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INTERVIEW

EXPLORING THE 'SLOW ARCHIVE' AN INTERVIEW WITH SVEN SPIEKER

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Abstract

This interview with Sven Spieker explores the characteristics of his theoretical proposal known as the "Slow Archive." Introduced in his "Manifesto for a Slow Archive" (2016), it offers an original approach on the relationship between contemporary art and the archival device. The discussion delves into various topics, including temporality and speed concerning contemporary archives in the Internet age; the processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of the aura and their impact on archives; as well as strategies for slowing down the rapid flow of information, such as manipulating digital obscurity or navigating the boundaries between truth and fiction.

Keywords: Slow Archive, Art-Archive Relationship, Archival Tactics, Contemporary Criticism, Slow-down of Information Flows

INTRODUCTION

In 2016, Sven Spieker, a Professor at the University of California (Santa Barbara, USA), published his "Manifesto for a Slow Archive" in the journal *ARTMargins online*,[1] of which he is the founding editor. His proposal is noteworthy in the field of theory concerning the relationship between art and the archive, a field that has seen saturation in recent decades. Spieker approaches the archive as a cultural device that neither conforms to the bureaucratic tradition nor merely opposes it, unlike other anti- or counter-archival approaches. The concept of the "Slow Archive" does not prioritize the principles of provenance or the maintenance of an original order, as traditional analogue archives do. Instead, it acknowledges that digital technologies are replacing localization with ubiquity. ICTs blur the inside/outside distinction in the information accumulation apparatus, creating an environmental condition traversed by constant data flows within the framework of neoliberalism. As we will see in the following pages, Spieker's proposal suggests unconventional strategies for dealing with historical and contemporary conflicts. In this way he helps us navigate the complexities of the relationship between art and archive.

In essence, the "Slow Archive" can be regarded as a kind of third way that critically engages with the present, while examining both archival tradition and contemporary disruptions. It rejects both the "humanist archive" and "the neoliberal archive of fast (capital) flows," since both are totalizing systems. Instead, the "Slow Archive" draws useful elements from each part and positions itself primarily "in the margins and blank spaces," trying to take control of the variations in the speed at which images and documents circulate today.[2] Spieker challenges us with the critical, and therefore political, potency of the archival device and prompts the question: "How can we retake the archive and revive or instill in it a critical function without either nostalgically invoking its humanist incarnation or endorsing its neoliberal nemesis, the idea of a fully transparent, fully capitalized mega-archive?"[3] His particular solution revolves around pace and speed. However, the concept of "Slow Archive" does not advocate for the return to the slowness of analogue processes focused on preserving traces of the past. Rather, it consists in slowing down the flow of information and our actions within this flow in order to overcome "the constraints of enforced archival productivity."[4]

Drawing on case studies from the art realm, Spieker's manifesto introduces the characteristics of the "Slow Archive" in a propositional manner. For instance, Peruvian artist Luz Maria Bedoya's artwork *Línea de Nazca* (2008) proposes an archival approach where the body, its measurements and its position in relation to data offer a reading that is particular, deviant, neither universal nor fully intelligible, yet inhabitable. Bedoya's work, along with works by Akram Zaatari, Lina Selander, Dani Gal, Jörgen Gasilewski and Julius von Bismarck, are brought up to underline a series of strategies and possibilities for the "Slow Archive" involving shifts in speed, perspective and position, both materially and conceptually. These strategies encompass destabilizing velocities, altering viewpoints, positioning subjects or

objects in decentralized or even fictitious spaces, and particularly, the disorienting effects they may evoke, influencing how images and documents are perceived, both by humans and the technological devices we use. Spieker directly suggests that we can interpret "the slowing of information flow as a new archival politics."[5]

The "Slow Archive" acknowledges that the causes of the slowness of traditional archives stem from their material condition and bureaucratic procedures. It also recognizes the perceived speed and transparency of archives in the era of internet hyper-connectivity. However, Spieker advocates for the use of "digital obscurity"[6] as a final operative strategy of detention, involving the manipulation of information accumulations that are marginal, hidden, consciously or unconsciously forgotten by the omniscient, neoliberal, global archive. The "Manifesto for a Slow Archive" serves as a compendium of tactics for operating within the complex contemporary framework of the archive. Like any good manifesto, the original text is direct and concise, setting out the suggested strategies with a few examples and comments. At *Archivo Papers*, we thought to delve deeper into the key characteristics of the "Slow Archive" through an interview with the author. Its relationship with time, the processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of archival aura, the relationship between truth and fiction, and guerrilla tactics in the era of Big Data are some of the topics that we will explore in the subsequent pages.

