

Reframing the Open Archive: A Live Show

Björn Quiring



07.10.2008

printed for the occasion of:

OPEN

Darri Lorenzen
Ingólfur Arnarsson
Finnbogi Pétursson
BJNilsen
Björn Quiring

A collaborative exhibition titled *OPEN* will be on view at the Living Art Museum from 11.10.08 - 22.11.08. The exhibition will open at the opening ceremony of Sequences Real Time Art Festival. The artists working on this exhibition are Darri Lorenzen (initiator of the collaboration), Ingólfur Arnarsson, Finnbogi Pétursson, BJNilsen and Björn Quiring.

OPEN is the first event in the extensive program of Sequences festival. In the evening of the opening day, at 9.30-11.30pm, the artists will collectively perform a remake of an LP record from the collection of the Living Art Museum: *BÍLFERÐ NR.1 / AUTOFAHRT NR.1* by Dieter and Björn Roth from 1979. The original piece is a sound recording of a road trip made by Dieter Roth and his son Björn. In the remake the artists will attempt to do the same i.e .make and record another road trip that will be played on this occasion. On Sunday 12th of October at 4pm, Björn Quiring will give a lecture titled: "Reframing the Open Archive: A Live Show" and BJNilsen will perform a sound piece.

The Living Art Museum
Laugavegi 26
101 Reykjavík
ICELAND
www.nylo.is

2008

Reframing the Open Archive: A Live Show

1. Archive

The word archive derives from the Greek word *arkhē* which means both „origin“ and „command“. It designates the location where things begin and their origin in space and time remains located, but also the source of power where orders are given and enforced. From the *arkhē* derives the word *archon* which denotes the superior magistrates of the Greek city state and the commanders who represent the law. From the word *archon* in turn derives the term *arkheion* which is the place where the *archons* convened and, more importantly, where all their official documents and administrative files were kept, the memory of the rulers and the knowledge thought concomitant to their power. The access was, of course, traditionally restricted to the privileged and closed to the public. The *arkheion* was a concealed, sheltered space: the entrails of power, so to speak.

The Roman empire took over the term; they labeled as *archivum* a place where they gathered together what belonged to the state. Along with the temples, it also became a store house of trophies where the republic stashed loot from the conquered nations. On feast days, some of it was taken outside, to be paraded around in processions. From that, one might glean a certain ambivalence of the archive: While it is basically an instrument of power, it might also allow the conquered to reconstruct their past, once they get access to it. The archive is both revolutionary (in its potential) and conservative (in its self-perpetuation). So in order to function, it has to establish fixed rules that regulate access and utilization.

The archive always has terms of use and a filing system, normally establishing hierarchies of relevance. Its contents will tend to mirror the structure of the outside world, but it's also bound to impose its own order on it. The archive always must keep its outside at bay and dominate it to a certain degree. A certain closure is its condition; a totally open archive would soon cease to exist. When the outside forces its way in and destroys or alters the records any which way, it will mean the end of the archival regime or at least a significant memory loss. Smart conquistadors have always known that a people will tend to lose its coherence and cease to be a homogenous unit once all its archives are burned. The only way to preserve the information under these circumstances is its further interiorization by way of memorization and oral traditions. One might label folk memory as just another, more interior form of the archive.

In both forms, however, the archive turns out to be incomplete; it can't record or control everything that's going on, but beholds life outside the archive only within a certain frame. There can only be one archive without a frame, or rather there can be two: The first would consist of all voluntary and involuntary memory traces of all

living things, what one might label the neuro-biological archive. The second would be the archive that just coincides with its object. For example, a text by Lewis Carroll narrates of some scientists who developed ever more detailed maps of a country until they arrived at a „a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile“ which couldn't be spread out because the farmers complained that it would cover the whole country and shut out the sunlight. So the scientists decided to use the country itself as its own map instead which, of course, is not a very practical solution. The problem with those two ideal archives is, again, one of access: one is too deep inside, the other too far outside. Thus in the workable archives, there's always a remainder, a place that the archive can't take into account. The perfect archive is never to be accomplished, which makes for the paranoia of power.

On the other hand, one can never be sure to be outside the archive either. For can there be life without some form of memory, that is, some form of archivization? At least, one can never be certain to have encountered it: Seeming spontaneity might just revive some forgotten memory traces. So the archive as well as the non-archive end up framed, in the sense of betrayed.

