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Obsession, Things, and Narratives

“It is always changing. It has order. It doesn’t have a specific place. Its boundaries are not fixed. It affects other things. It may be accessible, but go unnoticed. Part of it may also be part of something else. Some of it is familiar. Some of it is strange. Knowing of it changes it.”

In 1970, when Robert Barry wrote this short conceptual text entitled *Art Work*, it was, as we know, not the first, but definitely a strong statement for a notion of art that not only defied the still widespread idea of the self-contained, autonomous art work created by a single, original author, but, also directed the focus on its relationality.

Continuously changing while being ordered at the same time, its boundaries permeable, thus allowing for an exchange with “other things” and contexts, an art work in Barry’s view is never terminated, but changes meaning when being known of and perceived: with its emphasis on process, situation and context, the viewer gains importance.





In 2004, Robert Barry's conceptual text served Yane Calovski's project *Everything is After Something* as a starting point for a newly created anthem dedicated to one of the many "ais" located in the archipelago off the coast of the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. Ais are, as Calovski put it, deserted islands that have become "free-associative territory" after the Swedish army had abandoned them in the early 1990s after the end of the Cold War. In other words, they are places "missing an identity" –and thus, lead to a central issue in Calovski's artistic approach: the reflection of how the identity of a place, a community, or more generally speaking, of a particular context is constructed, and what is the role that symbolic practices like anthems, as well as material representations –images, architecture, monuments, etc.- play in it. Transferred into a music composition, sung and performed by a young musician, and, last but not least, documented in a short film by Calovski, the lyrics of the new "anthem" promoted a notion of identity which wittily undermined and counter-acted ideas of a self-contained, fixed identity, and acknowledged "identity" as inevitably being fluid and accessible for new impulses from inside and outside, if it didn't want to petrify. At the same time, its transfer to another context and translation into a new form followed an artistic practice where meaning is relational and perception context-bound.

If one exchanges the term "art work" with "collection", one enters yet another field, which is equally important to Calovski's artistic thinking and closely linked to the question of identity. (Art) collections gain identity not only through the items accumulated, but also through the way knowledge and artifacts are categorized, ordered, and displayed. The form in which a collection is made accessible reflects the structure and condition of any given society. In this sense, collections are defined by their usage. What then, if the given order is altered and both the display and the forms of perceiving the exhibits are changed?

In his project *Ponder Pause Process (a Situation)* (2010) at the Tate, in London, Calovski re-arranged works from the collection in a new –temporary- installation or, as the title says, "situation", focusing on works of art which, in their various forms of addressing and involving the viewer, were influential in Calovski's own artistic method. Combining artists of different generations who work in various media and employ different methods –from Henri Matisse to Joseph Beuys or Vito Acconci to Jeff Wall, Christopher Wool and Emma Kay –Calovski challenged some of the preconceptions of how to present and preserve a collection of art. How can, for example, process oriented, ephemeral and performative works –such as Francis Aljys' *The Commuters* (2005) consisting of a series of walks, in which an unprotected painting is brought from one place to the respective home of the performer- be displayed without losing their marrow? Or, in what way can art works be activated which are conceived to be complemented by the viewer, like for example Liam Gillick's *Big Conference Platform Platform* (1998) aiming to establish an open space or scenario for "unscripted" usage?



In his exhibition, Calovski included not only performative elements in his exhibition such as his multiple *ULAY*—a floor mat made for the exhibition to sit on and reflect—but also a workshop with artists, curators, and scientists held in the exhibition space addressing, among other issues, concepts of archiving knowledge and ephemeral conceptual practices.¹ He also introduced a deliberate subjective element in the given order of the collection, creating unforeseen associations and dialogues between art works which are not grounded in the traditional art historical chronology or its genre, nor media categories. “By addressing my idiosyncratic research process through rearranging analog notes with saved reference images, texts, and traced art-historical information,” explains the artist in a conversation in May 2010, “I can see how I can understand the display as yet another archive, a container of inconclusive connectedness between works that (should) resist a linear historical art narrative.”²

Calovski, in other words, conceived of a new narrative and transformed the artworks of the collection into the agents or “performers” of his staging of a temporary order, reflecting back at the constructedness of the given presentation of the collection, just like the Chinese encyclopedia in Foucault’s *Order of Things*. In *Very Beautiful Name Piece* (2011), his installation created for the Zorlu Center Art Collection, Calovski undertakes an even more subjective, personal approach while intensifying his general considerations on collecting and archiving. Again, “analogue” or physical material³, (compiled mainly from 2003-2004, when he was a researcher at the Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht) —that is, small drawings and diagrams, residues of research, notes on conversations, projects, budgets, personal notes, found slides, etc.— play a crucial role.

Presenting this heterogenous material in no specific formal order in transparent glass containers especially made for this purpose and meant to be presented on the museum’s or collection’s plinths, Calovski enacts a suggestive interplay between function and dysfunction, revealing and concealing, shedding light on artefacts that might otherwise have gone unnoticed.⁴ Here, the glass containers —both visually accessible and self-contained —symbolise the selectivity of the process of collecting, which also always implies the selection and definition of what is worth being remembered. As specific types of archives, (art) collections are materialised “memories”. But whereas *Ponder Pause Process (a Situation)* re-organized and activated the existing collective memory of a public collection, *Very Beautiful Name Piece* focuses on the more personal recollections of the artist, on leftovers of his artistic researches, but also private concerns of this period, even though quite many of them have already been appropriated found footage, which makes these recollections (at least) partly “collective”.



