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Rita Cêpa

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## ARTICLE

# AN ARCHIVAL IMPULSE TWENTY YEARS LATER

RITA CÊPA

*IHA (NOVA FCSH) / IN2PAST, Portugal*

In 2024, we celebrate two decades since the publication of *An Archival Impulse*, a fundamental text in the debate on contemporary art and its relationship with history, memory, and archival practices. Hal Foster, recognised for his “well-documented knack for identifying trends”<sup>1</sup> leverages the fall edition of the American journal *October*—focused on art criticism and theory, where he served as editor—to propose a new expression, aiming to encapsulate the present moment.<sup>2</sup> In it, Foster introduces, identifies, contextualises, and analyses the figure of the *artist-as-archivist*—one who works on and with found images, familiar objects, or textual fragments, aiming “to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present.”<sup>3</sup> Foster argues that many contemporary artists possess this fever or drive, which manifests itself in a predisposition to collect, compile and reorganise historical documents according to a quasi-archival logic that often takes shape in installation formats, open to interpretation. Although, for Foster,<sup>4</sup> this desire is not entirely new—having been active in the periods before and after the First World War—he points out that the current approach transcends a purely documentary use since it is not only about rescuing traces to preserve them but, above all, about recontextualising and reinterpreting them. These artists don’t just celebrate history. Their practice articulates the production, appropriation and manipulation of archival materials, transforming them into conceptual tools, vehicles for critical reflection, instruments of aesthetic innovation, and resistance mechanisms. These procedures not only reveal but also question and subvert established historical narratives, inviting the public to a profound reflection on the ephemerality of memory and the documentation’s role in shaping our understanding of the past and present.

In this seminal essay, Foster also dedicates significant attention to three major artists: Thomas Hirschhorn, Tacita Dean, and Sam Durant—each engaging with the archival impulse in distinct and innovative ways. Hirschhorn blurs the boundaries between public art, archival research, and collective experience, crafting volatile sculptures, grotesque kiosks, transient altars, and improvised monuments that fuse the informality of a precarious aesthetic with a pointed critique of hyperconsumption and mass culture. Dean’s work—often characterised by her use of analogue film, photography, and chalk drawings on blackboards—intertwines memories, literary works, myths, and historical narratives to evoke the erosion of time, the vulnerability of the human condition, the transience of existence, obsolescence, and the inevitability of loss, in a process where chance is celebrated, and nature asserts itself as a realm of awe and melancholy, resonating with the power of the sublime. In turn, Durant, known for his politically charged conceptual approach, has explored American history: initially, by critically revising signature specimens of mid-century design and architecture; later encompassing rock culture, vanguard art and countercultural music; and, more recently, delving into the notion of protest, addressing his interest in memorials, iconoclasm and civil rights movements, often drawing on archival photographs and documents to create large, provocative, and disconcerting outdoor installations. Despite their distinct focuses and media, these artists share unique perspectives that perfectly exemplify the trend Foster addresses. Also, by bringing together an array of renowned figures—including, albeit more superficially, other notable examples, such as Douglas Gordon, Liam Gillick, Gerard Byrne, Stan Douglas, Renée Green, Pierre Huyghe, Phillipe Parreno or Mark Dion—he provides an important overview of contemporary artistic practices that challenge and push the boundaries of the archive, offering us more stimulating experiences and new interpretive possibilities.

## THE ARTIST COLLECTOR

At this stage, it is important to mention a previous concept, complementary to Foster’s analysis: the notion of the *artist-collector*, which also falls within the broader spectrum of archive-based art—a creative methodology that sees archival practice as raw material, conceptual model, and source of inspiration. In *Esthétique du Livre d’Artiste: 1960-1980*, Anne Moeglin-Delcroix explores this typology, used to describe an artistic process centred on the almost compulsive spirit of someone who gathers, selects, structures, reuses, and recontextualises, more or less methodically, sets of objects, documents, images, or data, that share one or several commonalities. For Moeglin-Delcroix<sup>5</sup>, the strong rise of the social sciences and humanities in the 1960s and 1970s aroused the artists’ interest, leading them to bring procedures closer together. This approach—in which artistic practice incorporates scientific structures, forms, and methods—both functioned as a “fruitful creative constraint”<sup>6</sup> and a valuable stimulus for innovation. According to Moeglin-Delcroix, it is in the artist’s book that this relationship reaches its pinnacle. She views it as

a means of expression, a space for curatorship and experimentation, in which the notion that these two fields—art and science—occupy entirely separate spheres is challenged. In the publication as mentioned above, Moeglin-Delcroix highlights paradigm examples of this symbiosis, unravelling its authors' methodology, logic, and thought. There, for example, she references Christian Boltanski's books, which unite the spirit of collecting with documentary photography; Annette Messager's albums and notebooks, scattered collections of almost everything; and Hans-Peter Feldmann's small booklets, thematic fascicles made with postcards, newspaper clipping, and photocopies.<sup>7</sup> Such examples highlight the wide range of possible interpretations and developments within a typology that lies between scientific systematisation and aesthetics, reinforcing the multiplicity of fields in which both the artist-collector and the artist-as-archivist operate. The connection between Foster's and Moeglin-Delcroix's approaches provides a more robust understanding of how the archive integrates contemporary art, and vice versa.

