

Accumulation

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Clutter, both material and immaterial, is symptomatic of the human drive to archive, document, collect, save, reproduce and record the world. As these activities have exploded in recent years through cheap, more efficient and accessible technology, clutter might actually constitute a central mode of contemporary existence. Our project, *Accumulation*, is the product of our awareness of the social process of digital hoarding and our questioning of its impact on our individual identities and collective memory.



I. THE VIRTUAL ACCUMULATION AS COLLECTION?

Acquisition, self-extension and the fear of forgetting

For Aristides a “collection is an obsession organized” (Aristides 1998. p. 330). Written in the 1980s like most research done on the act of collecting and the existence of collections, his research differentiated accumulation with collection. A collection of “things” (stamps, artefacts in a museum, art for the Medicis or Saatchi or judicial testimonies) can qualify as a healthy hobby, as socially useful, culturally important or as means to create a better tomorrow. The accumulation of “things” on the other hand implies a lack of selectivity that is associated to clutter, even conflict, displeasure, and shame rooted in psychological illness that can eventually lead to the troubling and active behaviour of the hoarder (Phillips 1966; Novey and Novey 1987) (for some exceptional examples of this, refer to TLC’s ‘Hoarding: Buried Alive’ series). So while collections connote rational and exceptionality, “items in an accumulation lack the systematic selectivity in acquiring them, or a unity of categorical description” (Kron 1983. p. 93) that make collections proper and accumulations a threat.

But often accumulations and collections are realities that are explained through similar evolutions and mechanisms. Russell Belk has shown that throughout Europe and the Americas the occurrence of collections tend to follow the development of economic stability and consumer culture expansion, in other words times when there are more accumulated products available (Belk 1995). So while the Cro-Magnons left traces of fossil, quartz and galinea collections (Pomian 1990) and the wealthiest Medieval European royals and Churches collected art, “the real boom in mass collecting in Europe as well as in China and Japan began in the 16th and 17th century [with] the rapid economic growth due either to internal or international trade.” (Russell 2006) More recently the 20th century has seen a massive acceleration of object production or accumulation that correlates with an increasing number of collectors (Belk, Wallendorf, Sherry, Holbrook 1991).

In psychological terms Freud understood accumulations and collections as the result of the same anal stage in the psychoanalytical development of the individual. In that the traumatic frustration of toilet training leads one to accumulate in later life in order to regain control over the possessions forcefully lost many years ago. Furthermore both accumulating and collecting are reassuring activities of legitimisation and self-extension. For James Clifford collecting behaviours in children reveal how gathering and classifying “things” is an organized acquisitive obsession or a specialized form of accumulation to actualize the self:

"Children's collections are revealing (...) a boy's accumulation of miniature, a girl's dolls, a summer vacation 'nature museum' (with labelled stones and shells) (...): in these small rituals we observe the channelling of obsession, an exercise in how to make the world one's own, to gather things around oneself tastefully and appropriately. (...) An excessive, sometimes even rapacious need to *have* is transformed into rule-governed meaningful desire. Thus the self that must *possess* but cannot have it all learns to select, order, classify in hierarchies – to make 'good' collections." (Clifford 1985. p. 238).

If Clifford uses this to explain late 20th century children's personal collections, extrapolating and comparing it to a present-day large corporation's mission statement -- “to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful”¹ -- Clifford's analysis of collections isn't so far off from Google's successful motto. Does Google's enterprise replicate our latent desire to archive all of the world's data to make the “world one's own” like when we were young? (Clifford 1985. p. 238)

Pierre Nora would add an additional dimension to Clifford's statement. For this historian our 21st century Western society's apparent collective investment in collecting the world through structures like Google isn't linked to a childhood obsession, rather it is a relatively new activity on the scale of human history. For Nora the development of increasingly accessible and powerful archival technologies just like our construction of

¹ <http://www.google.com/about/company/>

memorials, the creation of UNESCO, or personal collections of photographs are simply material means to counter an anxiety about the future that rose out of the turn of the 19th century. Nora argues that the progressive acceleration of history and rapid social change underway since that time has resulted in a collective fear of total disappearance or collective death. As a result, as a collective we are investing time to collect, acquire and accumulate “things” and retain the security of a world that seems to be speeding as fast as our memory of it is vanishing. (Nora 1989)

