

# Creative Archiving: a case study from the John Latham Archive

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## Abstract

This paper looks at the history of the archive profession and emphasises the perceived role of the archivist as the keeper of truth. It focuses on the recent developments in archival practice with the adoption of post-modern thinking and its implementation with open-access archives online. Following a discussion of that approach, it introduces the concept of *creative archiving* as an alternative approach to archival practice and continues with the presentation of a case study from the John Latham Archive. It concludes with a discussion of the main pros and cons of creative archiving.

## 1 Introduction

*noit* is a word that John Latham used frequently in his writing. It is the result of reversing the ending *-tion* inside the word *tradition*. One type of performance which brought John Latham to public attention was the *skoob ceremonies*, in which carefully constructed towers of books were burnt and destroyed. Latham struggled to communicate a message to his audience during his lifetime: the need for a different language. His *skoob ceremonies* indicated that traditional language as we speak it, write it and read it is too limited to explain the world - it simply turns into smoke. He often used his own vocabulary to explain his concepts (such as *noit*), urging people to escape from the traditional space-based approach to the cosmos and move to a different approach based on time and frequency. He was not a trained scientist but his writings cross the boundaries between art and science.

The ideas which follow are influenced by Latham's work. His theory and practice has been an inspiration to this work and has shaped the proposed approach to organising his papers which could be called *creative archiving*. Most of the people involved in this work were not archivists, yet the proposal concerns archival practice, in the same way that Latham was not a scientist but managed to cross the boundary to science.

Following a review of the role of the archivist over the last 150 years, this paper focuses on the archivist's responsibility for collating history. The paper continues

with a proposal for adopting *creative archiving* in artists' archives and personal papers and concludes with a discussion of the pros and cons of *creative archiving*.

Let us start with an account of objectivity and interpretation in archival theory.

## 2 Objectivity and Interpretation

### 2.1 A historical account

For a researcher who has recently started working on archival science, a good introductory text about the history of the field is by Cook<sup>1</sup>. Although it is clear that record-keeping concepts have almost always been part of social and family constructs, Cook identifies 1898 as the year when these concepts were formalised and proposed as a set of rules for the archival profession, by the three Dutch archivists who published the *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*<sup>2</sup>. The *manual* included one hundred rules on the management of an archive, reflecting theories and practices of Dutch and other European archivists.

Some critical rules of the *Manual* are highlighted in Cook's article: a) rule 8 describes the principle of *provenance* in classical archival practice - the fact that material of one provenance should not be mixed with materials of another and b) rule 16 describes the principle of *original order* - the fact that material should be kept in the order that it was when it was being produced, which was particularly helpful for retrieving records since the Dutch organisations involved had robust administrative structures reflected in the archive. Therefore the arrangement of the material in the archives gave a clear image of the organisations' structure. Although *provenance* is a principle which has been preserved (perhaps) unchanged until today, the same cannot be said about *original order* which is not always clear, especially in artists' archives or private papers (Meehan describes examples of material from personal collections without meaningful original order<sup>3</sup>).

Cook continues his historical account of the archive profession by referring to the work of Sir Hilary Jenkinson and his publication *A Manual of Archive Administration*<sup>4</sup>. This emphasises two important concepts: a) the archival material as *evidence* of history and b) the inevitable *selection* of material from large volumes and therefore the controversy about the *objectivity* of an archive. Selection has been a much-discussed subject in the archive profession, but its necessity was emphasised decisively by Theodore Schellenberg in the middle of the 20th century. Because logistically it was (and is) often impossible to process the totality of records from large organisations, Schellenberg claimed that records should be accepted into an archive on the basis of their value for later historical research<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, the archivist is placed at a pivotal point in historical research and the future interpretation of history.

The problem of the volume of output, however, led to a further debate about how archival records are selected and since the middle of the last century many authors have contributed to the discussion. An important contribution was made by Hans Booms, who supported the idea that records should be selected on the basis of social criteria and not on administrative or governmental patterns, which do not necessarily embody the *truth* for an academic historian or researcher.<sup>6</sup> Typical examples of archives which do not embody the truth are those produced by authoritarian states. In these cases, it is difficult to talk about a single truth, since different evidence can lead to different versions of the truth. Booms also questioned the validity of identifying social criteria and concluded that *provenance* - the core

principle of archives - is a reliable criterion for establishing the value of records based on social criteria. This makes the archivist central to the preservation of history and although the archivist should be free from influence by administrative or governmental constructs, the archivist is again required to decide on record selection, description and arrangement<sup>7</sup>.

