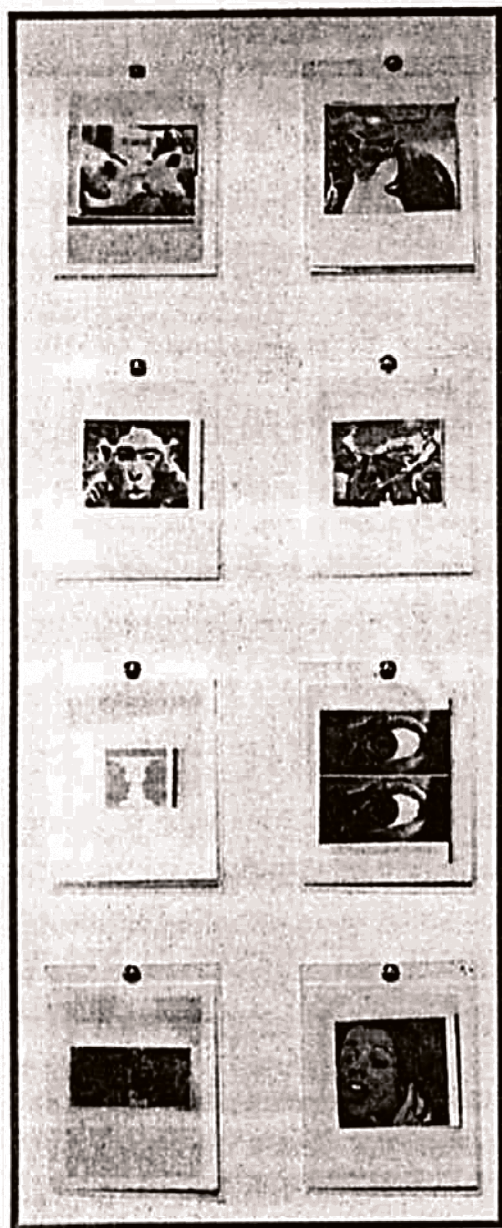


A is for Archive

By Jan Tumlir



The discourse of art, while straining for a requisite level of complex, technical specificity, ultimately is a kind of montage or patchwork of extraneous concerns. Those languages which are proper to it—the languages of technique, color theory and design—in fact comprise the smallest part of it. The bulk of the discourse is liberally imported from those humanities with a more elevated academic pedigree, such as comparative literature and literary criticism, which in turn sample a great deal of their material from the so-called “soft sciences,” including sociology, anthropology, psychoanalysis and economics, all of which is somehow distilled into a semi-cogent brew. One would imagine that this same profuse recipe, applied to the plastic arts, might serve to considerably expand the field of production. Not so. Contemporary art, inasmuch as it maintains any sort of theoretical attachment, devolves upon an extremely limited regime of ideas. What this signals, above all, is an evident fissure between theory and practice. In other words, precious few ideas articulated in theory provide a viable basis for artistic work.

The subject of the archive is an important exception. A referential means, and simultaneously its end, the archive provides that rare conflation of form and content which art is duty-bound to exploit. And if many contemporary artists sustain entire careers on such matters of museological selection, categorization, preservation and display, it is for exactly this reason. Among photographers, in particular, there exists an almost organic disposition toward the subject. “One could even argue,” Allan Sekula has noted, “that archival ambitions and procedures are intrinsic to photographic practice.” Indeed, the two are linked historically as the representative figures of an emergent information-based modernity. From the outset, photographers have traded in volume and prodigious numbers, which the archive was developed specifically to contain. Wherever photographs appear en masse, as they typically do, there likewise appears a potential archive. Consciously ordered or not, every collection or grouping of images will suggest a certain logic. This quantitative emphasis characterizes archival thought: a concern for certain image relations, for inventories, taxonomies, chronologies and narratives, over and above the image itself.

For photography, then, the subject of the archive is very nearly a matter of “internal affairs.” A certain critique is also implied, given the assumption that artists are (by their very nature, I suppose) opposed to the sort of institutional order of which the archive is emblematic. A certain irony, at the very least. Yet it is precisely this sense of a distance which is lacking in the

work of a group of Los Angeles-based artists, all of whom bring photo-archival concerns to bear upon an expansive range of materials and procedures. It certainly holds true for David Bunn, a photographically trained artist who consistently invokes the archival “theme” through the range of its institutional applications.