As the science historian Israel Rosenfeld once stated in an interview, memory and emotions are often intimately linked.⁵ Accordingly, the giving away of notes and material personally meaningful and functional to the artist at the time also entails a psychological dimension, testing the boundaries between the private and public sphere in the process of displaying and institutionalizing an artist's work. If the artist is, as Calovski mentioned in an unpublished email conversation, critical of his own need to draw from his past, *Very Beautiful Name Piece* is probably his most personal piece. It generates time capsules manifesting the occasionally irrational urge to collect loose materials and giving insights into the production and living circumstances of a specific moment in space and time.⁶ The element of time is also mirrored by the fact that part of the notes, diagrams, and drawings were written on the loose pages of an agenda designed by Manuel Reader, a German designer and at the time Calovski's colleague at the Jan van Eyck Academy, who himself had used pages of expired agendas of some of his friends from the year before (including Calovski's agenda); through this, *Very Beautiful Name Piece* introduces a moment of (self)referentiality as well as collectivity.

Collections of images and archives are hence both the object and the source of Calovski's explorations and artistic interventions. "Of archive and collection" reads the inscription in one of the many drawings of *Master Plan* (2008-2009) and *Obsessive Setting* (2010), two projects which are based on intense studies in various private archives. Both works refer to the reconstruction of Calovski's hometown Skopje in the wake of the devastating earthquake in 1963. The almost complete destruction of the city of Skopje was taken as an unparalleled opportunity to plan and envision the city from scratch, and to create an "ideal city" shaping all areas of social, economic, political, and cultural life in keeping with the optimistic spirit of the 1960s-1970s modern architecture (whose authoritarian gesture has been vastly criticised since then); simultaneously, the planned re-construction of Skopje was seen as a chance to strengthen and create an internationally acknowledged symbol of the Macedonian national identity within Tito's multinational state of Yugoslavia. In 1965, Japanese architect Kenzo Tange and his team were invited to develop a new *Master Plan* for the city which, however, was never fully implemented.

It was exactly this gap between high-flying ideas and the sometimes banal results in reality, the conflict between the utopian dreams of an individual and those of a collective body, the clash between a present projected onto the future and aging during the course of its realization and the needs and reality of a lived present, which sparked Calovski's interest. The "mystery of how we ended up with an unremarkable result after so much international input and solidarity" stood, as he once said, at the beginning of his complex investigation which traced the various displacements and



transformations of the original plans during the course of the reconstruction of the city. Calovski was not only interested in the details of production, but also in the omissions and lapses. His series of evocative drawings realised for both *Master Plan* and *Obsessive Setting* reflect his specific focus: they live from the tension between elaborate details, subtly sketched elements, and blank space. While some motifs repeat in both series, indicating, as the artist notes, the exhaustion of the archival material available, others take up elements from newly discovered documentations and records of images, pointing to new details. This returning to and reworking of found, appropriated, as well as new material while highlighting different aspects parallels the reconstructive manner of how (re)collections work: they shift, re-evaluate, and ultimately re-create what is remembered according to the conditions at the time the memory occurs.

Fragments of the past are captured from a present perspective in order to open new horizons, explore unknown territory, and allow for narratives and ramifications which are rarely linear –a reading which is reflected by the presentation of the drawings in loose clusters. While Calovski’s drawings embody the process of recollecting, the modular structure realised for *Obsessive Setting* –referring to Kenzo Tange’s original architectural model which Calovski had included in *Master Plan*– delivers a model for an ideal storage, archive, or museum: it is flexible, with no fixed boundaries, accessible and always changing.

Notes

¹ The participants of the workshop were members of the group *OuUnPo (A Workshop of Potential Universes)*, an itinerant project which explores the notion of time, space and the role of subjectivity in contemporary art discourse. Initially, Calovski had the idea to realize a regular program of meetings and events, but the institution didn’t prove flexible enough to allow for a regular “occupation” of its space.

² 100 Years of the Contemporary Art Society. What’s Next? Inside Public Collections, London 2010, pp. 339.

³ In his seminal essay “An Archival Impulse”, Hal Foster states that one characteristic of “archival art”, which he distinguishes as one of the main trajectories within contemporary art, is its being “obstinately physical”. Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse”, in *October* 110 (Fall 2004), pp. 3-4.





⁴ Although realised in a different medium, the beginning of Calovski's video essay *Hollow Land* (2009) orchestrates a similar interplay between revealing and concealing. It shows a sequence of short fade-ins and fade-outs, depicting architectural details of a newly constructed district in Amsterdam which Calovski characterized as a "place without history".

⁵ Israel Rosenfeld, "Dynamic Memory", qtd. in Hans-Ulrich Obrist, "Un archive peut en cacher un autre", in: *Interarchive. Archival Practices and Sites in the Contemporary Art Field*, Ed. by Beatrice v. Bismarck, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Diethem Stoller, Ulf Wuggenig, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne 2002, pp. 422.

⁶ In this context, Andy Warhol's famous *Time Capsules* come to mind. Between 1974 and his death in 1987, Warhol accumulated source material of his work and an enormous record of his daily life in altogether 612 cardboard boxes. In contrast to Calovski, however, Warhol did not display them during his life time. The fact that Calovski exhibits his "time capsules" in a public museum defines them as an important element of his ongoing reflection on the structures and processes of art institutions.

