

Public Talk at SFMOMA 10/5/2006

In Conjunction with the Exhibition, *Imposing Order: Contemporary Photography and the Archive*

There are, of course, all kinds of archives. What they share and reflect is our human need to order our perceptions of the world. All are products of the same impulse, solidified during the Enlightenment, that brought us perspective in the visual arts, tempered tuning in music, and Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality in philosophy. My intentions for this evening are to restrict most of my brief comments to the Italian archives I photographed in 1995 and 96 when I was a fellow at the American Academy in Rome.

First, I want to remark on how standing within any one of these literary archives made me feel as if I was riding the ebb of backward moving time. If history can be said to have an aura then it is here within these rooms that one experiences it full force. The reasons have to do with the spaces themselves: their modesty and of course in most cases with their age; with the quality of light within them – as much about shadow as light – and the way sheaves of paper, books, folders in yellowing covers are stacked mutely on their shelves – objects from the past tentatively and obliviously occupying our present,



appearing more randomly placed than ordered; and the near silence within the rooms – whatever sounds one hears are muted and far away, occupying a different galaxy; a different time. The air is musty, like a grandparent's attic, filled with smells of arid decay and remembrance. One feels

hushed within such spaces – overcome with the sort of reverence one might experience when eulogizing or recalling a deceased friend or relative. One succumbs to these feelings even while realizing— perhaps precisely because one does realize – that these repositories of the past are disappearing anachronisms –relics of the humanist need to order – and are being replaced by the vast, dynamic, digital archives available to nearly anyone in the world via the internet. This democratization of knowledge that turns the traditional hierarchical archive into a vast accessible plain of information devours epistemological palpability, its aura as well as its vain will to order.

The second thing I want to point out is that the archive has two dimensions or domains. One – that which I have been discussing and is the most interesting to me – is private. It is turned away from us, is hidden from public view. Being restricted, it is the realm of the specialist, available only to the initiated: those granted permission to enter and perceived as having the knowledge to utilize and respect its contents. I was going to call this its subterranean aspect but that image would be misleading, implying dankness, moisture and, using a biological metaphor, situate it in proximity to the bowels. The more appropriate domestic equivalent would be the attic, close to

the sky and metonymically, to the brain. The archive's second domain is more inclusive. Here it dresses up – creates an elaborate staging area for the acquisition of knowledge. Within these spaces, the holdings of the archive are brought forward, are organized and showcased for the public, which can consist of anyone from the expert, to the curious, to even the



urban homeless – at least this is the case in most large, American cities –seeking temporary shelter from the elements. It's not unusual for these spaces created for the interface between the public and the contents of the archive to be as important as – or, in some cases more important than – its holdings. This might be the case, for example, with the main reading room of the State Archive at Sant' Ivo alla Sapienza, Rome, designed by Francesco Borromini and pictured here after it had

been closed to the public and was being used for storage. As the location of the user interface, it is in these areas that the contents of the archive are organized and displayed to allow the public the greatest ease of access. In most instances, “experts” are available to help the public. In the literary archive, this is the job of the librarian. In the art museum, it is the function of the curator who selects and arranges the objects and who, although usually not available in person, often leaves guidance in the form of didactic wall texts. These, along with explanations by trained amateurs, the docents, and in some cases pre-recorded audio guides, are intended to provide contextual information as well as instruction as to how one might best interpret the works on display. (In passing it’s curious to note that in the usual absence of either curators or docents, museum guards often take it upon themselves to act as the experts, aggressively limiting the public’s physical proximity to the objects while offering their own unsolicited critiques).

I want to end these remarks by returning briefly to the attic – to that part of the archive that is hidden away, which is where I began this ramble. I want to reiterate that these spaces are beautiful to me partially because they seem oblivious to my presence. They exist whether I’m there or not. They express the reserved dignity of functionality. I’m reminded of the experience I had many years ago when I walked through the room of Rembrandt portraits at the Hermitage in what was then Leningrad. The thing that I found so affecting about the pictures – and I recall there being at least thirty of them – was this sense that the people represented weren’t aware that they were being looked at. Their eyes didn’t seek out my eyes nor demand my attention. They didn’t look out but instead seemed to be looking in. Privately. In other words they held back; were reticent; remained within themselves; were not compromised by my presence nor interrupted by my quizzical gaze. So it is with the archive – at least that secluded section that’s behind closed doors. Its objects – even the rooms themselves – seem lost-in-themselves and even though they



may represent a response to a humanist will to order, they defy or are unresponsive to its dictates in the same way that Rembrandt's subjects are oblivious to our gaze. Something else – something that can't be ordered – is being revealed. It defies language or representation. It exists outside of our desires to systematize. What I'm struggling to describe is found in the discarded, in the forgotten, in decay. It speaks of impermanence, transition, and of course of death.