Over the years, Bunn has generated several discrete but subtly related bodies of work, each exploring a specific institutional paradigm. In December 1988, for instance, he chose to address the Santa Monica Museum of Contemporary Art as both the context and subject of an installation entitled *Sphere of Influence*. Projecting the photographic archive into actual space, as it were, he invited the audience to peer through a variety of semi-official viewing devices, each trained upon some detail of the still-unfinished space—here a structural joint, there a crack or a paint splatter. A solemn archaeological technique thus deployed within the context of such a questionable undertaking served simultaneously to legitimize and undermine the subsequent findings. Partly satirical, no doubt, the installation effectively exposed the abysmal arbitrariness that underlies even the most rigorous disciplines. Beyond this, however, it inaugurated a somewhat more ambivalent and complex course of institutional engagement.

So much institutional critique entails merely the reproduction of perceived systemic failings, which, like constructing a machine that is broken from the start, is a coquettishly moribund enterprise. For Bunn, it is not so much a matter of citing this or that flaw, or replacing one discourse with another; rather, by colliding various incompatible, often opposed, discourses, he seeks to generate a surplus of new discursive hybrids. While critique is by no means relinquished, here it is tempered by a genuine appreciation of the subject’s structural complexity and allure. Bunn is not above occasionally indulging an overt aestheticism, yet neither will he shy away from its attendant problematics.

Archival by definition—that is, literally delimiting a “terrain of images” (Sekula)—the series of Polaroid photographs that comprise a later work entitled *Curvature: Some Projections*, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, in effect depict a map of the world through a series of emphatically abstracted fragments. What these glossy and color-saturated objects resemble, however, is not a geography so much as a collection of precious, jewel-like ornaments. An ostensibly political context is aestheticized beyond recognition, which surely is the point. If we may describe Bunn’s work, in general terms, as an allegory of exploration, then these objects are its prized remains—an archive of outwardly fetishistic proportions. Indeed, the

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artist's particular fascination with the sciences of geology, archaeology and cartography hinges upon their complicity within the more general process of "naturalizing the cultural." This process is no doubt fetishistic, as well, and, as noted by Roland Barthes, it also is essentially photographic.

The photo-fetish reappears as a surreal leitmotif in the work of Ellen Birrell. Here, too; archival concerns are applied to increasingly absurd but also practical ends. Initially devised as a means for keeping track of her materials, Birrell's so-called *inventory* has become an essential part of her work as a whole. This voluminous suite of modestly scaled black and white photographs straightforwardly represents the various objects which, for whatever reasons, wound up in her studio. Some were acquired for art-making purposes, and some not, but this motley selection makes reference to nothing so much as its collector's particular sensibility. First exhibited in late 1990 as part of Birrell's *T(h)ree Rings* installation at the Santa Monica Museum, the ever-expanding and always-unfinished *inventory* continues to haunt her every finished piece with a multitude of "roads not taken." Here again, the archive highlights the essential arbitrariness of the artistic enterprise. Even as it undoes Birrell's work, however, the *inventory* also completes it.

Describing her position in *T(h)ree Rings*, Birrell has stated: "I am interested in meaning as related to authorship... As an artist, I am increasingly uncomfortable with 'making things.' More and more, I want my authorial effects, my arbitrariness, to be visible in the tendentiousness of the juxtapositions and arrangements I insist on in the work, rather than in any distancing sense of craft or skill." The archive provides an ideal vehicle for these ambitions. One image, one object, one idea at a time, this ongoing construction proceeds up, down and across, taxonomically and diachronically, by perceived

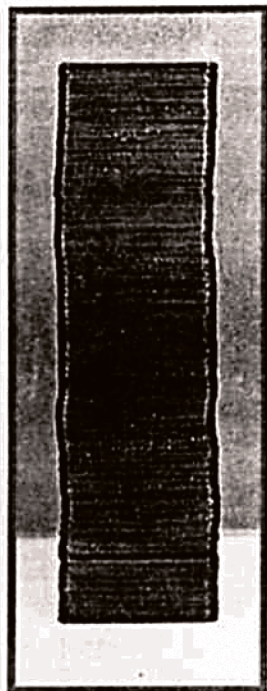
correspondence and opposition, by formal and conceptual echo, charting the authorial impulse all the way through the grid. Despite its flaws, or rather, because of them, the archive emerges through Birrell's *inventory* as a model for consciousness itself.

