

The Archive and the Database **David Gilbert. 2009.**

Kate Genever creates artefacts of various kinds, some of which are representations of other man-made artefacts. These representations - whether they be drawings, prints, films or sound recordings, are, in general, truthful renderings, which hover at various points on the continuum between art object and document. However, she also presents to us images of found objects, or 'finds', as she calls them, and these together are presented as an 'archive'.

Her collaborator, Adam O'Meara, has made photographs, both during Kate's residency, and as reproductions of Kate's artefacts. To complicate matters further Kate has worked with two farmers, who have also made photographs.

The relative status of these artefacts is uncertain, and the language used to classify them seems to draw from other fields of culture; from the methodology of the anthropologist and the ethnographer. But this difficulty is effectively erased by the method of displaying the 'archive' on a website.

On the website we do not see the original, we only see a reproduction. No authentic object is presented to us by the website, indeed every artefact has gone through the same process of interpolation, and is simply data, reassembled in real time to show us a representation of the original, or a representation of a representation of the original. Even the hand-made print or drawing of the hand-made object is eliminated and reassembled in a stream of data.

What is lost in photographic reproduction, Benjamin suggested, was the 'aura' of the authentic original.

This crisis in art predates the popularising of photography; in the 1850's and 1860's William Frith was a celebrity whose vast panoramic canvases of the Epsom Derby and The Railway Station drew vast crowds to collective viewings of his work, so the experience of art was even then a shared one, rather than a process of lone and silent contemplation. It is also true to say that Modernism in art was the last gasp at preserving the aura of the original, Clement Greenberg desperately splitting hairs more and more finely as he struggled to devise a coherent method to distinguish the work of art from all other artefacts.

Walter Benjamin drew an important distinction between methods of reproduction which required the craft of the human hand (a necessarily slow process) and photography (which is an instantaneous means of reproduction). With film and audio this is even more marked, as the speed of recording is the same as that of the events being recorded, which could never be the case when the hand was the tool for recording. But their key difference was not just the speed of reproduction, but the transfer of the creative act from the hand, which was freed from its artistic function by the photograph, to the eye.

The reproduction of the work of art, or the representation of things in the world, by photography has a levelling effect according to Benjamin. Scale and distance are eliminated, so that a vast object like a mountain in a distant country can be represented in the same space as an identically sized image of a human hair. Through reproduction photography imposes an equivalence on everything it records. The photograph is ubiquitous.

Lev Manovich takes Benjamin's thinking on a stage, suggesting that the interpolation of objects, so that all objects in the world are translated into streams of data, and that data is all made up of the same zeros and ones, arranged and rearranged in sequences and made manifest for us visually or aurally.

This is slightly different to the method of the archive where the authentic object is present. The archive purports to be uninflected, presenting artefacts to us objectively, but it is clear about its hierarchy. Anyone visiting the Pitt Rivers Museum would have to concede that it is not uninflected, and in fact that any collecting institution projects onto its artefacts the innate values of the institution and the wider culture it sits within.

Kate here gives us everything-all-at-once, randomly reassembling the material of the archive into unidentical-identical triplets. The constant rearrangement undermines any latent hierarchy, and yet it is impossible not to assemble meanings from each particular set of artefacts, and to read into them the relationships between them.

Finally, there is the paradigm of the website, the one-armed bandit. Everyone knows that this is a game of chance, with the odds loaded against the player, a game that we can never win. And yet we are certain that a winning combination can be found, that we can nudge and hold and create that magic permutation.