Pablo Santa Olalla | Your concept of "Slow Archive" diverges from traditional assumptions such as the "allegiance to the traces of the past" or its relation to storage. At the same time, the "Slow Archive" is not only oppositional either, as it does not focus on what "negates, repudiates, or destroys" the archival device as the "an-archive", the "anti-archive" or the "anomic archive" do.[7] Instead, you propose a more operational perspective on data accumulation and organisation, considering its relevance to both the present and our memory management practices. In any case, the relationship of any archive to time is remarkable. Traditional archives act as some sort of artificial memory projecting traces of the past into the present and future (→). Conversely, oppositional modes of archiving aim to reconfigure our interpretation of historical accounts by altering the structures of information gathering, ordering and preservation (↻). Could you elaborate on the relationship between the "Slow Archive" and the "anomic" (Buchloh), "anarchivistic" (Foster) or even "disobedient" (Scotini) impulses?[8] Is the temporal scheme in which the "Slow Archive" operates similar to or different from that of these oppositional archives? How would you characterize it?

Sven Spieker | I have been working for a while on rethinking what it might mean to think about the archive in our time of AI and global digitization. Here, it is not really a question of some kind of universal archive theory that can encompass everything. I have always felt that the archive's relationship to time responds to a variety of different demands at the same time. On the one hand, there is the

need to see the archive as being subject to (historical) time. Now as always, it is important to historicize the archive, so we can escape from the idea that there is, or can be, a universal archive. This being said, to historicize the archive also means to shield us from the temptation, so widespread nowadays, to think of the archive as a cascading series of particulars (identities) whose differences cannot be overcome in any way. What I think is needed, in thinking about the archive's relationship with (historical) time, is how we can think the universal without sacrificing the particular, and without simply condemning the one in the name of the other. The "Slow Archive" is my effort to think about this problem, by saying: let's not take an archive's relationship with time for granted; instead, let's make it the focus of our examination. My approach begins with the problem of negation: what does it mean to negate something? In classic oppositional logic, binary negations assume that the two terms locked into the equation both cancel each other yet, in doing so, are also mutually dependent on each other. I will say more about this below, but it seems to me that while such a logic is perhaps suitable for analysing certain historical constructs, such as the Cold War, they are not helpful nowadays. My goal with the "Slow Archive" was to escape from the oppositional logic of negation, and point to the fact that archives allow for multiple allegiances.

Pablo Santa Olalla | Today, discussions about the concept of the archive often tend to adopt a Manichean stance, oscillating between philic and phobic positions regarding accumulation and organisation of information. However, your concept of "Slow Archive" appears to disrupt this dichotomy. In this context, you draw upon Sveltana Boym's concept of "off-modernity".[9] The archive is undeniably a product of Western Modernity while simultaneously shaping it. Could you further explain how your idea of the "Slow Archive" aligns with Boym's principles?

Sven Spieker | In a recent article, I have tried to elaborate on the distinction between *archivophilia* and *archivophobia* in relation to contemporary art production.[10] My point there is to say that the Manichean logic you mention above is, at least when it comes to art, not helpful. First of all, it's clear that in so many ways, *phobia* and *philia* mutually condition each other, or even depend on each other. A phobic attitude to the archive does not exclude affiliation, and vice versa. To negate is not necessarily to annihilate. In fact, as we know already from classic archive theory, in archives, complete annihilation is not possible since even an act of erasure tends to leave traces that constitute an archive all of their own. This does not invalidate the *archivophobic* impulse, which plays an important role in art. It does, however, relativize any effort to think negation metaphysically, as all-out destruction or total cancellation without a trace. The "Slow Archive" wants to highlight this fact. And I mean this also in a literal way. For instance, to play a vinyl record slowly or mess with its surface so that it skips and scratches, as the

Czech artist Milan Knížák did in a well-known work called *Broken Music* (1979), is not to fully destroy either the record, nor its stored content. Instead, Knížák's act of destruction invites us to ask: Where and what, actually is the archive here, and what is being destroyed or distorted? What are we losing and what are we gaining by playing the record (the archive) in this way? To play a record slowly, to stay with this example, is also to practice what we could refer to as critical modernity, and what must not be misunderstood as a deviation or simply as an offshoot or a deviation from the metropolitan archive. The "Slow Archive" differs from what with the late Svetlana Boym we could call the *off-archive* in the way it relates not merely to a politics of space—the road not taken, the territory unexplored—but also to the affective qualities of such detours. It asks, what difference does it make at what speed we explore the off-modern, how does this speed affect our perception of that space or, more radically, how does it help us constitute such a space in the first place? In other words, the "Slow Archive" is not just the technical archive, the media archive, it's also in addition meant to suggest an archival "mode", a way of "being archive", of existing in an archival space and the affects and states of being this may generate.