II. 0s AND 1s AND REACHING THE SACRED THROUGH INTERNET TRANCE:

The materiality of virtuality

If collecting like accumulating are rooted in a balance of personal psychological need and of larger social and economic contexts what is certain is that, as Jacques Derrida famously coined them, “technical structures” must be in place to permit the archiving process to occur. These can be as straightforward as spaces to store the collected material – Facebook and the Senate Library are both “technical structures” – but they are essential because they permit the archive and importantly determine the “content in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future” (Derrida 1995. 17). So for instance when Facebook restructures the way in which its accumulated data is stored hence archived and presented, this content can potentially take a whole new meaning.

The main success of virtual storage spaces is how it responds so impeccably to the fear of total doom described by Nora and the need of control over the world and the self argued by Freud and Clifford. Indeed by reducing all and any data into a simple language composed of 0s and 1s it seems like anything *and* everything can be stored. This linguistic code makes all information contractible into light and manageable files that are exchanged via the Internet or saved in ‘clouds’. Unlike the collection, the storage, the accumulation or the hoarding in the physical world, the virtual world requires much less material space and hence encourages any and all “of the world” information to be saved. This results in an

explosion of virtual data that are incredibly diverse but all rooted in the similar desire to accumulate: millions of past sunsets on Flickr, endless feelings of boredom hashtagged, videos of two cats hugging uploaded to YouTube, the very image of our city streets archived by Google or memorials designed with algorithms similar to those of social networking sites. Today we are of the world by accumulating digitally. And incredibly if the physical hoarder may have negative connotations, the virtual hoarder does not necessarily. The virtual hoarder does not live in rooms that are impossible to trespass and no cockroaches can prosper in one's personal photo albums.

If the general understanding of one's email inbox archive is that it is endless and that the 'cloud' in which all can be stored is light (like a cloud), in fact like all pre-digital accumulations and collections, the virtual accumulation is entirely material. In a sense digital archives are the latest instalment in what Nora called the "essentially modern type of memory-making." For him the modern memory that emerges in the 1800s "is above all archival" and "relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, and the visibility of the image."(Nora 1989. p.17) And indeed our accumulation of virtual matter requires large-scale 24-hour data centres filled with servers pumping electricity. Virtual information is thereby highly material, that requires uploading, scanning, digitisation, air-conditioning, programing, wires, servers and this all in large data centers.

III. THE TEMPLE AT DELPHI AS ALLEGORY OF THE INTERNET'S DIGITAL ARCHIVE

For the ancient Greeks the temple of Apollo, set in the mountainscape of Delphi, was their most important religious site. There, Apollo, the god of prophecy would reveal the events to come through the Pythia, whose words were regarded as neutral portals of his divine knowledge. There, generals sought strategy recommendations, explorers guidance, citizens investment advice. It is also there that Oedipus was famously warned that he would murder his father and marry his mother. An exception in Ancient Greek misogynistic society the Pythia was a woman who, unlike most priests, did not inherit her office through noble

family connections and, a part from being born in Delphi, “she could be old or young, rich or poor, well educated or illiterate.” Furthermore “Pythias went through a long and intense period of conditioning, supported by a sisterhood of Delphic women,” but once an official Pythia she held the prestigious status of being, as a possessed medium, the voice of Apollo. (Hale, De Boer, Chanton, Spiller 2003)

From the only surviving depiction of the Pythia giving an oracle, a ceramic cup from about 440 B.C, she is shown on a tripod in a separated room from her visitor. Archeological digs have shown that according to the structure of the temple the Pythia would have been placed in a separate area of the temple: in an inner sanctum two to four meters below the level of the surrounding floor and set right above fumes of methane, ethane and ethylene. It is proven that ethylene inhaled in reasonable amounts induces a trance state, feelings of out-of-body experience and euphoria, and short amnesia after the intake. From primary sources we know that during oracular sessions the Pythia “during the oracular sessions, the Pythia spoke in an altered voice and tended to chant her responses, indulging in wordplay and puns. Afterward, according to Plutarch, she was like a runner after a race or a dancer after an ecstatic dance” (Hale, De Boer, Chanton, Spiller 2003). All parallel behaviours to those observed in huffers getting high of fumes.²

