

*Ship of Fools*



Quodlibet. A form of trompe-l'oeil painting practised by Dutch artists between 1655 and 1675. In these compositions, small objects such as letters, sketches and work tools were suspended with ribbons against a wooden background. They were then depicted in three-dimensional, illusionist ways, often to convey a story about the artist, in coded form. \*





\* the first paragraph in the film *Everyday Archives II (Flyers 1998 – 2008)*, conceived for the exhibition *Last Dance* as part of the Marseille-Provence European Capital of Culture programme in 2013. The exhibition was entitled after Donna Summer's well-known disco hit and intended to explore themes of event culture, ephemerality and celebration. While reading the brief, an early work that I had made while still in art school came to mind.



In the film *Notebook on Cities and Clothes* Wim Wenders reads: "You live wherever you live, you do whatever work you do, you talk however you talk, you eat whatever you eat, you wear whatever clothes you wear, you look at whatever images you see. You're living however you can. You are however you are. Identity – of a person, of a thing, of a place. What is it, identity?" <sup>1</sup>

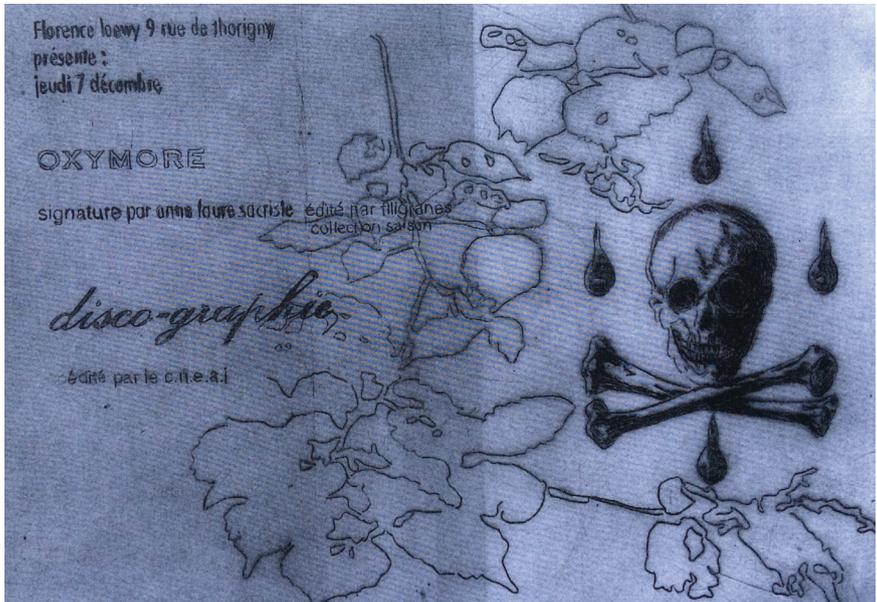
I had digitalised nearly one thousand flyers and postcards: invitations collected during travels to various European cities over a period of seven years, and assembled them in a silent slide-show. One of the aims with my effort was to, once and for all, learn the digital tools for image treatment available at the school. A knowledge that turned out quite superfluous, since the technology changes so rapidly and I often fail to remember technical instructions.

However, the digital learning process had only been one of the reasons behind my effort. As Walter Benjamin puts it in his unfinished Arcades Project, a collection is a form of "practical memory" and my archive contained the memories of what I had been doing over those years. Which clubs and concerts me and my friends had visited, which art exhibitions and theatre plays we had seen. At which bar I had met that adorable architecture student for whom I wanted to quit my boyfriend, from which party we had left on that crazy nocturnal car drive. In front of which club, on a boat in the river Seine, a homeless man had placed a frozen chicken (etcetera).

The aspect of creating a sort of coded personal diary was always there.

Then of course there was the allure to dwell on the archive – what it is or could be. How can we understand and challenge the processes of selection and representation, question what is considered valuable and worth keeping at a certain time, by a certain group, and what is being thrown out? I saw these ephemeral, hand-printed or photo-copied black and white scraps of paper – invitations for one-evening events in dubious cellar bars – as a form of counter archive. A symbolic questioning of a "real" archive, of the people who get to select, decide, narrate and formulate our collective and individual history.

"Lateness is a specific form of the work of mourning, its temporal mode; we might call lateness the mourning of time, the paradoxical manner in which an artist or artwork takes leave of their time, moves on or away from the now. [...] As opposed to the relinquishment of time, what of the contrary dynamic? What about those who won't let go? Does lateness occasion a sibling, a sister dynamic involved in holding on to the past, a desperate clinging to time itself? Is there, in other words, a melancholia of time?" <sup>2</sup>