2. Museum

The museum turns out to be under a similar strain. The Greek term *musaion* originally denoted the home of the Muses, usually a temple. Later on, it came to designate collections of artifacts, but also areas of study and scientific enquiry. It was a location of accumulated, privileged knowledge, with restricted access, but with access. The museum displayed inner and outer wealth and established a community around it.

Now, the museum has normally always been composed of an archival collection on the one hand and an exhibition space, that is a gallery, on the other. The gallery is the point at which the museum opens to the outside, the reception room where it shows itself. The word „gallery“ apparently derives from *galilaea*, the front hall of a temple or church: It designated the space both separating and connecting an outside, public area and private or sacred or otherwise restricted quarters. The gallery works as a sort of floodgate, an interzone neither all the way out nor all the way in. Architecturally, it's often been constructed as arcades or as a platform in front of a building, a place from which to see, but also to be seen. It's an observation platform supposed to afford a domineering vision.

Situated at this threshold, the space of the gallery establishes a community that is both inclusive and exclusive, in several gradations. It seems that the archive became a museum when it is conditionally and partially opened to its outside. Why has this happened? One of the reasons certainly lies in the fact that this is the best of all possible image campaigns. The museum establishes itself as a permanent triumphal procession, the objectified memory of a powerful organisation. Now as then, this organisation is

often the state: The mother of all modern museums, the Louvre, used to be the seat of the French king and became a museum when France became a republic. It was used to demonstrate the republican victory not only over the monarchy but also over the opponents of France in the Napoleonic wars. The Louvre exhibited captured enemy arms and pillaged treasures from conquered nations. The museum has developed as the place for the victorious to strut their stuff and a place for vanquished cultures to be buried. It draws the line between living culture and dead culture and documents their more or less strained relationship. Accordingly, museums in the nineteenth century were built to resemble temples and official buildings of antiquity, but also tombs.

The museum sustains itself by the notion that, in some way, it represents more than itself, that it makes some totality or at least some vital essence thinkable and palpable. It functions as a device for the production of a discursive or manifest sense out of contingency. The museum in this sense is a specifically modern institution which develops in parallel to the hospital, the school and the prison. All four institutions are destined to make the subjects within its walls accept their image of the world, but they're also places where this image can potentially be put to the test and questioned.

Now, how do the two functional parts of the museum interact, how does the the gallery relate to the archive? One might say that out of the material in the archive, a view on life is constituted which will find its expression in the gallery. Thus, the gallery exhibition articulates the archive. In that sense, the museum figures as a device for classification and interpretation. But the museum not only produces knowledge, but is also in the enviable position to provide in its objects the sensual experience to back it up. On the most basic level, it can form a sort of feedback loop of awareness by collecting evidence for its own categorizations. The museum thus functions as a framing device in the sense that it gives to see an image, but also in the sense of being a frame-up. Just like the archive, it is founded on hidden, one might say vampiric selectivity. The museum renders the outside world visible, but also invisible; it's a place of lucid vision and abject blindness.

In this invisibility, the museum also hides itself. The ideal museum might be defined as the repository and source of diverse spaces and times, and for this very reason has to represent itself as a place that is no particular place, ideally to be taken in within a moment of holistic appreciation that is outside of time. The result being that the museum increasingly stages itself as a non-place, erasing all traces of its temporal or spatial specificity. In denying its own contingency and simulating as closely as possible the experience of a pure, homogenous, Cartesian space, the gallery has become more and more inconspicuous, generating the famous „white cube“ of Brian O'Doherty.

3. Museum Art

The French philosopher Jean-Louis Déotte assumes that the very notion of art has been generated through this institution of the museum. According to Déotte, the function of art would be to give to the world an original and originary point from which to watch itself, in a way it likes to watch and be watched. Thus the art museum is conceived as a powerhouse and depository of perspectives on the world. In a somewhat stronger, more utopian version of the same conception, art is described as the area where life recognizes its own potential, or at least glimpses of it are caught.

Accordingly, a painting or drawing hanging on the wall has for a long time been conceived as a timeless window on the world. But what actually is a window? What is its function? Generally, it is situated at the border of an inside and an outside, but is not supposed to be a place where inside and outside really interact. For example, if you're coming into a room through the window, it is generally assumed that you're up to no good, and if a policeman watches you doing it, he will probably take you to the station and question you. Come to think of it, it's obvious that most windows are made for looking out, not for looking in. The window thus frames not the inside, but the outside world; it might be regarded as an attempt to reverse the relation of outside and inside. That's why it's easy to confuse a window with a mirror or an image, as artworks themselves often indicate. For example, the painting *Las Meninas* by Velázquez engages in one of the most sophisticated plays with the inside and outside of frames in art history. And, as Foucault has shown, its interest centers very much on the question if a frame in the painting's background frames a mirror, a window, or a painting in the royal collections.