## LIVING ARCHIVES

In contrast to these artists who work with pre-existing materials, some artworks transcend their physical condition and generate their own archives, linking once again the creative act and the archival practice. Recently, Sarah Haylett<sup>8</sup> drew on Foster's notion of the archival impulse to explore how many contemporary artists have engaged in collecting, archiving, and documentation practices. Throughout her research—conducted within the framework of the project *Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum* (2018-2022), focused on the Tate Collection—Haylett argues for the need for guidelines and adaptive practices that recognise the unique nature of these materials. She proposes a closer integration between artists, curators, archivists, and the public, to develop an infrastructure that not only accommodates but also recognises and celebrates the vitality and emphasises the relevance of this symbiotic relationship within the contemporary museum environment. In addressing this issue, Haylett<sup>9</sup> defines three categories of traces:

PREPARATORY – include sketches, drawings, notes, models, and by-products that contextualise and support the entire creative process, from conception to development, providing an in-depth view of the artist's thinking and methodology, serving as a foundation for understanding the final artwork;

DOCUMENTARY – these encompass images of the installation *in situ*, videos, and photographs commonly produced by museums or galleries to track exhibitions, as well as press releases, room sheets, and contracts related to acquisition or loan processes, reflecting the cultural and economic value of the artwork over time;

GENERATIVE – they intentionally emerge during the activation or exhibition of the artwork, are continuously produced as it is lived, experienced, or interpreted, respond to the circumstances of each new presentation, often resulting from direct audience interaction, growing organically, and reflecting its evolution by incorporating other layers of meaning.

This last set is the only one that comes directly from the artwork, which emerges from its dynamics, in an intrinsic process that derives from what Haylett<sup>10</sup> calls *living archives*. These contrast with the archival impulse in their approach and purpose, gathering a multiplicity of contents and perspectives—from the artist's original vision to curatorial interpretation, along with the audience's emotional reaction, which is, in turn, shaped by the spatial context in which the artwork is situated—and respond to the increasingly interactive nature of contemporary art, preserving the past while incorporating the present. By capturing not only tangible existence but also the intentions and contexts in which installations are embedded, these items should be considered an integral part of art collections, not merely supplementary documents. According to Haylett, this material forms part of the life cycle of these artworks and, as such, must be verified, collected, catalogued, preserved, digitised, and made available. However, its fluidity raises challenges in all these stages.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike the others, generative archival material is not a static record or a passive deposit of information, but rather a combination of active elements, manifestations that expand over time—extensions that co-evolve and metamorphose, reflecting the ephemeral essence of artistic creation. By embracing this mutable nature, they play a crucial role in preserving these practices, acting as portals that perpetuate their memory, even when physicality fades. When it comes to performance, for instance, they not only document the action-event itself but also extend the lifespan of the artwork, allowing for its future reinterpretation or reproduction. In this sense, the Tate 'Art Term' for 'Archive' reminds us that it was precisely with the rise of performance art in the 20th century that artists became heavily dependent on documentation as a record of their work—and a similar challenge arose with Land Art, whose landscape interventions were often erased by the force of nature.<sup>12</sup> With Conceptual Art, in the 1960s, these records ascended to the status of artwork, fundamentally altering our perception of the archive. This movement fostered a paradigm shift by moving the focus from the physical object to the idea, which radically changed the way art was conceived, exhibited, and understood. Documents—once considered peripheral—such as photographs, videos, maps, texts, graphs, or diagrams have become crucial for interpreting the artist's intentions. Furthermore, they invite the viewer to discover and become involved in the creative process, encouraging them to abandon passivity and transform the aesthetic experience into a more enriching dialogue.

Reflecting on this expanded form of creation, and although Haylett addresses several artworks within the Tate Collection, she focuses on six examples: *'The Lunch Triangle': Pilot Work B. Codes and Parameters* (1974) by Stephen Willats, *Something Going On Above My Head* (1999) by Oswaldo Maciá, *Film* (2000) by Pawel Althamer, *Tatlin's Whisper #5* (2008) by Tania Bruguera, *Embassy* (2013-ongoing) by Richard Bell, and *The British Library* (2014) by Yinka Shonibare.<sup>13</sup> According to Haylett, these works "bring the public and communities into institutions and inspire changes in record-keeping practices," challenging the established boundaries between the art collection and the archive.<sup>14</sup> Haylett uses a powerful example to illustrate how value

systems affect this distinction: the Turner Bequest.<sup>15</sup> The author recounts that: “After his death in 1851, [Joseph Mallord William] Turner bequeathed his entire studio to the nation”. Its contents were fully integrated into the art collection, including not only the “300 paintings” and approximately “37.000 drawings and watercolours” but also the preparatory sketches and notebooks that we would expect to find in an archive. For Haylett, this means that “Turner’s status in British Art History dictates [...] the terms of his care, disrupting institutional categories that divide art collections from the archive.”<sup>16</sup> This concern embodies a new era in which the gesture of documenting transcends mere preservationist practice or its complementary role to artistic practice, emerging as a creative act in itself—a form of artistic expression manifested both through the archival impulse and the dynamic energy of living archives.

