

The Incompletion of the Archive: Estrangement, Anthropophagy and Other Forms of Mishandling

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There is a sentence I have kept returning to, over the years, in my pedagogical practice: ‘eat your grandmother’. I have heard myself saying it to those participating in my seminars, and sometimes it ended up becoming a coded message or a running joke in the classroom: in order to work with an archive, one needs to learn to eat one’s grandmother. I shall shortly tell the story of how this expression originated, a few years ago, precisely in a teaching circumstance, which is always a privileged occasion of learning for me. Beyond the anecdote, however, what I see at stake in the returning use of that sentence over the years, is the call for a distinct politics of use of the archive, the one I am interested to reflect upon in this text.

If we consider an archive not only a collection, but – as Michel Foucault proposes – first and foremost a set of relations, and ‘a practice that causes a multiplicity of statements to emerge as so many regular events, as so many things to be dealt with and manipulated’,¹ we shall acknowledge that its system necessarily includes both private sentiments and public affects, individual instances and common histories. It is my conviction that the work of anyone engaging archives in artistic or knowledge production should be concerned with the mobilisation, reorganisation, and activation of public affects. This does not exclude

private sentiments: it is precisely the working of production that may transform private sentiments into public affects, that can aim to display not accomplished stories, in context, but the unfinished working of the archive itself.

Eating the Grandmother

The expression ‘eating the grandmother’ came up in a seminar on affective archives I led in Bogotá, as part of the Maestría interdisciplinar en Teatro y Artes vivas at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia in September 2017. The task students had been working with, in their previous seminar, was to assemble their private archives and work on modes of displaying them, presenting them to the others. When I arrived, the personal archives – made up of items of very different nature – had been reorganised time and time again in the daily exercises that students proposed within their gestures of display, that included performances, installations or whatever form they chose according to the logic emerging from the collections.²

One student had decided to work with the recipes of his grandmother: he had brought all the ingredients of a particular dish, and organised the space as an imaginary kitchen, where he would

perform the grandmother’s cooking gestures with precision, nostalgia and an interesting embodiment of matriarchal power, as well as subjection, over taste, domestic space and all that surrounds them. The juice coming out of the red fruits he would manipulate while cooking, ended up becoming the colour finally used to draw on the white surface of a canvas. There was a beauty in that gesture, but the system of enunciability in which this collection participated – in a sense, the broader archive that made it possible that the figure of that particular grandmother and her kitchen in late 1980s Colombia appeared as that, and not another – seemed completely saturated, confined in a personal attachment that could perhaps be shared by those who had tasted similar dishes, who had loved looking at their grandmothers moving in their kitchens, but appeared trapped within the border of sentiment, hardly reaching the most profound political level of affect. The same saturation impinges almost fatally upon the becoming public of many private collections, and gestures coming from inside their logic hardly ever completely displace them.

On the last day, however, the seminar itself had to be accidentally displaced: since the morning, the university had been the stage of a massive student protest, which was the beginning of what a couple of

weeks later resulted in a general strike, on the part of the students, which froze most activities on campus. The police had responded to the protest entering the university and dispersing the students with tear gas; it became impossible to breathe which was why so many had to abandon the scene in a hurry. I left the campus together with my students, who were discussing the reasons of the protest and their future involvement in it. The reasons were many, mostly related to a demand that the government take responsibility to pay back the debt towards public universities (more than 16 million pesos) instead of increasing support to private universities, as well as to ameliorate working conditions for staff and, consequently, learning conditions for students.³

As we left the university, the students carried with them items of their archives, partly because they did not want to leave them on campus, as they did not know when they would be back and they soon, in fact, stopped partaking in activities within the university in solidarity, partly with a plan in mind to gather in the flat of one of the students: while it would not be a normal session, we would playfully conclude the work we had been doing over that month, with a final exercise. In the flat, I gave the students the task to hand over their collections to a group of others, and that the resulting exercise

realised with the items from each collection would have to completely disregard the logic that until that point had organised the display.

Many and surprising were the interventions that happened that day. The most striking, perhaps, was the treatment the collection of the cooking grandmother ended up receiving: accidentally transferred to the space of an actual kitchen, the remembered gestures transformed into a collective banquet, performed by five other students, where the base of the dish being prepared was the naked body of a woman, adorned with ingredients, then kissed, repeatedly, turned into a playful and dreadful device where care and subjection, cannibalism and eroticism, celebration and violence would constantly mingle, where words and moans would become the recipe of a story that was immediately collective – a story of taste, of femininity, of violence and resistance, of seduction and terror – while, somehow, still retaining the power of enunciation in which the figure of the grandmother could stand still, in her very historical context, in the Colombia stained of blood surrounding her kitchen in the late 1980s.