Stephen Berens, an artist who occasionally has exhibited with Bunn and Birrell, also attempts a subjective occupation of institutional paradigms. Here again, the archive appears in direct relation to the Saussurian figure of *langue*, or language in totality, yet it is inflected at every juncture by *parole*, the individual utterance. Here, as well, the archive is applied to a project of charting the individual's voyage through the institution, through language and knowledge. In the work of Bunn and Birrell, however, these poles of experience (*langue et parole*, public and private) are connected through a series of almost identical maneuvers; for Berens, conversely, the path from the one to the other is circuitous and baroque.

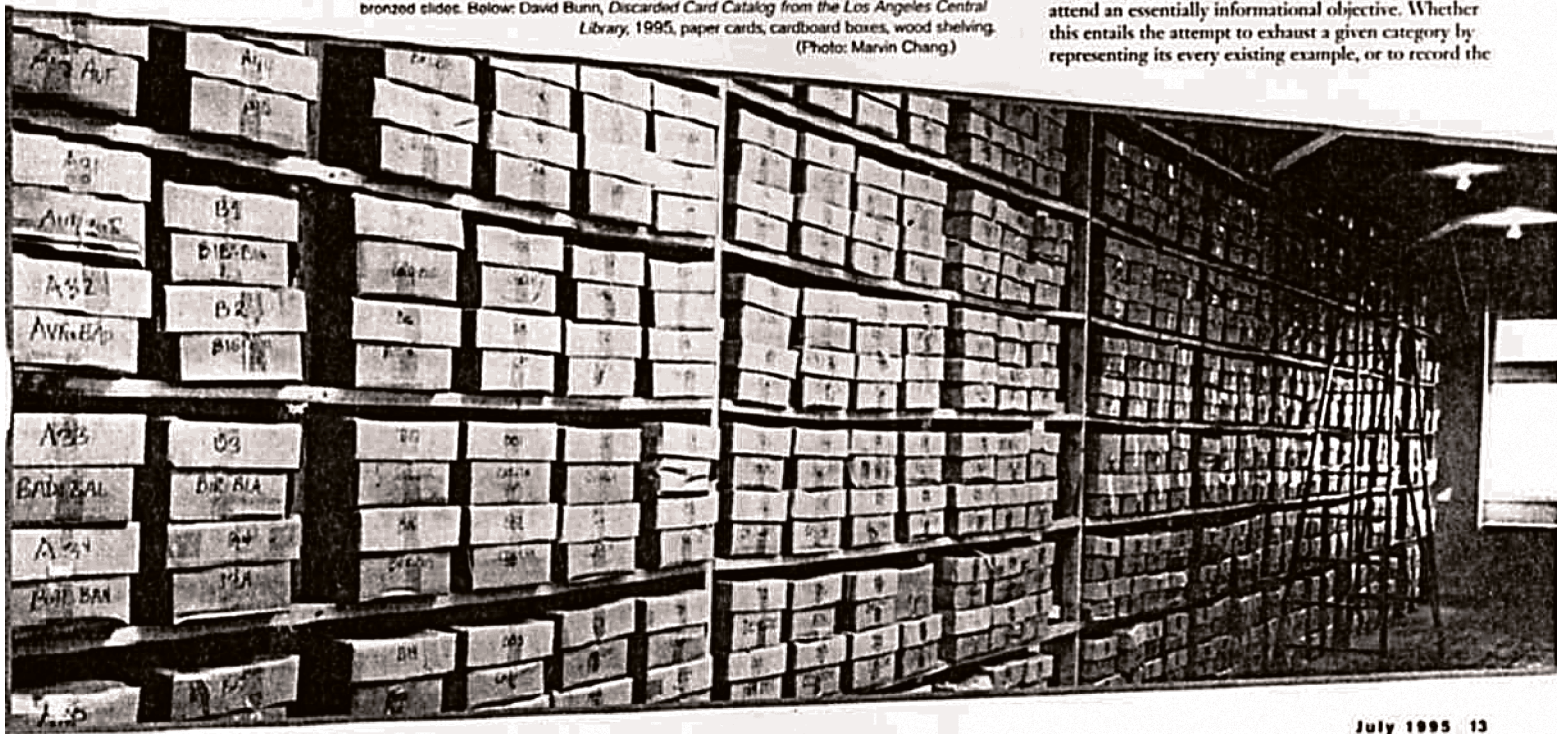
For several years now, this artist has conducted a meticulous recycling of his early work. An art-historical excavation of initial creative impulses, in a sense, but with consistently paradoxical results. Where one might expect to encounter an experiential discontinuity, or even conflict, there appears an even more oppressive accord. Indeed, the original and supposedly uncoded expression of youth slips right through the institutional matrix, in this case revealing what was from the start a perfect fit. Accessed through its already-institutionalized residue in slide files, portfolios and artists' statements, the object is never decomposed, only recomposed into ever more excessive forms of archivally overdetermined product. A small pillar of slides, for example, was bronzed and displayed under glass at the Old Federal Building in downtown Los Angeles in late 1992. Elsewhere, a résumé was expertly framed and

