

Matters

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Spector Books

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Digital Waste

Work and Byproduct

Since the mid 1960s the painter Gerhard Richter has collected newspaper cuttings, sketches and his own photographs on all manner of different topics. On sheets of paper he organizes these materials into perpendicular image-blocks, referred to simply as ‘sheets’ [*Tafeln*], they show motifs in a range of variations. Banal subjects find themselves placed next to historical motifs. Commenting on the collection of over 5000 images, the artist remarked “In the beginning I tried to accommodate everything there that was somewhere between art and garbage and that somehow seemed important to me and a pity to throw away.”¹ A relatively small proportion of the meticulously composed *Atlas* has been developed into works—generally paintings or photographs that have been painted over. The *Atlas* collection in its own right has often been prominently exhibited and also published in the form of a catalog. “As a work of synthesis, *Atlas* is an ‘organism’ that continues to evolve and change”² wrote the art historian Helmut Friedel. *Atlas* is simultaneously a work and a byproduct.

The creation of Jörg Sasse’s works requires a similarly high consumption of raw material. For many years the artist, who works with photography, has bought negatives and slides from flea markets and online auctions, as well as whole photographic legacies by amateur photographers. He painstakingly combs through these finds, in search of shots that he can use. The artist then digitalizes them, and using these photos in a modified form creates what he calls *Tableaus*. Only a tiny slither of this found-image material is interesting to Sasse, in his own words it has to be “awkward,” “absurd,” “tingling,” or “curious”³ enough to be able to be transformed into an artwork. This occurs most patently during the image selection process. The modification of the original image to a more or lesser extent—

according to Sasse “a game of familiarity and unfamiliarity”⁴—remains for the viewer almost undetectable.

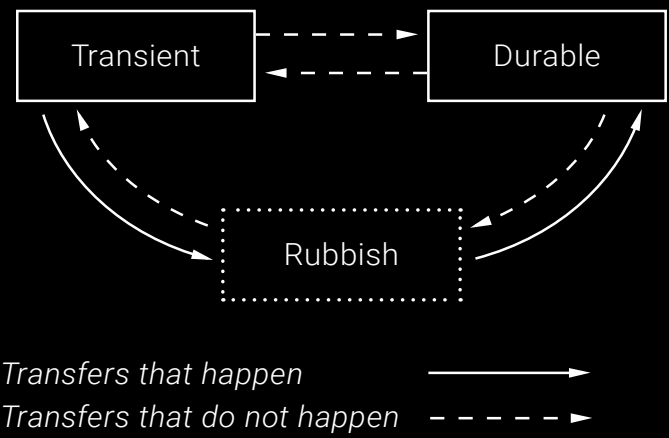
These innovative strategies practiced by Richter and Sasse were described in the early 1990s by the art and media theoretician Boris Groys as “the revaluation of values.”⁵ According to Groys this is one of the key principles of a cultural economic system in which artistic innovation takes center stage. This occurs particularly when that which is understood as culturally “worthless” is valorized, placed by the artist in the almost-sacred sphere of the cultural archive—or simply put: when something from the rubbish heap makes it into the museum. As Groys posits “[...] it is precisely the profane realm which serves as the reservoir for potentially new cultural values, since it is the other with respect to the valorized cultural archival materials.”⁶ In this manner “[...] both levels, culturally valorized and profane, are to be found in the same work of art, inseparably bound up with one another, to be sure, yet not fused in an organic whole. [...] it is precisely this dichotomy which constitutes the inner tension of innovation. In time, this tension diminishes, the innovation is archived and valorized, and value boundaries shift. Eventually, the next innovation comes due.”⁷ This internal tension becomes especially patent in Richter’s *Atlas* and Sasse’s *Tableaus*, because the work and byproduct are almost indistinguishable from one another.

Rubbish Theory

Already in the late 1970s the British social researcher Michael Thompson had developed a very similar cultural economic model. The starting point for his *Rubbish Theory* is the idea that objects can always be placed in one of two cultural categories: the ‘transient,’ in which objects have a limited lifespan and constantly lose value, and the ‘durable,’ in which objects possess an eternal value.