While watching the outcome of this exercise, the way that collection had been *mishandled* to and by the student's classmates, I saw very clearly how the

field of use of this particular archive – the one in which the grandmother and her recollected items participated, in the present of that very day of violence and uprising, in the continuation of a certain history and in the echoes of history itself – had expanded, and appeared unexpectedly refunctioned.

In order for any archive to be put into use, I thought, it was necessary to learn to eat one's grandmother.

On estrangement and use

In its simplicity and improvisation, that exercise – and many others I have seen students invent over the years, learning to think together about archives – spoke to me about a certain feature I consider common in the use many artists I am interested in (whilst operating in different media, techniques, styles and materials) make of archives: performing a certain *estrangement*.⁴

The estrangement I am convoking here is obviously profoundly indebted to Bertolt Brecht, who can be considered a grandfather of sorts to anyone who is interested in thinking about an 'ethics of production' in the making of art.⁵ Out of the many recipes that his intuitions have been repeatedly turned into, especially in terms of stagecraft, I am here interested

in picking only some specific ingredients, and to estrange them too from the sole domain of theatre: those techniques that make possible to process reality interrupting its supposed natural order of appearance, to insert a distance between the familiar context of appearance and other dimensions of the possible. Brecht's theory of estrangement was furthermore very much ingrained in his conception of history, and vital to his commitment to using artistic production as an instrument to learn different postures before history. The latter, it is important to remember, included not only the past, but the present itself: this is the crucial reason why the Brechtian actor should regard her own actions with the same distance a historian should have towards the happening of a particular past.

According to Paolo Virno, what the *Verfremdungseffekt* theorised by Brecht brings into the surface is the 'recondite root of the use of oneself',⁶ of one's existence, which

is both the premise and the cornerstone of all other uses. The use of oneself is based on the detachment of self. The existence which comes to be used is one with which one cannot always identify, one that is not fully possessed, and that is not completely familiar, while also not being really strange.⁷

Any form of use, according to Virno, exposes the intrinsic relation that humans establish with the things of the world, a relation that is never complete. In the things we use – Virno names, as examples, the computer, the kitchen, the dictionary – there is a potentiality which is never exhausted in itself: the things that we use at the same time reify this potentiality, and expose its very unfinishedness, the intrinsic incompleteness of our uses of life, alongside the suggestion that ever new uses can be invented anew, perhaps bordering the 'un-usual' or the 'out of use'. This is why, in a sense, 'the usable things are *the reality of the possible*: but it is a possible, we must add, that remains stubbornly such'.⁸

Significantly, Brecht believed that ideas themselves are 'use objects':⁹ like the things of the world, they are hardly knowable in and of themselves, but should be *handled*, confronted in their distance and relation with humans:

The tree knows human beings to at least the same extent as it knows carbonic acid. For human beings, using oxygen forms part of knowing the tree. The concept of knowledge must therefore be constructed more broadly.¹⁰

The idea of estrangement, then, strikes me as a use object that helps us think how to interrupt not only the supposed naturalness of historical appearance, but also the supposedly immediate relation of humans with things, the fantasy of an identification or empathy that can never be completely such, that is never situated at the origin of a relation but, if anything, is an effect of a perhaps unreflected, and yet deliberate posture toward the world.

How does all this speak to archives, and the multiplicity of things that make possible any knowledge to be drawn from them, that make possible that any enunciation is articulated around them? How can archives be turned into use objects?

By virtue of their intrinsic nature, archives appear as privileged sites to experiment with what Paolo Virno calls 'uses of life', as they oblige whoever confronts them to take position both before the use of oneself, and the things of the world: in this predicament, or at least so I suspect, lies the potential to tackle the concept of knowledge indeed more broadly. In order to possibly know the grandmother, one might suggest, one must learn to make use of the items constituting her memory, to mobilise the unfinishedness of the actions deposited in her objects, to nourish oneself with the corpus of her potential, not only actual, deeds.