As this example demonstrates, art itself can take account of the structures that determine it and engage with them. Just as a good play both posits and subverts the fleeting border between drama and „real life“, an interesting artwork in some way or another has to deal with the tense relation between representational objects and the „real world“. In this context, art necessarily will relate to the museum apparatus in one way or another. And since this relation imposes certain restrictions on both parties, it has become increasingly conflictual over the course of the last two centuries. Art seems to have slowly stripped itself of all the false autonomy that the museum seemed to offer it as a compensation for its conformity to exhibition standards. Finally, the space in which the conflict was waged, in most cases the gallery, became itself the focus of attention, one might say: the content of the artwork. In a constant struggle, the artwork tries to reframe the gallery that frames it or to blast the gallery's structure open all the way towards its outside or towards its inside.

One inconspicuous way to open the museum up by exposing it is to exhibit not so much the archive as the process of curatorial collecting and archivization, that is, the diverse forms of openness and closure that art has to pass through in order to arrive

at the gallery. Another possibility is to put a platform into the gallery, one might say a gallery into a gallery, and put the viewer on top of it. When art thus engages with over-exposures and blind spots of the archive, it engages in experiments of disarticulation in which necessarily no definite statement can be made. If the artwork tried to propagate another locale and another fixed meaning, it would at best end up as an alternative idol or trophy. So it has to try to remain open toward exteriors and contexts that it cannot anticipate, even though the museum almost always manages to integrate and archive these subversions of the archival apparatus.

4. Sightings of Life in the Museum

These edgy conflicts at the openings of the museum reanimate the old question how art and life ought to be related. In this context, it is worthwhile to remember that for a long time, the main business of art was generally considered to be the imitation of life. Such life manifested itself in an assemblage of figures or forms which the artist found in the outside world and mimed by way of the artwork. The artist thus extracted from nature its hidden substance, a vital essence which was to be dealt with almost like a subject. However, in the course of modernity, the artwork increasingly tended to be conceptualized as a result of a primal act of creation instead, an integral yet autonomous part of life without the need to imitate anything. The artwork acquired the right to become self-referential and to convey first and foremost its own status as an artwork. It didn't imitate but create spatial perceptions which impinged on the space the gallery visitor occupied. Soon it turned out that one didn't even absolutely need an artwork for that purpose. Kandinsky in 1929 was one of the first to praise the bare, naked wall that normally separates the inside and the outside of a gallery not only as a frame for the artwork, but as a worthy object of aesthetic contemplation, „living in and of itself“ and conveying „the intensity of lived experience“.

If this venerable idea of intensity seems to sound somewhat nostalgic nowadays, scientific and industrial development might have something to do with it. For technology has invaded life more and more, and now manipulates and even generates the processes of living itself with the help of better and better access to ever smaller spaces within nature. This makes it more difficult to believe in an autonomous inner life of things which art exposes, but which in „real life“ remains hidden. Consequently, a new artistic paradigm seems to be needed in which the artwork would no longer behave mimetically toward life, but wouldn't just serve as its most free and sublime manifestation either.

But if the artwork cannot serve as an exposition of a preexistent world with clear structures and borders, but cannot convincingly trace a vortex of unfathomable events or rampant spontaneity beyond all structures either, what can it possibly do? In order to find out, one will have to set out on a line of flight crossing these fading alternatives on toward a place that is not yet taken within the old dialectic of outside and inside.

Provisionally, let's call this place „the Open“.

5. The Open

Now, something can be open both to the inside and to the outside. Will this mysterious „Open“ be able to connect the two, like an open door? At least one can't see how just another opening (for example access to secret information) would change the situation of the artwork. Rather, the Open should be regarded as the place where the difference between inside and outside itself is suspended.