According to Thompson’s theory, that which belongs in the transient category includes all that is used and consumed, for instance everyday commodities and groceries, as well as everything that can be forgotten: short lived trends, fashion fads, trivial ideas and so on. In contrast, the durable category is comprised of all that is seen as having cultural value. This manifests itself particularly in the archive, in which cultural memories are both preserved and produced, and include all that which should remain remembered, for instance ethical values, remarkable people or ‘high art,’ for the preservation of which a whole conservation and restoration industry has declared itself responsible.

The basic principle of Thompson’s *Rubbish Theory*⁸



This categorical allocation is, however, not fixed, let alone innate. Instead it is far more the result of social dynamics and transformative processes of valorization, devaluation and revaluation. Yet a direct transfer between the categories of the transient and the durable is not possible. A third category is required, a transfer category, in which the revaluation of values, “the social malleability of objects,”⁹ is enabled: the category of ‘rubbish,’ in which objects exist outside of time and have absolutely no value. The rubbish category acts as an operator, constantly mediating between the categories of the transient and the durable. Furthermore “[...] the increasing economic value of objects, once they have entered the durable category, is accompanied by an increasing aesthetic value. Accompanying this, there should be an increase in interest and acquisitions among museums [...]”¹⁰

A vivid example of this is the work of the Swedish painter Hilma af Klint, which first garnered the attention of the art world after her death. When af Klint died in 1944, at 81 years

of age, she left behind a body of work consisting of over 1000 paintings, watercolors and sketches, as well as numerous texts and notes. The fact that af Klint self-imposed a 20-year ban on exhibiting her oeuvre after her death, coupled with her practicing of occultism, contributed to her public profile waning and her works swiftly losing value. Rolled up and packed in wooden crates, the works were stored in her nephew’s attic. Hilma af Klint’s paintings fell into obscurity and slid into the category of rubbish. An attempt to donate the estate to Stockholm’s Moderna Museet in 1970 was not successful. In spite of the fact that throughout the 1980s and 1990s single works by the painter were often shown in group exhibitions, it was first in the 2000s that a broad interest in the artist emerged with a series of institutional group and solo exhibitions at Paris’ Centre Pompidou (2007), Moderna Museet in Stockholm (2013), Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin (2014) and London’s Serpentine Galleries (2016). Af Klint’s work hereby migrated into the category of the durable, as having become part of the cultural archive. After being considered worthless for decades the value of the works suddenly skyrocketed. The newspaper *Zeit* reported that “Private collectors are prepared to pay enormous sums for the never-before-traded paintings, for this work strikes a chord with the art market, which is currently high-rolling modernists and their successors.”¹¹

Digital Waste

Virtual landfill also frequently serves as source material for works in the art world. The Russian net-artist Olia Lialina, for instance, is committed to conserving and preserving specific web-aesthetics from the late 1990s—“digital folklore” as she terms it.¹² For some time, together with her partner Dragan Espenschied, Lialina has been regenerating and restoring GeoCities websites. In the late 1990s GeoCities was a particularly popular online platform, it offered each of its mainly private users 15 MB of free webspace

1 Dietmar Elger, Hans Ulrich Obrist (eds.), *Gerhard Richter: Text. Writings, Interviews and Letters 1961–2007* (London 2009), p. 332.
2 Helmut Friedel, Preface: Ibid (ed.), *Gerhard Richter. Atlas. Photographs, Collages and Sketches* (Warsaw 2005), p. 13.
3 Jörg Sasse, *Arbeiten 1981–2014*, Ralph Goertz (Director). DVD Video, 35 min. Dusseldorf: Institute for Art Documentation and Scenography.
4 Ibid.
5 Boris Groys, *On the New* (London 2014), p. 10.
6 Ibid., p. 64.
7 Ibid., p. 84.