## BEYOND FOSTER

As we have seen, the figure of the artist-as-archivist does not end with Foster. In this sense, it’s important to emphasise that the exponential increase of born-digital content has strengthened the current appreciation of archival practices, materials, and technologies, the proliferation of cameras, and the massive digitisation of historical archives,<sup>17</sup> as well as the advance of artificial intelligence, the consolidation of collaborative platforms such as Wikipedia, Internet Archive or GitHub—which contributes to the enrichment of our collective memory and transforms the archive into a dynamic space focused on knowledge construction - and the unprecedented scope of information accessibility. Alongside these developments, there is an inherent desire to capture reality, which reflects an almost visceral need to document and preserve the ephemeral, to capture and interact with temporality. For Foster, this trend has gained new momentum, as it now appears as a critical response to the current saturation of stimuli and the desire to find new ways of thinking about the past, present, and future. At one point in *An Archival Impulse*, Foster cites the concept of post-production, proposed by Nicolas Bourriaud to describe a vision of artistic practice that, from the early 1990s onwards, no longer favours creation *ex nihilo*—based on the manipulation of raw material—and starts to exalt the observation, appropriation, reinterpretation, reuse, and resignification of pre-existing elements that are already in circulation.<sup>18</sup> According to Bourriaud, this seems to respond to the turmoil caused by the information age and the internet, its central tool.<sup>19</sup> This technical term—post-production—originating from the audiovisual lexicon, implies a profound alteration in the status of the artwork.<sup>20</sup> Both claim that facing the current data proliferation, a growing number of artists have adopted new working methods: Bourriaud speaks of appropriation, reprogramming, browsing, recycling, remixing, reshuffling, scripting, copy-pasting, and *détournement*,<sup>21</sup> while Foster refers to inventorying, sampling, and sharing.<sup>22</sup> After noting the growing inclusion of “terms evoking the electronic network” and the rhetoric of interactivity—characteristic of the internet—in artistic vocabulary, Foster ends up suggesting that the ideal medium for archive-based art could perhaps be “the mega-archive of the

internet.”<sup>23</sup> However, he points out that, despite the omnipresence of technology, most artists still value materiality and human interpretation, thus resisting total virtualisation and automation.<sup>24</sup> Foster was referring to coeval artists. Today, two decades into the expansion of information technology, his observations no longer fully capture the current landscape. Increasingly, artists are making fruitful use of digital tools, using the internet, or taking advantage of machine learning algorithms to process vast datasets. New ways of approaching the archive such as raw material, conceptual model, and source of inspiration are now emerging. But have the fundamental principles of archival art changed? What challenges do they present today? And what do these emerging practices have to offer or add? Can these approaches expand and redefine the archive’s role in contemporary artistic creation, enriching our understanding of this complex relationship?

Bourriaud states:

It’s important to note that Conceptual Art was contemporary with the decisive advancement of computer research in the early 1970s: while the microcomputer appeared in 1975 and the *Apple II* in 1977, the first microprocessor dates to 1971. That same year, Stanley Broun exhibited metal boxes containing cards that documented and retraced his itineraries (*40 Steps and 1000 Steps*) and [the group] *Art & Language* produced *Index 01*, a set of filing cabinets presented as a minimalist sculpture. On Kawara had already established his notation system in archives (his meetings, travels, and reading materials) and, in 1971, produced *One Million Years*, ten archives that kept a count far exceeding human limits, approaching the colossal amounts of processing required by computers. These artworks introduced data storage - the aridity of file classification and the concept of the archive itself - into artistic practice [...].<sup>25</sup>

The Japanese-American artist plays a crucial role in this transition. Through obsessively repetitive methodologies, Kawara documented his life from the mid-1960s until he died in 2014.<sup>26</sup> His most iconic series—*Today / Date Paintings* (1966-2013), *I Got Up* (1968-1979), *I Went* (1968-79), *I Met* (1968-1979), and *I Am Still Alive* (1970-2000)<sup>27</sup>—construct “a cohesive structure concerning the mapping of his existence through material archives governed by strict rules regarding their production and distribution.”<sup>28</sup> As Rita Dias observes, the essence of his work “is not revealed in what is displayed” but in the creation of a “living and continuous archive of his own movements and temporality.”<sup>29</sup> By meticulously and ritualistically recording his day-to-day, he subverted the notion of the archive, preserved the ephemeral, documented time, captured the transience of existence and, above all, redefined the role of the artist-as-archivist.

## DATAISM?

According to Albert-László Barabási, Kawara, along with Hans Haacke and Mark Lombardi, expands the possibilities and methods of Dataism—even though, the author did not conceive it as we understand it today.<sup>30</sup> Recently, the term has been



**Figure A**

On Kawara

Postcard to Ellie Siegel, September 12, 1976

From *I Got Up*

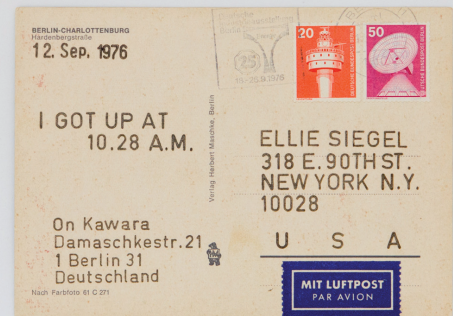
Stamped Ink on Postcard (Front)