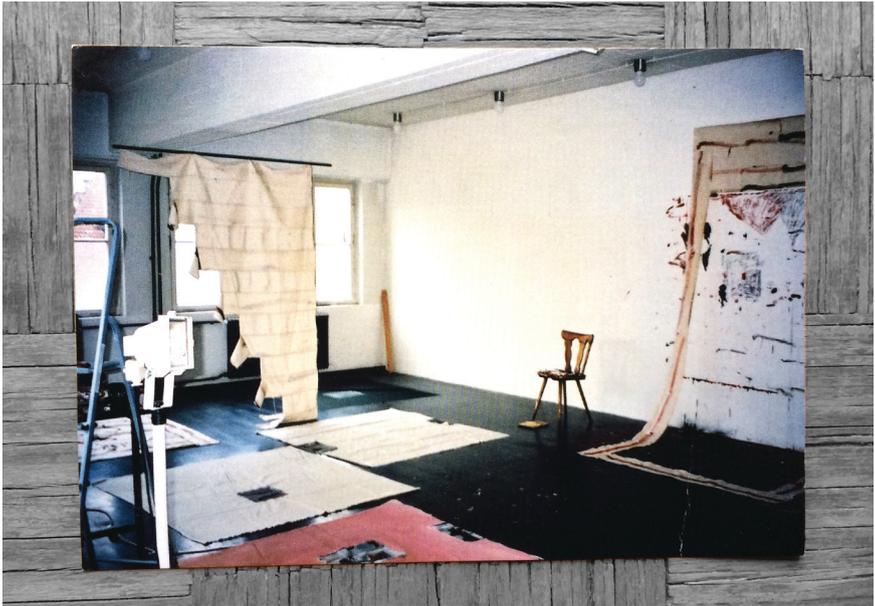


The ethical and political levels of archiving started to appear to me. If historical awareness – which is often the precondition for an archival interest – is a precondition for understanding the present, even foreseeing the future, could archiving be seen as an act of resistance against oblivion and void, a way of taking responsibility?

*Everyday Archives II (Flyers 1998 – 2008)* is a work of fragments, with a dialogue almost entirely made up of quotes from other writers. Georges Perec, the Jewish writer active in Paris in the 1960s and 1970s, wrote an entire novel based on quotes from other writers. Perec saw himself as a sort of “carpenter of words” – sometimes even a forgerer.

Georges Perec’s literary works are simultaneously minimalist and reduced, childishly simplified in language and form, yet complexly multilayered and refined in how they take on their subjects. For example in his novel *Disappear* (1969), a criminal drama on the theme of disappearance and exclusion on several levels. Constructed through literary constraints, in this case in the form of a lipogram where the letter e – fundamental to the French language – has been excluded, Perec used methods that helped him overcome his writer’s block. The challenge in having to construct a new, artificial yet natural-sounding language made the writing of the book an almost invincible, yet inspiring, “brick-layer’s task”. In David Bellos’ biography *Georges Perec – A Life in Words*, Bellos writes:

”The hidden linguistic agenda was covered by the social clowning [Perec was collecting ‘e-less’ words], but as on many other occasions in Perec’s life, one cover covered another. In the case of *La Disparition*, the double cover hid something that none of the author’s closest friends could have guessed at, unless they, too, were orphans of the ‘shoah’. The novel’s title is a slightly arch euphemism for death, but it is also something much more special: it is the term used in administrative French for persons missing and presumed dead. In his drawer at Rue du Bac, Perec still had the certificate issued in 1947 by the Mi-



Walter Benjamin writes about book collecting in his essay *Unpacking my library*: "My most memorable purchases were made on holiday – when I happened to be passing. [...] What a quantity of cities have revealed themselves to me through those marches undertaken in search of books to conquer! [...] Now, with the last packing case still only half-empty, it is already well past midnight. Other thoughts fill me than those of which I have spoken. Not thoughts; images, memories. Memories of the cities where I found so many of these things: Riga, Naples, Munich, Danzig, Moscow, Florence, Basel, Paris..."<sup>3</sup>

nistry of War Veterans in regards of Perec Cyrla née Szulewicz [Perec's mother], last seen alive at Drancy on 11 February 1943, a document headed ACTE DE DISPARITION." 4

In these playful and indirect methods of approaching difficult subjects, such as death, loss and disappearance, without explicitly talking about them, Perec had been inspired by films like *Hiroshima mon amour*, directed by Alain Resnais after the novel by Marguerite Duras. Above all he admired Resnais for his work with the first and government-funded documentary on Auschwitz, *Night and Fog*, which was withdrawn from the 1957 Cannes Festival at the request of West Germany.

Bellos writes that "Resnais's editing gives accomplished form to Perec's own intuition that meaning might emerge from alternation. *Hiroshima mon amour* deals with the task of facing up to horror, not simply in Nevers and in Hiroshima but in the parallels and the gaps between the two; simultaneously, it is an essay in film on the nature of memory, cast throughout in a kind of present tense. *Hiroshima mon amour* was a beacon of hope for Georges Perec. It proved that it was possible to confront both horror and memory and to produce from the otherwise ungraspable concerns that were already his own, a total vision, in which 'reality is unveiled in its true dimensions, in a world of relationships where at first everything seems incoherent but where little by little connections are made.'"