Pablo Santa Olalla | In your article, you highlight the traditional archives' association with locality, context and original order, aspects tied to the archival science "principle of provenance". The digital archive, on the other hand, is linked to processes of delocalisation. Following your text, these processes are related to the distinction between the inside and the outside of an archive. We have moved from the archive as a tangible place, from which one enters and leaves, to inhabiting an omnipresent archive, in constant flux. Walter Benjamin described the "aura" of a work of art in relation to its "here-and-now", which is lost through the flux of technical reproduction.[11] In this sense, we could say that traditional archives possess such an "aura". More recently, Boris Groys has spoken of a procedure for the "restoration of the aura", made possible through the mediation and curatorship of archives, whether analogue or digital.[12] In the "archive-as-environment" you describe, is it possible to "recover the aura"? Can we reterritorialise the processes of data accumulation and processing, which, as a political operation, can influence the means of (cultural) production in the framework of global neoliberalism? Or does the focus on contemporary connectivity hinder new ordering operations, allowing only for a "replacement of location with different forms of disorientation", as you suggest as a characteristic feature of the "Slow Archive"?[13]

Sven Spieker | Yes, the gamble of the "Slow Archive" is to think the archive as an environment, as it were ecologically. We are all very used to think of archives economically (Greek *oikos* < house), in terms of a specific place of consignment with walls and a door that is guarded by the notorious *arkhontes*, or whatever their equivalent may be in different contexts. Yet while this *arkhon*

remains important, and while it is often thought of (among others, by Derrida) as the archive's substratum, its material base, we should not forget that no economy can exist in isolation. The *oikos* is part of an infrastructure, it cannot run its operation without connection to other houses, other economies, and so its vertical internal organization must be supplemented with a horizontal one. To some degree, this is just a matter of perspective. As I try to show in my book *The Big Archive*,[14] while it's important to look at archives as repositories consisting of records and their classification—in short as an independent, "stand alone" *oikos*—we should not forget that this archival architecture is also part of a complex group of interacting institutions without which no analogue archive could function, including the registry. The Principle of Provenance is the outward manifestation of this reality. It says: in an archive, every single record comes from somewhere, from some place, and this provenance determines its place in the archive, so that archives always send us to another place, another archive. Ultimately, on this level, and using Boris Groys' terminology, the modern archive marks a suspicion: the suspicion that what we see (in the archive) hides another place, another archive that the present archive documents or registers without disclosing it fully. It's inevitable, therefore, that we talk about the archive as an *environment* rather than as an isolated mechanism, something that in the digital realm is self-evident, even if the network is not quite the same as what I refer to as an *archival environment*. In the analogue archival environment, the originality or authenticity of a record (an image or text) is a function of the place it occupies, and in this sense, there is indeed a resemblance to Benjamin's ideas concerning the *Aura*, which also designates the originality of a work of art in its traditional place—say, a cathedral—and the way in which this location becomes inscribed in said artwork. Originality/the *Aura*, for Benjamin, is in this sense genuinely archival: it preserves or stores the traces of the past in a certain place. By contrast, digital images, even if they are part of an archive, exist independently from that archive in the sense that their originality, or the lack thereof, is in no way dependent on the archive in which they have been deposited. In fact, they can be moved away from that archive, and into another archive, at any time. And in this sense, as Groys observes, digital images lack an *Aura* to the extent that they lack an archive beyond the algorithm that underwrites their (virtual) existence. The "Slow Archive," in this sense, represents indeed a version of what Groys refers to as "deterritorialization" (removal of the *Aura*) and "reterritorialization", the tentative restoral of the *Aura* through efforts to insert digital images into various environments by *exhibiting* them. What's important here, however, is the fact that the "Slow Archive" is not a strategy for making these images visible, merely for creating an *environment* for them. In other words, "exhibiting", as the example of Espenschied's experiments shows, can actually mean to make such images undiscoverable or obscure (see also below on "digital obscurity"). The point is not visibility but archivization: no restoring of the *Aura*, however tentative it may be, is imaginable without the archive that underwrites it.

Pablo Santa Olalla | Another characteristic aspect of the "Slow Archive" is "the strategic assumptions of fiction as fact," which you illustrate through Jörgen Gasilewski's 2006 documentary novel *The Gothenburg Events*. In recent decades, we have observed the remarkable commercial success of historical novels. While these novels have brought memory and history closer to general audiences, they do not seem to have awakened a spirit of critical reading, but rather a certain morbid fascination with the obscure historical details. This perpetuates a traditional narrative writing, centred on great figures and major events as propellers of a socio-political linear evolution where the societal body serves merely as background. However, there's been a recent surge in "speculative" and "fictionalized history" approaches in academia, as well as a renewed attention to science fiction authors (as in the cases of the retrieval of Stanisław Lem, Karel Čapek, Ursula K. Le Guin or Sandy Stone), as sources of valid knowledge. How does the "assumption of fiction as fact" proposed by your concept of "Slow Archive" relate to these contemporary trends in literature and academic writing?