10.5 x 14.9 cm

**Figure B**

Stamped Ink on Postcard (Back)

Courtesy of One Million Years Foundation

**Figure C**

On Kawara

Postcard to Ellie Siegel, September 13, 1976

From *I Got Up*

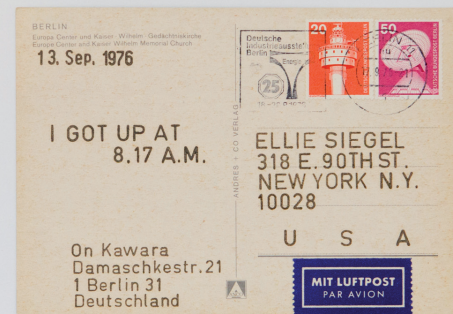
Stamped Ink on Postcard (Front)

10.5 x 14.9 cm

**Figure D**

Stamped Ink on Postcard (Back)

Courtesy of One Million Years Foundation

**Figure E**

On Kawara

Postcard to Ellie Siegel, September 14, 1976

From *I Got Up*

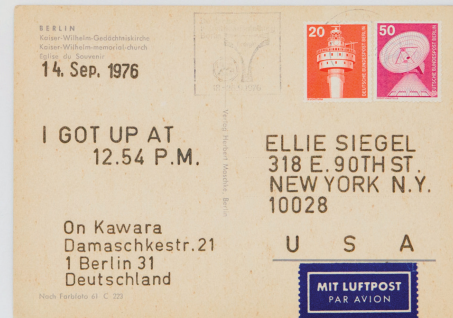
Stamped Ink on Postcard (Front)

10.5 x 14.9 cm

**Figure F**

Stamped Ink on Postcard (Back)

Courtesy of One Million Years Foundation



used to describe an emerging philosophy created by the *Big Data Revolution*, which denotes special confidence in the truth and usefulness of data as informational resources, arguing that “everything that can be measured, should be measured.”<sup>31</sup> It has gained prominence through the thinking of Yuval Noah Harari, who defines Dataism as a religion “that, instead of venerating gods or man, worships only data.”<sup>32</sup> For him, this ideology arises from the explosive confluence of two scientific waves—Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species*, pivotal at a time when biological sciences began to view organisms as biochemical algorithms, and the advance of theoretical computing, particularly since Alan Turing’s envisioned machine.<sup>33</sup> Barabási uses this same designation to define an artistic movement still maturing.<sup>34</sup> Like David Brooks’ notion, he notes that artists who adopt Dataism seek to embrace the visual and aural symbolism of data, recognising its massive importance for our society and collective consciousness—*lingua franca* of today and the future.<sup>35</sup> For Barabási, this perspective captures something that transcends or underlies physicality and documents invisible societal processes—“connections, associations, affiliations, correlations, causes, aspects, and consequences of a reality that is simply not accessible to retinal art.”<sup>36</sup>



Following Barabási, contemporary artistic practice must respond to this new reality to remain relevant and to continue reflecting our constantly changing epistemology.<sup>37</sup> Today, artists have a significant opportunity to adapt, address the power of data, and decode its complexity through a range of new tools, media, and techniques, integrating the aesthetics of numbers and exploring their visual resonance.<sup>38</sup> At a time when informational resources are multiplying and the ability to compile and interpret them has exponentially increased, it's only natural that contemporary creation also embraces, appropriates, contemplates, and works with them. Now data intertwines in several artistic processes as a raw material, conceptual model, and source of inspiration. Through codes and computational methods, data transforms, unfolding into objects, performances, or installations that invite the observer into an immersive and interactive experience. This emerging set of practices and new approaches that arise with data artists has expanded creative possibilities and revealed an intriguing response to the growing influence of technology in contemporary society.

## THE DATABASE IMPULSE

For Lev Manovich, databases—structured collections of items from which users can perform various operations, such as viewing, browsing and searching—have emerged as privileged and symbolic forms of cultural expression in the computer age, now occupying a central position in various creative processes.<sup>39</sup> He notes that a poetic and aesthetic dimension has naturally emerged around these proliferating structures, reflecting the complexity and richness of their contents.<sup>40</sup> Manovich even identifies this impetus in seminal works in the history of photography, such as *The Pencil of Nature* (1844-1846), by William Henry Fox Talbot—the first commercially published incunabulum, illustrated with calotype prints, a pioneering reproduction technique based on the positive/negative principle, developed by Talbot himself and comparable to the invention of the daguerreotype<sup>41</sup>—and *Face of Our Time* (1929), compiled by August Sander—a publication that brings together a series of portraits intending to trace a detailed anthropological panorama of German society at the time.<sup>42</sup> Both exemplify a methodological approach that catalogues the world in a cumulative, objective, meticulous, almost scientific way, and that replaces conventional narrative with a systematic organisation, centered on classifying and structuring collections of visual data—characteristics inherent to the *database impulse*, introduced by Manovich and equally vital in Moeglin-Delcroix's thinking.<sup>43</sup> In an interview, he points out that a fundamental difference between digital databases and previous forms of organisation—such as photo albums, archives, libraries or encyclopedias—lies in their scale.<sup>44</sup> The former are limited in size and contain a restricted number of items that can be accessed directly and physically. In these, “the human body is still sufficient as an interface.”<sup>45</sup> However, when dealing with millions of records, it becomes truly unthinkable to view them all or easily locate a specific element using only manual methods, which means that we

are now dependent on computerised techniques to carry out searches, compare and organise information.<sup>46</sup> This means that today, databases are vast beyond the scale of human perception and cognition—an essential quality that, according to Manovich, makes them a fertile field for exploration in artistic practices and the ideal technological vehicle for representing a globally interconnected era.<sup>47</sup>

