

I, Archive

The Conceptual Basis for The Performance Art Piece

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The Synopsis

The purpose of this performance art piece is to illustrate a few archival concepts, the barriers and nuances of archive, specifically. The basis for the experiment is in the simple scenario of “Question & Answer.” I, playing the archive, put myself in the position of interviewee three times. Each time I am asked questions. The first two times, the questions are identical. The third time they are altered ever so slightly. For this to occur, of course, the questions must be scripted which raises a few philosophical questions. Even more questions are raised when users of the archive are privy to an example of someone else’s method of interaction with the archive. And then, how do the users react/interact when they are witness to a previous session via a pre-recording as well as a concurrent video example via a live recording from only a few moments earlier.

The Disclaimer

Here, standing before you, is a living, breathing archive. Just under the surface of the skull lies the archive’s physical space—an impressively small hulk of neurons combined to form a pinkish-greyish, symmetric mass. Stored in the seemingly ephemeral neural networks patterned upon this mass, is an intricate tapestry of ideas and experiences—experiences dating back to prenatal periods.

However, just because the span of experiences begins with fragments conceived in a mother’s womb, it does not necessarily follow that the aforementioned fragments are recoverable. And if recoverable, there is no guarantee that they are meaningful to anyone—even the bearer of the archive.

When interacting with a living archive you must be very aware of the ramifications spawned from its being alive. The major difference between the archive standing before you, and the traditional, tangible archive, such as the one housed inside of Wallace Memorial Library, is the ability of the archive to process its own contents. Filing away objects inside of a traditional archive usually results in a preservation of the original item. On the contrary, filing anything into a “living” archive is like handing over a newspaper article to an editor. What ever remains of the original idea or experience is at the whim of the archive. Such whims include things such as personal perspective, innate bias, fantasy, and creative reconstruction. Personal perspective allows only elements of an experience available to the senses to be stored. Innate bias skews incoming information based on

preconceived notions of how things *must* occur. Fantasy results in parts of an experience either being appended or subtracted from an “entry” due to processes like dreaming, where the archive is unable to separate truth from fiction. Finally, creative reconstruction simply means that the archive didn’t like what it remembered about an experience, and thus may change it upon communication in a brutish show of control.

The Pre-Recording

The night before the live performance was to take place, I recorded a Question and Answer session involving one of my friends. I, of course, was the archive. And he was the user. The setting is my apartment. I am lying on the couch, relaxed wearing whatever it was I wore that day. One more point needing reiteration is the fact that it is the night before, not the day of the performance—this will be key in analyzing the archive’s nature over different instances. This is one instance of the archive—the first recorded instance.

In the video, I had my friend—my first user—ask me three questions. Question One was, “What is the square root of one hundred?” My response was and always will be, “Ten.” This is my control question. The response from the archive will always be the same as long as the mathematical reasoning portion of my brain continues to function in the demonstrated and commonly accepted manner. Since elementary math is a relatively static knowledge based in specific human-made logic patterns it follows that I should, as a human, hold to the pattern of reasoning math in a consistent manner even across multiple instances of my internal archive. The reasoning behind using one hundred and ten for the numbers in the question is because when they are written in Arabic numerals, i.e. 100 and 10, they can be interpreted as both Base Ten and Binary numbers. Thus, if audible language using the linguistic constructs of “One Hundred” and “Ten” was not used, and instead the numbers were fed into something more accustomed to binary digits, then the response of the archive would differ based on the relative interpretation of the input.

Question Two was, “Who is the president?” Notice, that in this question as well as the first one, that the phraseology is setup such that “you” or “your” is not involved. This abstracts the question from being opinion based. Like accessing a non-living archive, most users ask questions in a global sense like this. The irony is in the context. Even though, the user may think they are getting the universal answer it is still limited by the knowledge base of the archive. And this is limited further so, by the personal opinions of the living archive. So, where my response from home might be, “George W. Bush,” my response can certainly differ, as happens, when the context is altered.

Question Three was, “What is the climate of your immediate surroundings?” Here, I am switching the question’s tone. It is now personal because of the inclusion of the modifier “your.” Immediately, the response of the archive is impossible to grasp as fact in any level of ubiquity. The answer wholly depends on how I feel physically and mentally the moment the question is asked, how I interact and perceive the area around me, and also whatever the whim of my speech is at that time. Of course, this pre-recorded response deals with my apartment, the couch, and the heat therein, etc.