## 2.2 The inevitability of choice

Archival practice has also been the subject of discussion in the arena of philosophy in recent years. Post-modern thinking has often been examined in an archival context and there is evidence that professional practice has shifted in that direction. A good account of this shift was given by Hardiman who, quoting Ketelaar, highlights the power of the archivist to choose what is *worth archiving*, *consciously* or *unconsciously*.<sup>8</sup> Earlier in the same work, Hardiman also introduces Derrida and his *Archiving Fever*<sup>9</sup> which summarises post-modernist thinking about archiving:<sup>10</sup>

1. There is no exclusionary truth in accepted meanings. The archivist (or anybody in that role) can make conscious decisions to facilitate a slanted version of the truth or to highlight a specific point of view about the truth, thus forcing archive users to investigate a distorted history or a selective history. More importantly, even if there are no unethical intentions in the archivist's work, the archivist may still distort history because of the inherent inability of any person to approach a situation truly objectively. Such concerns are also highlighted by Douglas and MacNeil when reconstructing archives *received in bad order* to indicate what could have been the original order of the material.<sup>11</sup> The intention to reflect a situation accurately by efficient selection and ordering of documents for archiving may be there, but the archivists' existing experiences (through education, professional environment, family etc.) may limit them from undertaking the work objectively. Therefore no archivist can claim to facilitate the discovery of the absolute truth<sup>12</sup>.
2. *Deconstruction* is a necessity in archiving. Derrida introduces *deconstruction* as a way to avoid the problem of the single accepted truth of an archive. Deconstruction allows and demands archival practice to be questioned rather than accepted. It is not so much the practical everyday archival processes that this thinking has influenced but rather the overall approach to the understanding of practice<sup>13</sup>. For example, producing metadata for a record often makes us wonder whether this metadata is the record itself. The process of producing the metadata perhaps will never change, but our understanding of it will be revised again and again, an issue which has been examined by Schwartz.<sup>14</sup>

Harris, in his account of the validity of electronic records with examples from South Africa, highlights similar problems where again the truth in an archive is contested.<sup>15</sup> Supporters of post-modern archival practice have benefited from the expansion of the Internet. The shift to online open-access data and communities started influencing the methodologies for presenting and using an archive in a post-modern fashion. As soon as the online tools matured, some formal proposals of how the archive could be modified were made, as will be discussed next.

## 2.3 Archives 2.0

In accordance with post-modern thinking, Eric Ketelaar has recognised that the archive is not static and its context is reworked over the course of history<sup>16</sup>. He continues by proposing a way to implement openness in an archival context by

using social networking software<sup>17</sup>. Archive items can be available online and people who relate to and recognise them are able to enrich their context and offer multiple interpretations. Some (more daring) institutions have already offered the public the opportunity to enrich their archives and in many cases this is particularly rewarding (Ketelaar cites the example of the Polar Bear Expedition Digital Archive; in a UK context, The National Archives' 'Your Archives' site should also be mentioned). This leads to an amalgamation of Web 2.0 tools with archival practice in a successful implementation of deconstructive practice online. It is worth highlighting some technicalities here:

1. The contributed content of the Web 2.0 archive is often simple text. Text can be keyword searched, but it cannot be searched semantically, thus diminishing its usefulness in a software query. For example contributions about the original date of a document will be done using simple text - someone will insist that the document was written 'a week or ten days before the given date'. Although humans reading this text will be able to understand the dispute about the date, software will have little success in doing so. Therefore, a software query on dates will ignore this data, making this contribution less valuable while keeping the archivist's original date as the *official* one.
2. It might be possible (although I have not seen any examples so far) for online archive users to contribute to the structured metadata of a record, which will potentially make their data *official*. In this case the user has power over software indexing, but the user's contribution is limited to the framework of the archivist. A simple example is offered by the Dublin Core Metadata initiative which is popular in the description of web resources. Describing a photograph of a group of people typically involves writing down their names in a specified format, so that they can later be retrieved by a computer query. Dublin Core includes a *description* element which in its simplest form can store text. When a user wants to name the persons in the photograph, this is done in free text according to the archivist's decision and therefore any semantically interesting information is ignored by the software query. In other words there are only certain types of data that a user can contribute within the data/metadata framework that the archivist has set, therefore the archivist is again in control of what the users can meaningfully contribute.
3. It is often the case that, although contributions from the public are welcomed in an archive, there are none made. One reason is because the prospect may involve a lot of time-consuming work which no member of the public is able to undertake because of the large amount of time required. Another could be fear that the contribution will be criticised. And, of course, one must not assume that Internet access is possible for all audiences.