Nevertheless, it is still in the 1990s that artists began to approach databases more critically.<sup>48</sup> Among the most pertinent examples of this period, for Manovich, is Chris Marker's *Immunity* (1997)—a CD-ROM that simultaneously functions as a profuse, non-linear archive and as a bold multimedia essay.<sup>49</sup> Divided into seven large thematic zones, the disc gathers a vast collection of documents—poems, book covers, postcards, illustrations, posters, photographs, telegrams, paintings—which, together, weave a constellation of fragmentary memories of the 20th century.<sup>50</sup> Its interactive structure invites exploration and the construction of narrative paths, urging the user to navigate freely, following the flow of their wandering. Marker approaches the archive as an individual, perhaps solitary, journey, that transforms into a dynamic immersive experience, whose fundamental characteristics anticipate the logic of contemporary digital systems.

However, Manovich suggests that the artist who most systematically explored the creative possibilities of data collection, analysis, and visualisation is George Legrady.<sup>51</sup> With a body of work spanning nearly five decades and encompassing a variety of media—from documentary photography to multimedia installation—Legrady is a forerunner in embracing computing within his artistic practice, anticipating a fundamental transformation in how we conceive and manipulate the archive today. If we examine his trajectory, we can also see that his work mirrors the path of the archival impulse—from Foster to Dataism.

*Catalogue of Found Objects* (1975) is one of his most resonant works. It conceptually aligns with the concerns of the authors referenced by Foster—particularly Hirschhorn—and, formally, with the work of the artists mentioned by Moeglin-Delcroix—especially, Boltanski's inventories.<sup>52</sup> In this installation, composed of a panel of 30 photographs, Legrady collects and organises common artefacts found in an abandoned lot, which becomes an excavation site—papers, bottles, hangers, decomposing apples, disposable packaging, baseballs, cables, fragments of fabric. Like a quotidian archaeologist, Legrady surveys the site, collecting “traces of consumer society and its system of values.”<sup>53</sup> He then arranges them on computer paper, creating a catalogued typological arrangement, striving to decode their hidden language,<sup>54</sup> past lives, untold stories. The photographic medium preserves these items, transforming them into a collection of still lifes,<sup>55</sup> seemingly insignificant. By registering these remnants against a neutral background, Legrady reveals patterns and relationships that emerge from the juxtaposition of chance and order. In organising perishable items, he invites the public to reassess their beauty and significance, challenging traditional conventions of curation and archiving. *Catalogue of Found Objects* marks a decisive break in his social and humanistic photographic practice,<sup>56</sup> a shift from his early forays into documenting Indigenous

communities.<sup>57</sup> Legrady finds new comfort in handling his own subjects—a transition that reflects a significant change in his relationship with the archive, now transformed into an active space of reinvention. Moreover, the standardised matrix of *Catalogue of Found Objects* already “evokes electronic memory, which makes it possible to organise and process a body of information too great for the capacities of the human brain.”<sup>58</sup> For Pierre Dessureault, this almost scientific gesture that fixes transience, prematurely reveals another latent fascination in Legrady’s work.

In 1981, Legrady was introduced to computer programming<sup>59</sup> by Harold Cohen, the artist and creator of AARON, a software developed in the late 1960s that pioneered the exploration of artificial intelligence as a creative tool.<sup>60</sup> Years later, *The Anecdoted Archive from the Cold War* (1993)<sup>61</sup> would emerge as one of his first interactive works. In the exhibition space, the artist projected an image on a cinematic scale and placed a plinth with a computer mouse at the centre, through which the audience was invited to interact with a CD-ROM. The initial menu displayed the architectural floor plan of the former Worker’s Movement Museum in Budapest, configured as a metaphorical layout.<sup>62</sup> By moving the cursor, visitors could explore eight galleries, each dedicated to a specific theme. Within these, Legrady juxtaposed political propaganda and documentary material—photographs, sound recordings, home videos, bibliographic references, currency, memorabilia, drawings, identity cards—related to his escape from the Hungarian capital during the 1956 Revolution<sup>63</sup> and collected for 20 years. The different windows that open were punctuated by descriptive memories of brief episodes, introducing his testimony, humanising the installation, and fostering empathy. The intentional

Figure 1

George Legrady, *Catalogue of Found Objects*, 1975

30 Gelatin Silver Prints

157 x 325 cm (each 31.4 x 45.8 cm)

Image courtesy of George Legrady.