The Initial Showing

The day/the period/the moment of the performance arrives. Handouts are provided to three students—these students have been designated as users. They are information retrievers—librarians—by designation. Handouts are “User Manuals.” Because they have been singled-out as the users they have power via direct access to the archive. They can ask the questions. However, they have been chosen by me, the archive. This means I actually have the root power. Many argue, though often by cliché, knowledge is power. Well, I am the specific knowledge repository in this instance and I have preferences to say who uses this repository. So, while some people have been given power via access, they are limited to what I let them have in the way of power. These users are analogous to “friends” in a sociological sense because I have given them access to me, but I still have access control with them. And I chose the questions. The archive informs you, often like a friend informs you, not only via answers to questions but also via what questions you can ask.

These chosen users, along with the rest of the audience, then watch a showing of the pre-recorded video to the class on one TV/VCR setup. This lasts less than one minute. But in that time, they are exposed to a demonstration of how the archive works and how one user (my friend) chose to access it. This not only supplements their instruction manuals with an ocular-centrist-friendly example of usage, but sends a ripple of influence beyond mere instruction because an imitable example has been provided to the users. By showing this I have even more control over their usage. Though I have abstracted myself from the instruction via the faux-objective lens of a camera, I—the archive—have given them more focused direction for accessing my knowledge.

The Live Recording

While the archive at this point is physically related to the archive in the pre-recording, several elements of the scenario have changed. The archive has a different appearance via different clothes. The archive has a different mindset because it is the next day, at a different time, with a different amount of sleep and focus. Finally, the context has been altered—it is no longer my apartment, it is an auditorium at RIT. The combination of these factors results in a new instance of the archive. However, the new instance of the archive still relies on its database in memory—a database influenced by the showing of the pre-recording.

Now, the users get a chance to test their archive accessing skills. Each users’ manual instructs the holder to ask a question at a specific time. Once recording starts, the first question is asked—the same exact first question asked in the pre-recording. Then, the same second question and third question are asked. The answers to these questions are going to change due to the change in archive instance, specifically due to context.

The Second Showing and Recording

In this last round of Question and Answer, multiple instances of the archive are running at once—two are static, one is living. The pre-recording will be aired on the same TV/VCR as before, and the just completed live recording will be aired concurrently on the other TV/VCR. While I field the questions this time, the camcorder is recording directly to its own tape; and the frame encompasses both TV/VCR setups.

The situation is contextually the same as the first live recording despite a negligible change in time. New factors are present now though. The other instances of the archive are being displayed, while I field questions. The questions are audible for direct contrast between the pre-recording, the first recording, and new live performance. The answers are audible for direct contrast and also as influences on my new answers—they are now forced into my current psychological mindset. I cannot avoid and must then reflect on them. One final element is a change in the questions. This is not a change in verbiage, but instead a change in oral interpretation. One word in each question will be highlighted to the appropriate user as “stressed.” The user hyperbolically stresses the word when delivering the question. In Question One, the word stressed is “SQUARE.” In Question Two, the word stressed is “THE.” In Question Three, the word stressed is “YOUR.” These nuances battle the influences of the videos running for focus of the archive’s attention. For the first question, the answer is still “Ten.” For the second question, the answer now requires more thought on what is right. And for the final question, the answer has been focused by audible clarity; thus, my answer is more focused to “MY” immediate surroundings.

The Reflection

At this point, all the Question and Answer is over. I, the archive, take the camera and playback the final recording through the viewfinder to myself. I reflect on the video. I reflect on myself—previous versions of myself. This is personal—no one else can see the reflection. This is unique—no one else can do it. And right now, nothing but a “living” archive can do it.

The Justification

I used specific video and dialogue in this performance to make several didactic points. The use of video is key. How can I critique the philosophical attributes of an archive without creating new archive? By recording the performance onto a tangible medium, I have archived it. Video, also, makes the point of ocular-centrist archiving of

this specific event. Is it not represented for us if it is not VIEWable? In the end, the film is storing nested archives. The final video is three instances of a single, once living archive coexistent at once—now completely static and preserved as “fact” until the tape medium is destroyed. This layering is possible through the use of video.

To further criticize video’s ocular-centrist foundation, the performance was scripted. Each line to be delivered has been written down. It was a fabrication. It was not reality, though it may be trying to portray the reality of a living archive. This hearkens back to the early ideas propounding film’s objectivity and factual nature.

Related deeper into film theory, the framing of the recordings are very deliberate. In the pre-recording I am face-forward, top of frame. This is a position which commands respect, but is also the most vulnerable being completely exposed from the front—I have given out the keys to my archive. The second recording is shot from the side, which gives a new perspective, the same way the new context provides a new perspective from the archive. It should also be noted that I am the only one in the frame, I am the only source of information. The whisperings of users are visually source-less. I am the edifice of knowledge.

On a final note, anything you or the audience read into the performance beyond what was outlined in this document is the product of my mental archive aligning with yours/theirs. This is completely intentional.

Thank you for accessing Erhardt.