encased. Berens's art recognizes no separation between public and private. Its version of institutional critique, accordingly, begins in the home and studio.

Berens certainly is not alone in his approach to the archive; nor, of course, are Birrell and Bunn. A similarly self-critical take on such matters is evident in Mitchell Syrop's proliferating assemblages of high school portraits, for instance. And in Christopher Williams's reproductions of botanical specimens. And in John Divola's recent photographic exhumation of an antique nature. Among the preceding generation of Los Angeles photographers, we also find no end of precedent for the so-called archival "mode." Judy Fiskin, Robert Flick and Ed Ruscha: all, in one way or another, are scrupulous archivists. Even those pioneers of West Coast art photography, John Baldessari and Robert Heinecken, have nurtured their respective bodies of work upon a largely archival regimen. If I mention these artists no more than in passing, it is simply because, on their whole, their archival ambitions lie "elsewhere." It should be mentioned that, within fine art photography, at least, archival procedures typically attend an essentially informational objective. Whether this entails the attempt to exhaust a given category by representing its every existing example, or to record the



Facing page: Ellen Birrell, *A Bird's Eye View Sees All the Way From Eye to Eye*, 1992, eight black and white Polaroids, from the Collection of Eileen and Peter Norton. Above: Stephen Berens, *Slides of All My Work From 1980 to 1989, 1991, 150 bronzed slides*. Below: David Bunn, *Discarded Card Catalog from the Los Angeles Central Library*, 1995, paper cards, cardboard boxes, wood shelving. (Photo: Marvin Chang)



formal permutations of a single exemplar over time, we remain well within the bounds of a conventional documentary practice. The work that concerns me here aims neither to maintain the distant sanctity of its archival sources nor to completely evacuate their authority. Rather, it claims a kind of middle ground, "a kind of theater," as Birrell characterizes the space of her exhibitions: "... all gestures made there are dramatic and self-conscious." Like theater, this is the space of an ideally productive interface between master texts and individual utterances. Or otherwise, between the generalized language of the archive and a specifically subjective, even existential, dialogue. As they work their way through the ready-made orders of the world-as-museum on the one side, and the world-as-prison, -clinic and -asylum on the other, these artists forge new connections, new categories, new archives.

As the quest for the archival absolute gives way to immanence, incident and arbitrary play, the results are sometimes perplexing, but generally rewarding. Like the surreal and surprisingly rich associations which Dunn wrests from the card files which are his latest obsession, it is a poetry literally composed from the titles of other people's books—and by extension, the library as a whole and the sum total of human knowledge contained therein—yet it is one which does not alienate, inviting us instead to follow suit. I close by quoting in turn: "Sometimes a great notion, Sometimes a hero, Sometimes a little brain damage can help."