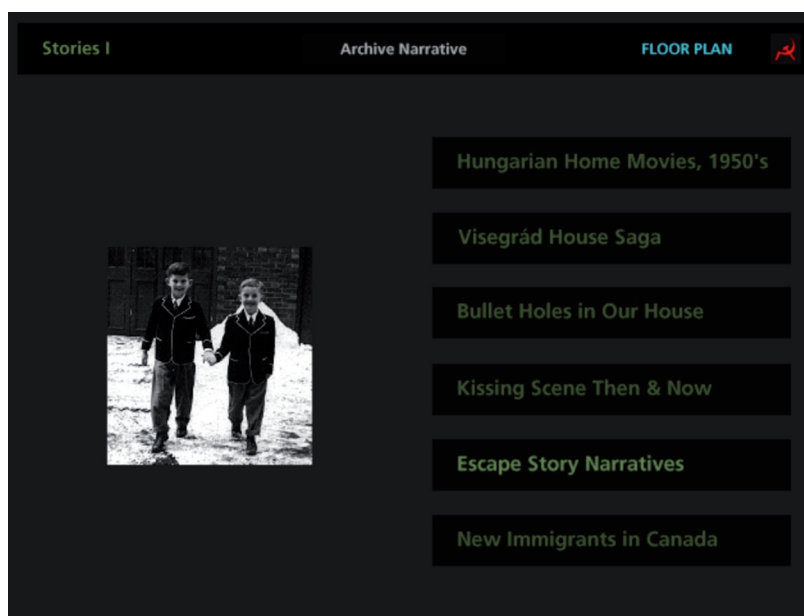
fragmentation of these contents prevented the formation of a closed, linear narrative, placing the viewer in a continuous process of discovery, adrift. By placing personal stories within a broader narrative, in an official context, Legrady did not merely reveal the impact of this transformation on an individual level.<sup>64</sup> The artist simultaneously conceives a dialogue between his private, intimate experience and communal construction, bringing to light the impact of this event on his identity and that of many others. For Jean Gagnon, it is the autobiographical nature of this work that makes it unique within Legrady's body of work, "giving it both the intimacy of a family photo album and the anonymity of historical iconography."<sup>65</sup> Characteristics that also echo Marker's project mentioned above. Two systematic yet playful presentations in appearance, which consider the audience's reading politics, propose a fluid, associative route through their documentation, raise questions about the supposed neutrality<sup>66</sup> of archives, and explore the impulse to which Foster alludes. Nevertheless, in *The Anecdoted Archive from the Cold War*, poetry gives way to resistance. According to Tim Druckrey, it transcends mere sentimental retrieval, as it reshapes both the past and politics as inseparable components of historical narrative.<sup>67</sup> Legrady appropriates methodologies from other disciplines—history, sociology, archival science, museology—to create a partial installation that "confronts the relationship between archival logistics and the realignment of memory and history."<sup>68</sup>

In turn, *Pockets Full of Memories* (2001-2007) represents a generative art installation commissioned by the Centre Pompidou in Paris. It arises from a conversation with Boris Tissot, at a different phase in Legrady's career, now embracing the *database impulse*, at the intersection of art, technology, and data science. Aiming to create a real-time, digital-based cultural archive, the artist worked with active public collaboration, inviting visitors to digitise and describe a small object they possessed. Through an interactive digital survey, the visitors assigned keywords, determined the intensity of eight binary attributes of their specimen—old/new, soft/hard, natural/synthetic, disposable/long-use, personal/non-personal, fashionable/not fashionable, useful/useless, functional/symbolic—and recorded their name, age, gender, occupation, language, and country of residence. Each entry had a unique ID and recorded the date, time, and location. There was also the possibility of writing a brief message. Based on this information, classified by Kohonen, an artificial neural network algorithm, the items—defined by their semantic metadata—were organised in a two-dimensional visual space, and projected onto a large screen in the exhibition space.<sup>69</sup> Each day, the public could follow the evolutionary process of this archive, the growth of the collection, and the constantly changing mapping, reflecting the arrival of new data, positioned according to the similarity of their characteristics, either in person or online - via [www.pocketsfullofmemories.com](http://www.pocketsfullofmemories.com).<sup>70</sup>

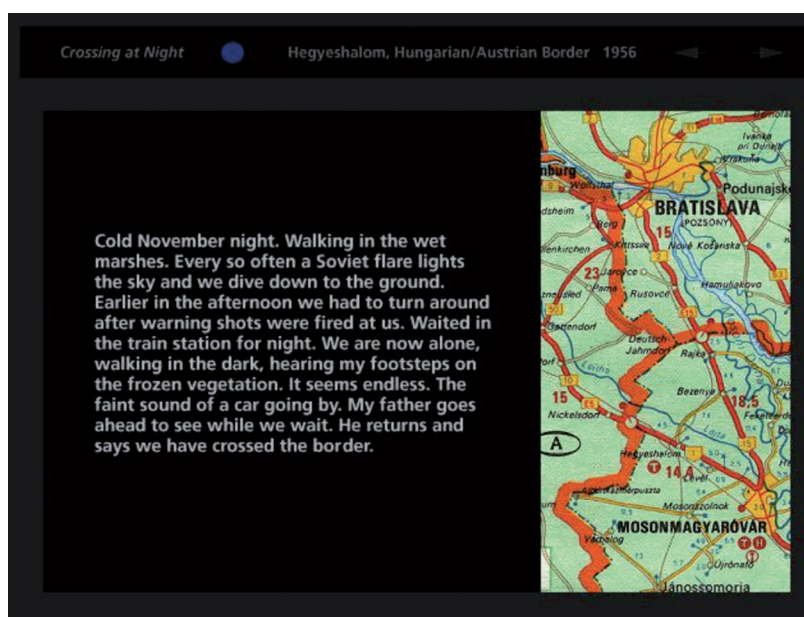
With this project, Legrady transforms the exhibition space into a place of creation, exposes a classification system, raises awareness of over-surveillance, and forms an extensive anthropo-archaeological database.<sup>71</sup> Over six years,



**Figure 2**  
George Legrady, *The Anecdoted Archive from the Cold War, 1993*  
Interactive Digital Media Installation (Screenshot), variable dimensions.  
Image courtesy of George Legrady.