Since Heidegger, the discussion of this mysterious area tends to start off with the *Eighth Duino Elegy* of Rainer Maria Rilke. For Rilke, the animal is the paradigm of the Open, because it is completely within the world, not even separating between the world and itself. In contrast to that, humans want to get hold of the world, so they put themselves in opposition to it, outside of the pure space of wholeness. To say it in the words of the poem's beginning:

„With all its eyes the animal world
beholds the Open. Only our eyes
are as if inverted and set all around it
like traps at its portals to freedom.
What's outside we only know from the animal's
countenance; for almost from the first we take a child
and twist him round and force him to gaze
backwards and take in structure, not the Open.“

Accordingly to Rilke, man has fallen from the grace of the Open and doesn't inhabit it any longer. Instead, he inhabits a theatre, in which he remains both spectator and actor. Again, in Rilke's own words (translated by Edward Snow):

„We, though: never, not for a single day, do we
have that pure space ahead of us into which flowers
endlessly open. What we have is World
and always World and never Nowhere-Without-Not [...].
Spectators, always, everywhere,
looking at, never out of, everything!
It overfills us. We arrange it. It falls apart.
We rearrange it, and fall apart ourselves.“

Martin Heidegger has developed an extensive critique of these lines. According to him, the openness of the animal life is not a real openness. It is, in a way, nothing but a closure, for the animal is absorbed in nature, captivated by it. („Benommen“ is the German word used in that context.) The animal is always outside of itself, its natural

openness closes it off from its own inwardness. The animal is thus beyond the difference of openness and closure. It beholds neither the one nor the other, for it lacks awareness of the difference which supposes a faculty to differentiate between them. And that faculty, according to Heidegger, supposes human language. Only man has access to the Open, and only by way of language. The Open, in his interpretation, basically turns out to be the confrontation with a significant noise or form which illuminates and rearranges the relationship of human beings with the world by drawing them out of the structures they normally move in.

6. Electronics

Just out of spite, let's take an example that Heidegger would have intensely disliked and return to the door which can be either closed or open. Come to think of it, the door not necessarily connects or separates between an inside and an outside. One might imagine wall around the equator, and if you put a door in that wall and pass through, are you stepping outside or inside? This reflection is just to serve as a stepping stone to another, more structural approach to the door and the Open. To supplement another example, think of electronic appliances. Rather surprisingly, an open circuit turns out to be exactly the one through which no current can pass. The condition of a current of electrical energy is a closed circuit. Hence you might say: the more closed the system is, the more open it turns out to be. This is not just a bad joke hanging onto a curiosity of language. Think of the archive again: that also can only function if its doors remain closed, at least some of them to some of us. And this arrangement keeps the sense the archive makes of the world in place. It becomes apparent that the door is a device with which to differentiate and signify. You might imagine an archive that consist of nothing but of an enormously complicated assemblage of open and closed doors. Actually, you don't have to imagine it; you can see it all over the place. A computer is basically exactly that. There's a good reason why the basic building blocks of all digital devices are called gates; as there's also a good reason why the most widespread operating system of protected modes under one Bill Gates isn't called *Doors*, but *Windows*.

Now, just as it was undecidable if the open door through the imaginary equatorial wall leads to an outside or an inside, it's undecidable or irrelevant what's outside and what's inside in the realm of electronic archives. Perhaps for this very reason, the use of electronic appliances in artworks has led to some controversy. A widespread supposition was that the growth of electronic arts was a fatal development that has rendered art impure and its contemplation impossible. However, their electrification has at least offered good occasions to ring in a new round in the conflict between artwork and museum by reopening the question what art is and what it is supposed to do.

Take, for example, a loudspeaker within a gallery playing back sound events occurring in the gallery or outside street noises. Now these are noises that are neither intrinsic

to the objective gallery space nor extraneous to it, and neither altogether natural nor altogether artificial and subjective. They are located in an interzone between these alternatives, and widening it, for example by exposing the connections between the amplification and the transformation of sound events. Thus, sound artists seem to be in a particularly privileged position to rework the relation between imitation of the outside and expressive creation from the inside since they have always produced works which bypass this nagging dichotomy. They make things perceivable by transforming them, that is, they reframe them.

Under ideal conditions, this technological intervention neither imposes itself on the outside world nor imitates it. Instead, it renders the relation between space and the gallery visitor more open in the sense of experimental, hinting at new ways of experiencing the acoustic and visual properties of the rooms she or he usually moves in. Neither a subject nor a world finds its authentic expression in the process, but their relations and conditionings can be slightly transformed all the same. The immediate result of such interventions will tend to be a certain disorientation because categories one uses to orient oneself in the world are found to be temporarily suspended. Yet after momentarily getting lost in space, one might perhaps be able to reaccommodate to it in a new way which is richer in possibilities. Thus some new sense would have seeped in from a virtual place that is neither inside nor outside and which one might call the Open without giving in too much to mystification.