Typical for Perec was his unwillingness to take a stand, his constant refusal to bring his stories to a narrative conclusion. This "explaining" of reality, inherent to linear storytelling, was not something that Perec wanted to accomplish. "Only complete discontinuity – fragments – can save me! But it bugs me! It bugs me!" Perec wrote. Total discontinuity was neither something that the reader would have appreciated, and Perec takes on the problem of fragment narration in many texts, a. o. in *Species of Spaces* (1974). The novel *A Man Asleep* (1967) Bellos calls a "collage-novel" – secretly constructed exclusively

In the book *Looking at the Overlooked* I read: "Taxonomy is the name given to the branch of knowledge that deals with classification; the taxonomist takes a body of phenomena (plants, animals) and groups them into species and genera, according to criteria which the taxonomist creates for the purpose of analysis." <sup>5</sup>



on quotes from other writers – and he means that the collage might be perceived as a literary form of humility. He writes:

”Falsification; or substitution. Gaspard was to be a carpenter, or a forger, or a crook, or all three. Why should writing be different from carpentry? Why should Perec not take pieces of wood that had already been turned and reassemble in his own marquetry? Inherited notions of property were all that stood in the way, and the desire to preserve the sanctity of the artist-prophet. Perec was not a prophet (the fate of the novel *Things* made that clear enough); a craftsman was what he wished to be. *A Man Asleep* is a work grounded in that modest ambition.”

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#### References and quotes

- \* 1 out of 11 text excerpts from the HD video *Everyday Archives II (Flyers 1998-2008)*, Malin Pettersson Öberg, 2013. Distributed by Filmform. Images: from the video *Everyday Archives II... 2013*
1. Wim Wenders, *Notebook on Cities and Clothes*, 1989
  2. George Baker, *Lateness and Longing: On the Afterlife of Photography*, 2013
  3. Walter Benjamin, *Unpacking my Library: A Talk About Book Collecting*, 1931
  4. David Bellos, *Georges Perec - A Life in Words*, 1993
  5. Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, 1990
  6. Thomas Nau, *Walker Evans: Photographer of America*, 2000
  7. Marcel Broodthaers, *Ten Thousand Francs Reward*, interview, 1974
  8. Song lyrics, Flotation Toy Warning, *Happy 13*, 2004
  9. Wikipedia description of “ephemeral”, 2013



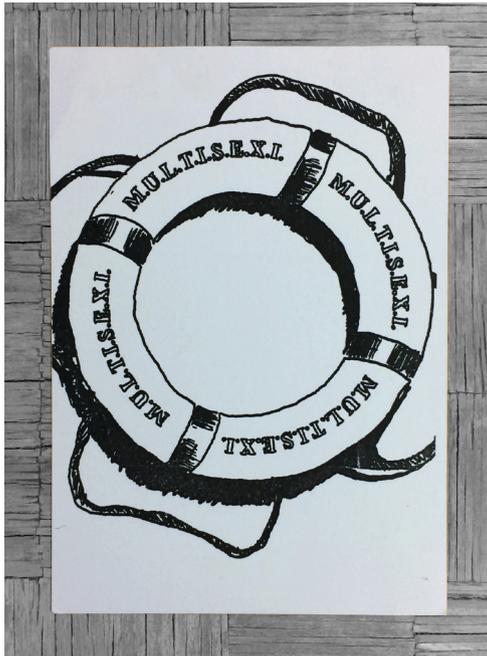


By placing objects side to side we can compare them. We can discover their differences and similarities. By isolating them we can study them. How is this black color different from this black? How can form speak about content? What is this interface between the interior and the exterior, the substance and the surface, our concepts and the material world – can we even separate them?

"By 1971 there was a good chance that the subject Walker Evans chose would be some kind of sign. Signs had always been part of his subject, but by 1971 they had become almost his artistic obsession. Frequently on his excursions he would photograph a sign and then remove it, if possible, and take it with him. The photograph had always been his way of making clear exactly what it was that had significance."<sup>6</sup> How do we know what has significance?



"A comb, a traditional painting, a sewing machine, an umbrella, a table may find a place in the museum in different sections, depending upon their classification. We see sculpture in a separate space, paintings in another, ceramics and porcelains..., stuffed animals... Each space is in turn compartmentalized, perhaps intended to be a section – snakes, insects, fish, birds – susceptible to being divided into departments – parrots, gulls, eagles." <sup>7</sup>





My grandparents were true collectors. They knew about the ability of objects to transmit knowledge and transform the world. When they died, a large auction was held at their courtyard, in the pouring rain. Everything they had gathered over the course of a lifetime, was shattered and sold.

"Please leave all shiny objects behind, you won't need them where we're going. Relax, take a deep breath and concentrate now, we really must be gone. There's a risk in everything we undertake, but now you must trust me more than anyone. Cause I've seen things, that you could only dream about. I've been to places that you'll never find. And I've had dreams that you couldn't even fit inside your head. All the places I wish I could find."<sup>8</sup>



*Ephemeral. Lasting for only a short time, transitory, short-lived. Ephemeral pleasure.*

1. a short-lived organism, such as the mayfly
2. a plant that completes its life cycle in less than one year<sup>9</sup>