Sven Spieker | I cannot speak to all of the books you mention, but my example (Gasilewski) seems to come close to what you identify as "fictionalized history." Gasilewski's example is interesting to me mostly for the way it helps us understand a type of fact that is often associated with archives: facts as *evidence*. In his novel, Gasilewski argues that an archival document does not simply contain or own its own status as evidence; rather, it searches for that status within what he calls "the greatest of stories, reality." I enjoyed this statement – it seems to say that the function of evidence, hence of archives, is not, as is often assumed, simply a given. Evidence is part of a process of establishing truth, and that process is interesting less for the way it neatly separates truth from fiction—we know this is impossible—than for producing what Alain Badiou calls events (*événements*): something that from the perspective of what exists, of what we know and are used to is wholly improbable and unlikely. Evidence understood in this way proves to us the real existence or possibility of what from the point of view of a "realistic" politics is impossible, hence pure fiction. The "Slow Archive" aims to be evidence in this sense. Not simply the merging of fact and fiction but rather proof (evidence) that what from the perspective of "facts" is fiction can, in fact, become actualized and real.

Pablo Santa Olalla | The final characteristic action of the "Slow Archive" is "the slowing of information flow as a new archival politics," which you illustrate through the concept of "digital obscurity." This relates to that which remains invisible, marginal to the transparency of the neoliberal global archive. However, as you briefly note in your text, traditional archives also exhibit a form of analogue obscurity. In fact, a significant part of research, whether artistic, historiographical, social, or humanistic, involves bringing to light what canonical interpretations of the accumulations of

information overlook, aiming to enrich the narratives by supporting, opposing, or deviating from them. In this sense, the "Slow Archive" approach to "digital obscurity" is contrary to that of obscurity in analogical archives. Whereas the latter seek to provide clarity, in the case of the neoliberal global archive there is an excess of transparency that the "Slow Archive" seeks to contravene. However, slowing down the contemporary flow of information can also be accomplished through other means beyond such a commitment to "digital obscurity." Consider, for instance, the "culture jamming" procedures proposed by Mark Dery in 1993.[15] This kind of semiotic guerrilla warfare sought to actively intervene in the infosphere of the time, adding chaos to it. Today, these procedures of hacking, remixing, and rumour production have become more numerous and complex: pishing, pharming, spoofing, identity theft, memeing, glitching, and so on. In the operational framework of Big Data, many of these tactics seek first to accelerate the production of information in order to eventually slow down the flows by introducing noise and disrupting the channels. Do these new technophilic procedures of resistance against the neoliberal global archive bear any resemblance to the "Slow Archive"?

Sven Spieker | In his article on "Semiological Guerilla Warfare," Umberto Eco recommended a series of tactics for anyone interested in resisting the pull of manipulative mass communication, in an age when it was no longer enough to identify reactionary information sources with the goal of replacing them with more progressive ones.[16] Eco believed that only a systematically developed conscious focus on the different ways in which messages are received and interpreted by their consumers, the different codes and systems used for their decipherment, could remedy this situation. Of course, there is nothing wrong with this view, but perhaps from our perspective, Eco's belief in communication science and semiology and what both can teach us, feels idealistic in way that the tactics you mention in your question–pishing, pharming, spoofing, identity theft, memeing, glitching–are not. Unlike Eco's model, these tactics argue that militancy trumps analysis. Rather than subjecting information and its flow to analysis or trying to educate the consumer of information, they perform or inhabit its flows without trying to decipher or analyze it. With often surprising results, these militant tactics subvert the neoliberal drift of the data flows that engulf us today. Yet in doing so, these tactics are perhaps also a bit helpless when it comes to what to do with their victory. How and where can we orient ourselves in a situation where manipulation no longer has an outside? The "Slow Archive" positions itself somewhere between Eco and these tactics. On the one hand, it says: we live in an age when nostalgic appeals to the past, to past struggles and ideals, or to knowledge that purports to be objective and scientific, are no longer able to underwrite a new politics. Yet at the same time it argues that this does not mean that we should simply write off the archive. On the contrary, a newly conceived archive, what I call an archive of the present, is more necessary than ever. It asks: "How can we retake the archive and revive or instill in it a critical

function without either nostalgically invoking its humanist incarnation or endorsing its neoliberal nemesis, the idea of a fully transparent, fully capitalized mega-archive?" The artworks I mention in my manifesto are all efforts to grapple with this question. In all cases, the ("slow") archive is at the center, yet this archive does not recreate the traditional archive architecture with its rigid distinction between inside and outside; nor does it lay claim to present or past knowledge to cement anachronistic intellectual or legal ownership claims. Rather, by focusing on what traditional archives and knowledges have overlooked; by reterritorializing data without sacrificing knowledge altogether; and by critiquing nostalgic invocations of the past without giving up on memory, the "Slow Archive" promotes the archive, perhaps paradoxically, as an agent of change.

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