7. The Passing of Dieter Roth

Of course, you don't have to use electronic equipment in order to achieve this effect. Another strategy would be to erode the archive by taking it at its own word. This is how the work of Dieter Roth could be described, for example. Roth's project, if you want to call it that, seems to be one of all-encompassing incorporation which excludes absolutely nothing from the process of art production. A somewhat blatant emblem of this approach is the „Journal for Everything“ Roth edited for a while. For it printed all contributions that were sent to it, regardless of the content. Other examples are his extensive recordings, photographs and other documentations of ordinary, seemingly insignificant events, such as a car drive from his gallery to his home. Generally, Roth has been archiving the formless for decades, particularly all that which seems to fall out of useful categories, such as small everyday waste products and even excrement in the form of little sculptures made of rabbit shit. A peculiar way of striving for the absolute archive seems to open: the archive of absolutely everything which would leave no remainder. The effect, of course, is that the archive itself goes to waste.

Roth's work is marked by an ambivalence. For one the one hand, he gives nothing for lost, on the other, he consciously rots the archive from the inside, hinting at its final, necessary dissolution and even accelerating it. Eventually, it all comes down to a question of time: Everything is passing, but everything will have been at some point. Along

with everything, one is always passing through the archive, haunted by the phantasm of catching life at its origin, the *arkhē* of the right moment, just as it comes to be. Then life would really show itself and might live on in the Open, without the need of archives. But somehow the last door always opens on the place where we got in instead. And it turns out that the doorkeeper keeps us from nothing but this door. All we're left with is the archive as the symbol of the origin that, finally, one can't get into and can't get out of, so that we end up permanently taking leave of it. In that context, one can quote for a last time Rilke's *Eighth Elegy*:

„Always, no matter what we do, we're in the stance
of someone just departing. As he,
on the last hill that shows him all the valley
one last time, turns and stops and lingers—,
we live our lives, forever taking leave.“

Or one might state the same matter in the words of Dieter Roth himself:

„Pissing is as good as crapping
Coming is as good as going [...].
Good night“

Sources

Maurice Blanchot, *L'Amitié*, Paris: Gallimard, 1971

Lewis Carroll, *Sylvie and Bruno*, Mineola: Dover, 1988

Germano Celant, „A Visual Machine. Art Installation and Its Modern Archetypes“, in: Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson, Sandy Nairne (ed.), *Thinking about Exhibitions*, London: Routledge, 1996

Jean-Louis Déotte, *Le musée, l'origine de l'esthétique*, Paris: Harmattan, 1993

Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever, A Freudian Impression*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996

Brian Doherty, *In der weißen Zelle/Inside the White Cube*, Berlin: Merve, 1996

Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach, „The Universal Survey Museum“, in: Bettina M. Carbonell (ed.), *Museum Studies. An Anthology of Contexts*, Malden: Blackwell, 2004

Paula Findlen, „The Museum: Its Classical Etymology and Renaissance Genealogy“, in: Bettina M. Carbonell (ed.), *Museum Studies. An Anthology of Contexts*, Malden: Blackwell, 2004

Michel Foucault, *Die Ordnung der Dinge*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2000

Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992

Jacques Lacan, *Das Ich in der Theorie Freuds und in der Technik der Psychoanalyse*, Weinheim/Berlin: Quadriga, 1991

Wolfgang Pfeifer (ed.), *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Deutschen*, München: dtv, 1995

Donald Preziosi, „Brain of the Earth's Body. Museums and the Framing of Modernity“, in: Bettina M. Carbonell (ed.), *Museum Studies. An Anthology of Contexts*, Malden: Blackwell, 2004

Juliane Rebentisch, *Ästhetik der Installation*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2003

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, translated by Edward A. Snow, San Francisco: North Point Press, 2000

Dieter Roth, *Das Weinen*, Stuttgart/London: edition hansjörg mayer, 1978

Beate Söntgen, „Keine Reste. Dieter Roths Versprechen“, in: Beate Söntgen, Theodora Vischer (ed.), *Über Dieter Roth. Beiträge des Symposiums vom 4. und 5. Juli 2003*, Basel/Köln: Schaulager, 2004