In the same way that this site was a source of Truth then, the digital archive can be regarded as today's oracle of Truth: both offer the most reassuring ways to feel in control of

² “Spiller, a toxicologist, became a member of the project. His work with “huffers”—teenage drug users who get high on the fumes from substances such as glue and paint thinner, most of which contain light hydrocarbon gases—had shown a number of parallels with the behavior reported for the trance state of the Pythia. Spiller uncovered even more parallels in the reports of experiments on the anesthetic properties of ethylene carried out more than half a century ago by pioneering American anesthesiologist Isabella Herb. She had found that a 20 percent mixture of ethylene produced unconsciousness but that lower concentrations induced a trance state. In most cases, the trance was benign: the patient remained conscious, was able to sit up and to respond to questions, experienced out-of-body feelings and euphoria, and had amnesia after being taken off the gas. But occasionally Herb would see violent reactions, the patient uttering wild, incoherent cries and thrashing about. Had a patient vomited during such a frenzy and ingested some of the vomit into the lungs, pneumonia and death would inevitably have followed. Thus, according to Spiller’s analysis, inhaling ethylene could account for all the various descriptions of the *pneuma* at Delphi—its sweet odor and its variable effects on human subjects, including even the potential for death.” Hale, John R.; De Boer, Jelle Zeilinga; Chanton, Jeffrey P.; Henry A. Spiller. “Questioning the Delphic Oracle” in *Scientific American* 289 (August 2003). 66-73.

the future. Hoarding virtually today is a hopeful way to insure that the future will remember us, that we will remember ourselves, that nothing is lost and that we are in control of the now to better plan tomorrow. Furthermore if learning about the future at Delphi meant putting the Pythia into a state of trance, today accessing the Internet's virtual archive can induce trance-like experience for its user. YouTube or Facebook for instance are particularly trance inducing: being led from one video to another, profile to the next, time and space, subject and object are collapsed.

IV. ACCUMULATION: A PROJECT

In our project, we wish to emphasize our contemporary obsession with accumulating and the materiality of the virtual spaces we are using to do this with; furthermore we want to point to the notions of control, self-actualisation and fear of doom that push us to do so.

As such for our project we chose a low-resolution image of a photograph of the ruins of the ancient Temple of Delphi taken in the 1960s. Found on the Internet, this image (probably a vintage vacation photo, not dissimilar to what one can find on Flickr) will be presented in a pixelated proportion so as to emphasize its digital origin. Keeping with the idea of giving virtual matter a material value and to emphasize our contemporary hoarding tendencies, the image of the temple will be complimented by a recorded audio of Google's voice (the Google Translate voice) reciting the binary code that composes the image (by literally it saying the 823 696 characters that make up the image). The goal is to emphasize that despite the image's low DPI, its binary code is composed of millions of characters.

We purposefully want to re-create the Pythia-like feeling of being taken out of time and space through a trance-like audioscape. The omniscient quality of the sound will extend the spectator's experience as they too will be taken over by the sheer quantity one numbers accumulated to make the image. Similarly to the state of "surfing" the internet or of the pythia telling her oracles, with our audio recording our intention is to drag the viewer into a

trance-like state by drowning him or her with the humungous amount of information that the image carries. Furthermore in this way there is a synesthetic dimension to this work, as sensations of several kinds are stimulated as the result of one sense only (Neher 1980). In this case, one's auditory apparatus is stimulated by the sounds of the voices reading the 0s and 1s, but at the same time the person can 'see' the sounds -- the way in which sounds are actually connected to the image. By positioning the image in a dialectical relationship to the sound recording, we convey a feeling of heaviness.

CONCLUSION

Akin to the role of the oracle in ancient Greece, we hope that experience of *Accumulation* will disrupt people's everyday use of the virtual world and confront them with our material relationship to the now in terms of past and future. By challenging viewers about the accumulated materiality of our virtual archives we ask about the very nature of how we remember and we become.

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