threatened locations, the objects do not necessarily originate there. Nomadic, carried by tides, currents and tempests, movements of capital, goods and labour, they are flotsam and jetsam entangled in global forces both human and non-human. They traverse scales of time and space, troubling these categories as they go. [2]
As hyperobject, climate change *undoes* representation, melts away former certainties enframing what we can see and know.[3] Just as there is no ideal vantage point from which to view, nor ideal moment, there is no *elsewhere and when* that is situated outside its reach.
The distribution of impact, agency and even responsibility are unevenly distributed: something the Archive registers. Accumulated actions, here, by some, have unimagined effects there, on others.

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[1] <u>Non-Annex I</u> Parties are mostly developing countries…especially vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change, including countries with low-lying coastal areas. Least developed countries (LDCs) by the United Nations are given special consideration under the Convention on account of their limited capacity to respond to climate change. https://unfccc.int/parties-observers

[2] Karen Barad, 'No Small Matter: Mushroom Clouds, Ecologies of Nothingness, and Strange Topologies of Spacetimemattering' in Tsing, A.L., Swanson, H.A.,Gan, E. and Bubandt, N. (eds) (2017) *Arts of living on a damaged planet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p106

[3] Timothy Morton (2013), *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

The loss of topographic integrity implied by sinking and melting means the collected objects will become traces of no-place. Place loses its margins, becomes fluid - as do categories that place defined: identities, citizenship, jurisdiction, to name but a few.

So could we locate the objects in time, say of *when* they are? How long ago did the forces of sinking and melting begin? Is this a story of deep time, before and beyond us. Or of colonialism, industrialisation, the carbon imaginary?

Or is it a story of *now*, our fear of *no future:* the project asks **who will be there (where?) to remember?**

Memories of the future, *not here, not yet,* already disrupt temporalities, topographies, oscillating between material presence and anticipated absence, between planetary scales and the minutiae of everyday material traces. A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting *marks*, rather than *represents* these disruptions, and in so doing, suggests how the objects hold open temporal and spatial imaginaries capable of traversing these scales.

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Let us return to the haunted objects, in themselves apparently so unremarkable or abject. They are indeed the 'rags and refuse'[4] of a world we can still remember. For Walter Benjamin it was in overlooked material fragments that the forces of history, of power and social relations, of revelation lay trapped. Freed from their past contexts, they could release their significance in, and for, the present.

In her introduction to Benjamin's essays in the volume 'Illuminations', under the subtitle The Pearl Diver, Hannah Arendt quotes Ariel's song from The Tempest,

> Of his bones are coral made,
> Those are pearls that were his eyes.
> Nothing of him that doth fade
> But doth suffer a sea-change
> Into something rich and strange.[5]

Benjamin, the rag-picker, is cast as the diver who searches the depths, the past, for what has been transformed by time, by the sea, into pearls. Object-thought-fragments, rich and strange, surface in the present, in all their unforeseen value, agency and urgency.

The transfiguration of objects – found, appropriated, situated, collected – is a long-established strategy of art, extracting previously unimagined meaning and critical potential from the objects' contextual and material registers.

Ruined objects, '(b)roken-down matter' in Benjamin's term, could then be elevated to the status of allegory.[6] The historic object, suffering sea-change, revealed agency in its *future*

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[4] Walter Benjamin, (2002 [1999]), *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge and London: Belknap Press, p460.

[5] Hannah Arendt, in Benjamin. W, (1988) *Illuminations,* trans. H. Zohn, New York: Schocken Books, p.38.

[6] Walter Benjamin, (2002 [1999]), *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Cambridge and London: Belknap Press, H2, 6, p207

significance. Importantly, the pearl also reveals the *pearl-diver:* we must do justice to the 'concrete historical situation of the *interest* taken in the object.'[7]

Can we cast the archive's contributors as just such pearl-divers?
Gathering scraps and fragments not of the past but of our *present*. Memory-in-matter is transfigured through their actions. The objects are sea-changed by the *future* that the contributors, and the archival structure of the work, anticipates.
Picked up, turned in the hand, observed, carried home: new stories attach to them.
Pearl-diving, described by Arendt, is an embodied metaphor: there must be the one who dives, who acts and efforts to pry loose the pearls, and in doing so interprets and reveals.
She emphasises, this is not to *preserve* the past, *but to change the present.*
As memories of the future, how does the Archive work on the present?

If we are to do justice to the *interest* in 'broken-down matter' that makes up the Archive, we must interpret not just the objects but the actions of their collectors.

Balkin's project involves the activation of contributors, collaboration in shared authorship, and collective responsibility forming community. A People's Archive is both rhetorical gesture and the documentation of that gesture: the meeting of material, action and concept.

As participatory art project, the Archive's contributory, globally-dispersed commons of shared concern is constitutive of potential communities-to-be: a memory of a future to-be-imagined. Its political dimension lies in acknowledging others who are absent, 'being and thinking in my own identity **where actually I am not**' in Arendt's own phrase.[8]
Each contributor, and each viewer of the work, is given cause to reflect on *their* position: a position that can be understood as located geographically and ethically.
These individual contributory acts, archive both the objects *and* the production of a political space: 'There have always been technological supports for memory, which have always posed problems of access …. qualification, rights ….' comments the catalogue for 'Memories of the Future', a 1987 exhibition organised by philosopher of technology Bernard Stiegler, 'how these questions are answered is constitutive of the community.'[9]

The Archive, in its material form as object collection, and its immaterial online form as platform, both gathers and distributes. It links and connects as it circulates; a train ticket from a flooded German town sits alongside a note from Cuba, a tin from Cape Verde – it anticipates the objects, places and people that will join these, manifesting the restless forces that *already* link these, back and forth through time.