A form of estrangement is always at stake in gestures that deliberately interrupt the context in which archives exist as a whole: the act of ripping the whole, which supposedly presides over the fragments manipulated in production, is necessary in order for items to be used, dealt with, manipulated and reorganised.

Surely, in order for things to be estranged, it is necessary to establish a certain antecedence of familiarity, hence “a whole” has to be conjured, or artificially constructed, even in cases when it was never there in the first place. This is what happens, for instance, when an archive is not pre-existing, but is constructed in an artistic project by means of suggesting its very absence.

Anthropophagous Mishandling

This is what happens, for instance, in *Mishandled Archive*.

The way *Mishandled Archive* deals with the singularity of each item makes it possible for them to appear as incomplete utterances, as scraps of reality suspended in their becoming history. This is possible because the items of Tara Fatehi Irani’s archive are turned into things that can be “used”: it seems not by

chance that the encounter with each photograph, in public places, comes with a number of “instructions for use”. The latter, however, are never prescriptive, nor pointing to what a “proper” use would be: they are descriptions of movements, they are captions that connect the image to a broader spectrum of imagination, they are clues to what the wider system in which those items exist might be – but not exactly, not quite precisely, not just one system; they are possibilities of communication, they are pointers to potential regimes of enunciation but they do not speak from within them. First and foremost, they are tools to estrange the item itself from any given context, and construct an interference that is handed over to whoever encounters the photograph, the bit of text, the staged fragment of a supposedly private, but in fact intrinsically public, affective archive.¹¹

In a sense, those instructions for use can be seen as functioning like the titles that, in Brecht’s epic theatre, drop down to frame a particular scene, isolating it from a continuum and yet making it part of a broader narrative. As Fredric Jameson reminds us, the narrative titles in Brecht pertain to a specific feature of the estrangement-effect, namely its distinctive relation with the practice of “storytelling”: as opposed to dramatic structures, the narrative (or, in Brecht’s own terms, ‘the epic’) holds the potential

to be cut into separate entities, whose autonomisation serves the purpose ‘to tell the story of individual experience like the history in the history books’.¹²

What this suggests, in Tara Fatehi Irani’s work, is a form of storytelling that at the same time takes the responsibility for a particular history – the one that was happening while, and through, the photographs assembled in her collection – and the present in which this history resonates, while another bit of history is taking place or being recognised as such. The storytelling, then, happens here on various levels: there is a potentiality of storytelling – if the passer-by who accidentally encounters the photograph will get in touch, and receive as a gift another fragment of story – but there is also the invitation, to the passer-by, to partake in the storytelling itself: to complete the utterance that is handed over to her, or mishandled, for that matter, with gestures and words but moreover with a call to perform a re-montage of the image with another surrounding, hence to both witness and create another scene for the item’s appearance. The supposed completion is consigned to a stranger, it is displayed as such and yet, at the same time, standing still in the hope to be accomplished – but this will happen only if a posture before the picture will be taken, by someone who, at this point, we may be tempted to call a spectator.

Crucial to this operation seems to be the promise that there is, indeed, a story that exists as a whole: a story underlying the archive, a story that can be reconstructed, a family narrative that is singular and private and that only accidentally gets exposed to the public. The fact that this story (in the various articulations of the project) is constantly conjured in a mixture of artificiality and authenticity, seems important as well, as it contributes to the work of estrangement that takes place throughout. The promise of a story is, in a sense, precisely the antecedence of familiarity on which the estrangement-effect can possibly take place. It is, likewise, a first expression of a distinctive use of herself as a producer that the author of this project does: assuming the position of the collector, the family member, the bearer of the legacy, only in order to prepare and enable the very dismantling of this perspective, alongside the collection and the alleged legacy.

But another element seems vital to the ethics that produces this particular archive as a use object, existing in a specific time and space (the transnational space inhabited by an Iranian-born, UK-based artist, who performs this project mainly across these two countries and in a few places in between, as well as in the immaterial and all-too-material locus of the

internet): the mis-handling of certain representations, certain stereotypes, certain fragments of ‘otherness’ that are at the same time exposed to, and withdrawn from, the risk of exoticism. The images of elsewhere, of other times, of other spaces, of other bodies are left to interfere with the ‘other’ public space in which they are abandoned, displaced and reframed through a careful ethics of representation, which – to my view – brings us back to another meaning of ‘eating one’s grandmother’. Or to say it otherwise, this ethics seems kindred to what Suely Rolnik, drawing from an old Brazilian tradition of thought, calls an ‘anthropophagous strategy’: an approach to artistic and knowledge production that interestingly addresses from yet another angle the complicated relation between the strange and the familiar, as well as the space opened by acknowledging the blurring boundaries between them.¹³