**Figure 3**  
George Legrady, *The Anecdoted Archive from the Cold War, 1993*  
Interactive Digital Media Installation (Screenshot), variable dimensions.  
Image courtesy of George Legrady.

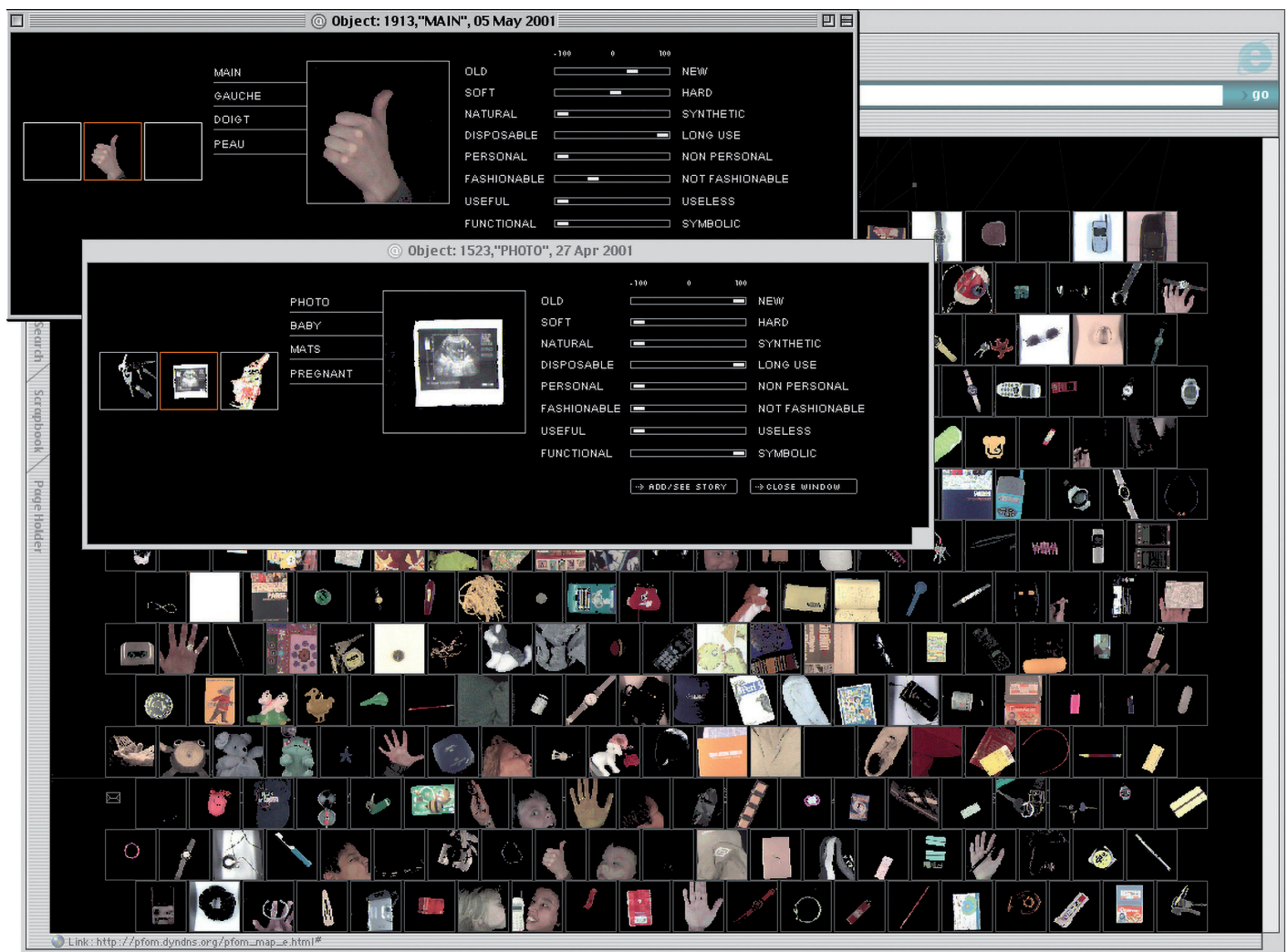


**Figure 4**  
George Legrady, *The Anecdoted Archive from the Cold War, 1993*  
Interactive Digital Media Installation (Screenshot), variable dimensions.  
Image courtesy of George Legrady.