The above points show that even in an *Archive 2.0* arrangement, the archivist and not the public has the power to produce and present data in its *official* version. Therefore, the archivist's particular view remains the dominant version of the *truth*.

## **2.4 Archivists at the epicentre**

After more than a century of discussion, from the Dutch *Manual* to Booms' philosophical extensions and post-modern thinking, the archivist is still the main actor in preserving history and the keeper of a version of the *truth*. The profession is now stronger than in the past and archival standards have been proposed to limit governmental attempts to distort history and to put the archivist in control of what is recorded and how.

Having read these writings mentioned above, and in an attempt to digest the underlying concepts and their applicability to archival practice, there is one final important observation to be made: most of the theoretical discourse on archiving seems to focus on a single point of power of the archivist, which is the process of *selection*. This is undoubtedly a critical point in the archivist's work and it seems to be the main concern in the field, which perhaps overshadows the role of the archivist as an expert in arrangement and description.

Choice of material is inevitable for large organisations with huge output, but not always a problem with artists' archives which tend to be limited to a single person's output and therefore smaller<sup>18</sup>. John Latham, for example, was an artist who was actively collecting material about his work but his archive only includes about 8,000 documents, which is a small fraction of the size of institutional archives. Other artists have larger collections and output but it is rare to find anything comparable in volume to institutional archives. Another important point is that institutional archives grow continuously. Unless there is capacity of processing the complete daily output of an organisation, *selection* is necessary to avoid an ever-growing backlog. Artists' archives, on the other hand, tend to be shaped by an artist's own decisions over what to keep and tend to be studied after the artist's death or after the bulk of the artist's work is complete. Therefore, these archives do not increase in size and although the volume of documents to be processed could be large, it would be difficult to justify discarding part of it instead of processing it at a later stage. Finally, the value of artists' archives is often appreciated by potential funders and their relative small size means that funding may be available for processing them in their entirety.

If we accept that *selection* in artists' archives is less of a problem because of the relatively small volume, arrangement and description should be the core subject of *deconstructive* thinking for artists' archives. Arrangement and description have previously been approached from a *deconstruction* perspective<sup>19</sup>, but this is only suggested as a state of mind rather than a revised working methodology.<sup>19</sup> In other words, archivists are asked to accept their partiality but are left to continue using methodologies that have been widely criticised for their rigidity and absoluteness.

This is an appropriate point to introduce *creative archiving*.

### **3 Creative archiving**

Because partiality is unavoidable and since the perceived truth may be changing anyway, let us turn partiality to an advantage.

Experienced archivists working with an archive over a long period of time often have a unique understanding of the history that the archive holds. This is particularly true if the archivist has been responsible for describing and searching the archive and has previous experience of similar material. Their background knowledge makes their version of the truth partial, but they are often more informed about the subject area than anybody else<sup>20</sup>.

Another advantage that archivists have is their training on classification techniques: the ability to identify material of similar type, to link this material and to make these relationships part of the context of the archive. These relationships are not always original to the archive. They are a particular representation of how material is inter-related, nevertheless they are useful to the visitor as a study aid and because of this they are also influential.

By accepting partiality as an inevitability, we could fulfil the potential of modern tools for arrangement and description to communicate the archivist's understanding of history to the visitor. *Creative archiving* is taking partiality to an extreme and celebrates the archivist's role in history while at the same time clearly admitting that this is only one version of the truth: the archivist's own interpretation.

### 3.1 Interpretation

The use of standards (such as ISAD(G), EAD and Dublin Core) is an undeniable benefit of the archival profession.. Standardisation requires a structure which is repeated in every complying archive. The same structure is used regardless of the subject of the archive and thus archives appear to be very similar in terms of content organisation, even when the content itself is different. Arguably, however, this makes the individuality of archives disappear in the unified approach to archiving because, in a sense, they are being lost within larger collections of big institutions. Therefore, this standardisation inadvertently reduces the value of an individual archive because instead of promoting it and emphasising its value, it buries it in the vastness of a larger collection<sup>21</sup>.

This paper proposes the complete interpretation of an archive by the expert archivist as a way to make both the archival practice and the user experience unique. This will elevate the value of the archive by offering extra information to the visitor in the form of an added interpretation layer created by the archivist. Smaller archives can stand out as significant units with valuable information even though they may still be discovered through an indifferent search engine. The archivist's interpretation can enhance the user's experience and increase the educational value of the archive<sup>22</sup>. The success of *creative archiving* relies on the archivist's ability to communicate the interpreted information and the archivist's knowledge of the field covered by the archive.