The mode of subjectivation Rolnik calls ‘anthropophagous’ is deeply rooted in a reclaiming of cannibalism as a complex procedure dealing with both domination, power and alterity: in the 1930s in Brazil ‘the so-called *Anthropophagous Movement* extracted and reaffirmed the ethical formula of the relationship with the other that governs this ritual in order to make it migrate to the sphere of culture’.¹⁴ In this migration, the act of devouring the others

becomes the metaphor for a condition that postulates the necessary confrontation, the incorporation and also the digestion of ‘another’ culture (in that case, specifically the culture of the coloniser). At the same time, this metaphorical devouring also affirms contamination not in a domesticated horizon of interculturalism, but as a capacity to be affected, and to affect, the world *as alterity*, by means of a knowledge produced and consumed through the body. The ‘anthropophagous strategy’ refuses to adhere to a single system of reference, and enjoys the freedom to improvise with radically different repertoires.

In this light, the operation of ‘eating the grandmother’, in *Mishandled Archive*, assumes yet another order of resonances: the anthropophagous quality of this mishandling is key to a certain way of processing reality and history, allowing them both to be contaminated by the present happenings, to be porous to what comes, or what could possibly come in contact with them, with no pre-established patterns of relationality and not a pre-negotiated measurement of alterity. This is key to an understanding of what it takes to handle private sentiments and public affects, and to live and work in transnational spaces of production and consumption. This mishandling asks what certain images produce

in their interference with the present, as well as with a past that is mis-remembered, mis-represented and most likely invented, but hands itself over to practices of collective use, in an always strange and always familiar public space. This procedure affects both the world in which this particular archive exists, and the archive itself: the corpus of the archive as a whole – no matter its existence in the first place – needs to be convoked onto the scene through the fragmentation of the pieces being disassembled, devoured, in the production of something that transforms that whole, completely, or even the very idea of it.

It is the work of production, taking place in each and every encounter with the spectator, that is entrusted here to do the digestion.

1. Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 129.
2. The work with archives is one of the trajectories of investigation students are encouraged to pursue in the Maestría interdisciplinar en Teatro y Artes vivas, and it is understood in pedagogical terms as a way for students to start gathering creative matter for their own final projects. In many cases, this work leaves an important trace in students' final performances, which are elaborated over the course of two years. In most cases, the original archival setting disappears and the materials undergo a really interesting transformation, precisely in the direction I am pointing toward in this text.
3. I am grateful to Marcia Cabrera who has talked to me at length about the context of the protest that impacted our seminar on that day, and that preceded a general strike, declared on October 10, 2017. In our conversation, Marcia unpacked the complexity of the political demands at stake, as well as of the position of MA students in that context, with much more precision and critical engagement than the space of these pages allow me to sum up. Marcia was also the student who kindly offered her flat as the venue where we worked together on the day I am describing in this text, and I am also grateful for her generosity in this circumstance.
4. I am thinking, for example, about the work of Mapa Teatro, of Rabih Mroué, of Kateřina Šedá, of canecapovolto, to name just a few.
5. Frederic Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London and New York: Verso, 1998), 49.
6. Paolo Virno, *L'idea di mondo. Intelletto pubblico e uso della vita* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2015), 180; my translation.
7. Paolo Virno, 'L'usage de la vie,' *Multitudes* 58, no. 1 (2015): 143-158. Abstract in English on https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_MULT_058_0143--the-use-of-life.htm.
8. Paolo Virno, *L'idea di mondo*, 158; my translation.
9. Bertolt Brecht, *On Art and Politics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 92.
10. Bertolt Brecht, *On Art and Politics*, 94.
11. On the idea of affective archive, see Giulia Palladini and Marco Pustianaz, eds., *Lexicon for an Affective Archive* (Bristol: Intellect and LADA, 2017).
12. Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, 44.
13. Suely Rolnik, 'Anthropophagic Subjectivity,' in *Arte Contemporânea Brasileira: Um e/entre Outros* (São Paulo: Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 1998), 137-145.
14. Suely Rolnik, 'Anthropophagic Subjectivity,' 138.