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[7] Ibid., (K2,3) p391
[8] Hannah Arendt. (2006), *Between Past and Future*, London: Penguin Books, p237
[9] *Il y a toujours eu des supports technologiques de la mémoire, qu'ils ont toujours posé des problèmes d'accès, c'est-à-dire de qualification, de droits et de coûts, et la façon de répondre à ces questions est constitutive de la communauté.* Mémoires du Futur (1987) https://www.centrepompidou.fr/cpv/resource/cgjBE7k/rxRyax (*my translation*)

Against *loss of future,* it links objects and their collectors in acts of preservation. Against *loss of place*, it creates and occupies a shared commons of concern, dispersed across the globe, standing where current political and governmental structures do not.

The Archive, as a critical, diachronic structure, questions us in the future-conditional tense. Could we have acted? Did we stand by? What should we have done? If we had acted *then,* what might be possible *now?* What kind of present is a determinant of what kind of future? As an artwork, the Archive demonstrates the capacity for contemporary art to frame potential for thought and action. As Benjamin recognised, art acts to prefigure the possible: it creates a demand in the present that can only be met in the future. The present haunts the future, as promise or debt. So what does the Archive want?

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In Archive Fever, Derrida quotes Yosef Yerushalmi: 'Is it possible that the opposite of forgetting is not remembering, but justice?[10]
This action, this effort for the just is both individual and collective. It is in the future, a possible but not inevitable one: it is virtual.
Discussing Benjamin's Critique of Violence, Derrida observes in Force of Law 'what makes for the worth of man… is that he contains the potential, the possibility of justice, the yet-to-come *{avenir)* of justice, the yet-to-come of his being-just.'[11]
Justice haunts, it demands that now addresses not-only-now, that here is not-only-here but there too. Again, time and place are unsettled. Memory, and the demand of justice that accompanies it, is thus not retrospective but *prospective*.
The Archives fragments offer testament, bear witness to loss, tell stories of their ruin, and make their demands upon us. They are 'slow crimes in progress', comments Balkin.[12] They are *evidence.*

Do they ask not to be lost, or for their loss to be catalysts against further loss? Things, lamps, mountains, *address us,* Benjamin said; languages issue from matter.[13] With effort we can translate, find a new grammar, re-order their relations to us: could we *care* for that coastline, learn from that storm-damaged postcard, attend to the habitat of that insect? This is the demand of an ethics of the more-than-human, and maybe the only one that is *possible, and just* in a time-yet-to-come.

'The loss of worldly permanence and reliability', wrote Arendt in 1954 '…. Does not entail, at least necessarily, the loss of the human capacity for building, preserving, and caring for a world that can survive us and remain fit to live in for those who come after us.'[14]

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[10] Derrida, J. 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression', *Diacritics*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Summer, 1995), p50
[11] Derrida, J. (1992) 'Force of Law: The Mythical Foundations of Authority' in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, ed. D. Cornell, M. Rosenfeld, D.G. Carlson, London: Routledge, p53.
[12] Balkin, Amy, interview Monica Westin, Bomb Magazine https://bombmagazine.org/articles/amy-balkin/ July 2, 2015
[13] Benjamin, W, Demetz, P. (1978) *Reflections : Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing.* New York: Schocken Books, 2007, p330

[14] Hannah Arendt,. (2006) 'What is Authority' in *'Between Past and Future'*, London: Penguin Books, p95.

Our ability to respond – our response-ability – can risk being blocked by the forces of sinking and melting. Arendt, like Benjamin, approached the past as if the present was not *inevitable.* History instead was collisions, recognitions, premonitions, possibilities: the pearl-diver might yet pry loose futures from beneath these turbulent waters.[15] The very concept of the Anthropocene - as catalyst for thought - has already thrown together, across times and spaces, forces and connections previously unobserved, undeciphered.[16]

To rethink the topography of citizenship, agency, care, even justice – means to think where-we-are-not and what-we-are-not. The Archive triangulates new coordinates of collaborative, geographically scattered actions.

This is the agency of memories of the future: they act upon *us,* oblige us to re*think,* to re*act.* In response perhaps it is us who will be sea-changed.

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Balkin, Amy, (interviewed by Monica Westin, *Bomb Magazine*,

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[15] "Here the entanglements of time, tide, economics irreducible relations of responsibility. There is no fixed dividing line between 'self' and 'other', 'past' and 'present' and 'future', 'here' and 'now', 'cause' and 'effect'." Barad, K. 'Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come' *Derrida Today 3.2 (2010)*: p265.

[16] 1610 has been suggested as the date when the Anthropocene becomes legible, when the collision of Old and New World left a measurable plunge CO_2 levels (see https://www.nature.com/articles/nature14258). In 1610 the settlement of Jamestown is founding a colony, whilst across the ocean Shakespeare is writing The Tempest.

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UNFCCC United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
https://unfccc.int/parties-observers