8 Michael Thompson, *Rubbish Theory: The Creation and Destruction of Value* (Oxford 1979), p. 45.
9 Ibid., p. 50.
10 Ibid., p. 32.
11 Gerrit Gohlke, “Major, Radical, Forgotten” („Groß, radikal, vergessen”), in: *Zeit Online* (June 13, 2013), online: www.zeit.de/2013/25/abstrakte-malerei-hilma-af-klint- (accessed April 9, 2016).
12 Olia Lialina and Dragan Espenschied (eds.), *Digitale Folklore* (Stuttgart 2009).

and a basic HTML interface. The company rose to the height of its popularity in 1999 and was bought by Yahoo. In the years that followed, interest in GeoCities sank rapidly and the project was ended in 2009. Shortly before GeoCities was deleted from the net, a group known as Archive Team managed to save and publish a torrent of approximately 1 TB (381,934 sites). Since 2013, from this virtual bundle, Lialina and Espenschied have regularly published screenshots of the former GeoCities sites on oneterabyteofkilobyteage.tumblr.com. In addition to this, the work has already been exhibited in various museums.

With such projects Olia Lialina acts as a chronicler of an aesthetic of disappearance, and quickly comes up against its limits. Today, many elements of the GeoCities sites cannot be processed, because old codes and plug-ins are often no longer supported. Hyperlinks lead nowhere, the sites that are linked are long since down or the domains have been otherwise sold. According to the Dutch-Australian media theorist Geert Lovink, the internet is not a place of durability—at most it is an interim storage, not an archive.¹³ “When bills go unpaid, sysadmins move on, retire or decease, operating system versions are not upgraded, companies go bankrupt, and telco policies change, then hard disks crash [...] server racks are forgotten, disconnected, and then sold off for scrap and recycled, and domain names expire or are not renewed. [...] It’s the jumbled mass of incompatible and disused data formats, file extensions, and network protocols that make the ‘archive’ inaccessible and impossible.”¹⁴ It is too early to say whether Lialina and Espenschied’s project-blog will still exist in ten or twenty years; if so, then surely only by means of consistent maintenance, updating and further development.

The internet is through-and-through transitory. Boris Groys recently commented on e-flux that it “thematizes precisely the profane dimension of art.”¹⁵ As a post-historical medium,¹⁶ it is not capable of historicizing itself, and is dependent upon the reliability of perpetually changing media, which if even at all possible, are only partially able to be documented. (It is not without reason that Lialina also published her *Digital Folklore* project in the form of a book, despite the fact that in print, some of the digital content was only able to be shown in a reduced form). Both the past and the future are, on the whole, factors of disrup-

tion for the internet: The past forms a legacy of obsolete systems, which are in permanent conflict with the development of new websites, platforms, and applications; and the future is a space perpetuated by risk, exposed to the turbulence of globally networked markets and the extremely fast-paced technology industry. Over the last years it has been possible to observe a return to artistic practices exploring durable media—notably those practices that examine online-phenomena—which perhaps recognizes the fact that: within the internet, it remains hardly possible to generate values that are durable enough to enter into the cultural archive.

13 Geert Lovink, “This Is Not an Archive. Internet as Temporary Storage,” in: Thomas Seelig (ed.), *Peter Piller Archive—Materials* (G) (Cologne 2014).

14 Ibid., p. 87.

15 Boris Groys, “The Truth of Art,” in: e-flux journal #71 (April 3, 2016), online: http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article_9005786.pdf (accessed April 20, 2016).

16 The term “post-history” is one of culture and media philosopher Vilém Flusser’s central concepts. It deals particularly with the impact of the stark expansion of digital technologies that arose in the 1980s. Flusser sees the linear-causal thinking of text and history-based societies, which enjoyed hegemony for four thousand years, as experiencing a crisis of linearity, the post-industrial society at the end point of its historical awareness. In contrast to the finalist or linear-causal world views of previous generations, in the digital era a new, non-linear way of thinking emerged: viewing the world as a random materialization of investments, implemented by programs, and as an era which always has contingency at its epicenter. Vilém Flusser, *Post-History* (Minnesota 2013).

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