However, the archivist's interpretation is not at the expense of standardisation as discussed next.

### 3.2 Online tools

*Creative archiving* can be implemented because it is now technically possible. A wealth of intelligent online tools which can replicate standard and non-standard structures is available. These allow the addition of an interpretation layer on top of what one would consider a typical electronic version of an archive. The field of digital preservation in particular has many important projects to showcase, offering a range of software tools. Such tools are developed with standardisation in mind, but offer the flexibility required for the archivist to interpret the archive in a unique way. This is achieved through separating content and presentation templates as will be explained.

Online archive resources, such as A2A and the Archives Hub, offer data which is typically stored in databases. Databases are built around mature structures and often hosted centrally. These structures can be used to implement standards by enforcing the use of metadata schemas across all records. Data stored in the database can then be queried by presentation templates and the resulting web-pages are presented to the user. The presentation templates can be customised to select and present data in any format or layout. Often this customisation is limited to simple rules for aesthetic improvement of content, but recent software tools allow extensive alterations to templates which is where the customisation and

interpretation layer can be built. Because databases are stored centrally, a second interpretation layer can be built independently, query the data and present it in a different way. The data still adheres to the same standards but its presentation is different.

Although a detailed account of the software that could be used for *creative archiving* is out of the scope of this text, it is worth mentioning a) the Fedora project which is a repository and management system for digital (or digitised) objects<sup>23</sup> and b) Drupal which is a content management system suitable for presenting data in a variety of ways.<sup>24</sup>

## 4 Case Study: The John Latham Archive

In 2008, Ligatus initiated a project to produce an online archive of the papers of the late artist, John Latham. The proposal for the project was built around the concept of *creative archiving* whereby the material of the archive would first be studied by the archivists and then a new classification system based on John Latham's work would be used to organise the archive. Before proceeding with the description of the online archive, it is necessary to first summarise the key concepts of John Latham's work. John Walker has written extensively on John Latham's work as well as the artist himself in his *Report of a Surveyor* among other publications.<sup>25</sup>

### 4.1 John Latham's theory

#### Least Event and Minits

The use of a spray gun by John Latham in the 1950s led him to the *Least Event* concept. Latham faced the canvas as a blank screen where an artwork was about to come into existence. The blank canvas had the potential to become any artwork and out of this potential the event of the creation of a specific artwork took place. Although the creation of artwork is often a complex process, Latham managed to reduce that complexity to the minimum with the use of a spray gun. By momentarily pressing the spray gun trigger, a sequence of paint or ink spots appear on the canvas. The first of them was for Latham the simplest element of realising an artwork (and in fact anything else). That *minimum* spot is the visualisation of the Least Event - the shortest event that can exist. Two or three spots together already form some sort of relationship and therefore a more complex event, and the more spots appear the more the complexity increases to a level that anything in existence is an event. Latham popularised this concept with his famous one-second drawings (figure 1)<sup>26</sup>. The stamp often accompanying these drawings indicates to the viewer that the event of creating the drawing as well as the event of viewing it are unique. Although two One Second Drawings may look similar, their stamps confirm that they are different. Latham used a typology for classifying events also known as *Minits*, where Minit 1 indicates the creation event of the work, Minit 2 indicates the viewing event of the work, Minit 3 indicates the apparent fixed characteristics of the work (such as the event of it having a specific colour), Minit 4 indicates the event of the duration of the work (typically for performance or film) and Minit 5 indicates the event of referring to the work: a classification system defined by the artist himself.<sup>27</sup>

## Time-Base

The composition of complex events from the archetype Least Event led Latham to develop a scale (*Time-Base spectrum*) on which events can be mapped on a line with the high frequency (shorter - *low-base*) events on the left side and the low frequency (longer - *high-base*) events on the right. This is depicted in Figure [2](#) where the line is replaced by a cylinder around which a canvas has been rolled. This canvas holds all possible events, often depicted as spray drawings or letters. As the canvas is being unrolled, events are experienced only while they are visible on the front side of the cylinder. Once they are hidden (in the past), their memory remains, but they can no longer be experienced. Events close to A occur rapidly (too rapidly for human perception), whereas events close to Z occur slowly (too slowly for human perception). Events around the middle of the cylinder can be experienced by humans and in 1975 Latham proposed the use of the Time-Base spectrum as a filing system for classifying these events and their frequency [28](#). Later [29](#) he defined a terminology for these events: a) *bio-physical* events, for events which relate to human life (such as birth, death or illness), b) *socio-political*, for events concerning the society and politics which span much longer than a human's life (such as institutions or organisations and political parties), c) *geo-political*, for events related to almost permanent social and political constructs (such as countries or religions) and d) *geo-physical*, for geological or planetary alterations and events caused by human activity with a long-term impact to the environment (such as the melting of ice-caps or the movement of tectonic plates). Again the artist himself offers a classification system based on his theory where higher-base (lower frequency) indicates events with higher impact.