*Pockets Full of Memories* would travel to seven other locations<sup>72</sup>—Dutch Electronic Arts Festival, Rotterdam (2003); Ars Electronica Festival, Linz (2003); AURA Media Art Exhibition @ C3 - Center for Culture & Communication Foundation, Budapest (2003); Museum of Contemporary Art Kiasma, Helsinki (2004); Cornerhouse Gallery, Manchester (2005); Museum of Communication, Frankfurt; Museum of Contemporary Art, Taipei (2007)—and reach distinct audiences. To this day, the corporeal presence of these contributors vibrates through a repository consisting of 11,288 objects: phones, toys, keys, glasses, rings, bags, documents, currency, bank cards, books, watches, lighters, padlocks, chocolates, fruit—and even some hands, feet, and heads<sup>73</sup>—among many others. This collection records a community in time.<sup>74</sup> Nowadays, these local actions are housed in a global network, able to be revisited or post-visited anywhere and anytime. They now exist as poetic, nostalgic remnants of another world. These recall the generative traces Haylett describes. Both intentionally emerge throughout exhibitions, being continuously produced as the installations are experienced, responding to each new interaction with the audience and surrounding setting or scenario. In this sense, *Pockets Full of Memories* seeks to transfigure the ephemeral into a living archive. Legrady's practice exemplifies how archival structures can be reimagined as rhizomatic networks, continually shaped by cultural, technological, and collective engagement. His exploration of the archive as a dynamic and participatory space, rather than a static repository, clearly demonstrates how technological mediation enables the archival practice to evolve in response to user interaction, algorithmic processing, and real-time data flows. In short, starting from a traditional engagement with the archive, Legrady elevates it to a new level of complexity by embracing the database impulse. He's shaping not just contemporary art but also memory-making [Figure 5].

Alongside *Catalogue of Found Objects* and *The Anecdoted Archive from the Cold War*, *Pockets Full of Memories* shares a commitment to systematising artefacts, mapping traces of daily life, and reflecting on the construction of collective memory. Though rooted in distinct approaches, these works illustrate Legrady's capacity not only to explore new formal possibilities but also to rethink and reconfigure archival art within a remarkably short period. His evolution becomes evident when we become aware that: A) in the 1970s, he still operated in an analogue regime—despite photography technology taking a significant leap in the same year; B) in the 1990s, he was already using newly available processes and software, such as digitisation and Macromedia Director (later Adobe Director)<sup>75</sup>; and C) at the dawn of the 21st century, he definitively embraced advanced digital tools. Today, Legrady prioritises the potential of digital photography, algorithmic production, computer-generated animation, data analysis, machine learning, and artificial intelligence in his most recent works. *Pockets Full of Memories* is indeed one of the first works to implement an artificial neural network algorithm to autonomously organise data, anticipating the interest and adoption of such resources in contemporary art,<sup>76</sup> a trend shared by artists such as Ryoji Ikeda, Rafael Lozano-Hemmer, and Refik Anadol.



## FINAL NOTES

Although Foster clearly distinguishes archival art from database art—as well as archives from databases—it is impossible to ignore their multiple intersections.<sup>77</sup> Both rely on documentary materials and share a critical view of the role of archival practice. However, they diverge in their substance. While the former is primarily anchored in the tangible nature of documentation, the latter ventures into the digital realm of data. But can we conceive data art as a natural evolution of archive-based art? Or will the voracious automation of archiving drain the interpretative, subjective, and critical dimensions that have always characterised this trend, dissolving it into purely algorithmic logic?

Through the work of artists like Legrady—who embodies both the artist-as-archivist and the artist-collector—it is possible to assert that it is from technological progress that archival practice reemerges as a vibrant field of potential in the current art scene. Its intrinsic relationship with contemporary creation, far from static, adapts to the challenges, concerns, and methods that define the present. In this period characterised by the ubiquity of the internet, global connectivity, and the advent of computing, we witness a methodological, material, and technical

**Figure 5**

George Legrady, *Pockets Full of Memories*, 2001

Interactive Digital Media Installation (Screenshot), variable dimensions. Image courtesy of George Legrady.

update, in full harmony with the time we live in. This development not only reflects the fluidity inherent to the 21st century but also mirrors the immateriality that permeates the current world and the mutability of archival art - a category that, discreetly, now expands.

The artist described by Foster in *An Archival Impulse* no longer operates under the same assumptions, instead engaging with new contexts. In 2004, Flickr and Gmail were launched, Facebook was still limited to Harvard, blogs were flourishing, as was MySpace, the first version of Firefox emerged, and the internet-as-platform, the second phase of the web, was born.<sup>78</sup> In the era of artificial intelligence and with the inexorable advancement of technology, it is important to underscore that the archival impulse develops in tandem with the notion of the archive—irreversibly reconfigured by the omnipresence of data. It is no longer a tomb-receptacle, but a pulsating organism, a fluid, interactive environment. By embracing digitisation and automation, it transcends preservation and becomes a living, malleable territory for experimentation, capable of generating new readings of the present and reconfiguring the legacy of the past. Today, more than a repository, the archive is a crucial social tool for the construction and preservation of collective memory<sup>79</sup> increasingly threatened and eroded.

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- 60 His trajectory is outlined in a pivotal exhibition at a time when these tools for image creation have entered the mainstream with text-prompt-driven software such as DALL-E, Midjourney, and Stable Diffusion. Check Harold Cohen: AARON | Whitney Museum of American Art: <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/harold-cohen-aaron>.
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