## Observer and the Brothers Karamazov

Within this framework of Time-Bases concerning humans, Latham indicates three key positions which are useful in describing the characteristics of people in a social environment. These three positions match the characters of one of Latham's favourite novels: the *Brothers Karamazov*. Dimitri (Mitya), the oldest brother, is depicted as an impulsive and cyclothymic person whose main concern is himself. Ivan, the middle brother, is a well-educated and controlled person able to observe his older brother's attitude, rationally explain it and often avoid it. Latham underlines that Ivan is limited by his own framework of logic and although intelligent, he is unable to surpass his reasoning capacity. The youngest brother, Alexei (Alyosha), is depicted as the intuitive and more spiritual character who, despite his good but limited education, approaches a situation in the best way, having observed the other two characters. [30](#)

The three brothers represent different levels of human existence in the Time-Base spectrum and indicate different points of view of a situation and different understandings of the *truth*. This triplet of *impulse - reason - intuition* is more evident in Latham's Observer series. [31](#) Mitya takes the form of a bulky and rather scattered group of books. Ivan is depicted by a more canonical arrangement of books and is always connected to Mitya by a wire. Alyosha is consistently depicted as the smallest group of books, reduced to a simple indentation of the canvas in Observer IV, and disconnected from the other two brothers.

Although Latham's work includes many other aspects, the above description represents some of the main themes in his work.



## 4.2 Interpretation

John Latham is among a minority of artists in that his artwork illustrates his rich scientific/theoretical framework. Because of this, examining texts from his archive was particularly useful to understand that theory and to summarise it, as in section [4.1](#). If Latham were still alive, the best way to confirm that this summary accurately reflects his ideas would be by having the artist himself review it. Given that the examination of the archive started after the artist's death, the above summary can only be considered as my own interpretation of Latham's theories, although others share this interpretation. A short description of the thinking process behind the development of the archive follows.

In an earlier paper on a possible model for John Latham's archive based on his artwork and theory, I suggested that the concept of event should be dominant in the archive with documents/events being ranked according to their importance, with the most important ones having a longer impact and therefore higher Time-Base.[32](#) The proposal went on to explain that the storage of a digitised document on a disk and its depiction on a computer monitor was equivalent to the canvas's potential before the spray gun result. In retrospect, the proposal in the earlier paper could be similar to the approach that Mitya, the impulsive Karamazov brother, would have if he were to embark on such research. That proposal focused on the part of John Latham's theory which is perhaps most widely known and closer to a *scientific* theory. It isolated the most science-like concepts and tried to impose them on the archive, because, given my background, science appears to me more valid than other aspects of Latham's work and therefore more important. Various science-related concepts were adopted but either because of the difficulty of comprehending Latham's writings or because Latham's theory is simply wrong, these concepts were soon contradicting each other and consistently collapsing any content structure tested. The concept of a document/event was therefore gradually abandoned. In the meantime, John Latham's other ideas became more and more comprehensible through the examination of his archive. The texts about the *Minits* and the *Time-Base* spectrum were studied, revealing the classification systems mentioned in [4.1](#). It was soon recognised that the artist's theory should not be applied to the documents themselves, which seemed always to lead to inconsistent structures, but to the way the archive is queried or experienced. The fact that the initial ideas were abandoned and other ideas were adopted, led to the recognition that both the ideas and the archivist matured through the archival work. The idea of modelling society based on the different Karamazov characters became central at that point, as the three brothers are inevitably ranked according to their maturity and potential by Latham. If these three characters were enough to describe people in society for Latham, surely they were enough to describe both the archivists and the potential users of his archive?

The casual user, one who is looking in the archive to find images with immediate impact, approaches the material in a Mitya fashion. This user has no intention of investigating Latham's writings in detail and therefore most of the archive is irrelevant. The Mitya approach to the archive is very much like browsing a magazine or a tabloid newspaper, looking for catchy photographs.[33](#)

The informed user, one who is visiting the archive to find evidence for scholarly work, approaches the material in an Ivan fashion. This user is there to perform accurate queries and receive robust references on specific concepts. The Ivan approach to the archive is closer to academic research.

The intuitive user is one visiting the archive to gain or contribute understanding or appreciation of Latham's writings and artwork. This user is there to observe content

and other users, having acquired familiarity with the archive not only through thorough study, but also through intuition. The Alyosha user is able to search more intuitively than others.

### 4.3 Implementation

The online archive of John Latham's papers is organised around the three Karamazov characters and at the same time takes into consideration John Latham's own recommendations on classification.<sup>34</sup> The archive can be accessed using three distinct roles: *MA* for Mitya, *IA* for Ivan and *AA* for Alyosha. *MA* offers a random selection of photographs which are shown in the form of a slide-show. The intention is to replicate the casual browsing of the archive by Mitya-like characters. *MA* was implemented through the interpretation layer by querying the database, selecting the available photographs and ignoring any other data. *IA* offers a sophisticated faceted searching tool for retrieving documents from the archive. The Ivan-like visitor can perform directed and detailed queries at item level on the archive documents, using a controlled vocabulary with terms mostly borrowed from the UK Archival Thesaurus.<sup>35</sup> *IA* is perhaps closest to a traditional archival search, as it is more practical for assisting retrieval of specific documents for the informed user. *IA* was implemented through the interpretation layer by building exhaustive indexes from all metadata records and presenting each record in its entirety. *AA* offers another approach to searching the archive which matches Alyosha in that it requires intuition. The *AA* search relies on the John Latham-specific classification based on time-bases. Documents in the archive have been given marks in the four categories of time-bases: bio-physical, socio-political, geo-political, geo-physical. By choosing a mark in each or any of these categories, documents with content which relates to this mark are returned as the result of the query. Again this is possible to implement through the interpretation layer by querying the database based on metadata from Latham's four categories. The *AA* part of the archive is still under development because the numerical view of this marking does not fully reflect the intuitive nature of Alyosha. The intention is to replace this numerical system with a sound-based searching tool and work is in progress in collaboration with the sound artist David Toop.<sup>36</sup> Further technical details on the implementation of the John Latham Archive online are described in a forthcoming paper by the author.<sup>37</sup>

The implementation of the online archive of John Latham requires an understanding of John Latham's theory. In other words, the arrangement and description process itself is part of the study of the artist's papers. A user who approaches the archive for the first time needs to make a choice to enter the archive as Mitya, Ivan or Alyosha. The three brothers are described in a short text at entry point, so the uninformed user will already appreciate this aspect of John Latham's work. The user's searching and browsing experience itself transforms the archive into an educational tool and demonstrates that the archivist's work has an impact on users.

## 5 Discussion

### 5.1 Creative archiving

The main argument against such heavy interpretation is that the interpreted truth might be misunderstood for a universally-accepted truth. But in the case of the John Latham Archive this interpretation was needed since one of the objectives of the project was to promote the artist's work and make it more accessible. Latham's work is impossible to appreciate fully without reading his texts, which are

notoriously difficult to comprehend. Therefore the interpretation is intended to contribute to the wider understanding of his work. The role of the archivist as an educator can be critical for the communication of ideas which exist in an archive. There is no doubt that the archivist's/educator's opinion is partial and subjective, but this is the case with any teacher. In recognition of the archivist's awareness of her or his own subjectivity, the online archive is clearly marked as an interpretation through the unique arrangement and description tools used (MA, IA, AA in the case of the John Latham Archive).

The interpreted archive makes use of subjective arrangement and description tools, but it does not exclude the use of other tools. Archivists of the 21st century have the luxury of a range of software which can query a body of data in many ways. In the case of the John Latham Archive, it is possible to build several interpretation layers on the same archive. Perhaps metadata will need to be extended, but viewing the archive through someone else's interpretation is technically possible.

Another argument against *creative archiving* is that the additional layer with the archivist's interpretation hinders rather than augments access to the data. This is indeed a risk when such heavy interpretation becomes the core of the archival process. There are two answers to this: a) the archivist should be aware that the archive must be practical in some way and allow reasonably convenient tools to be used so that information retrieval is maintained as part of the archive's core functionality. However, this is not a risk of *creative archiving* only but an issue that archivists have to address regularly. b) It is technically possible to avoid the interpretation layer and allow the user to access raw data. In other words, the interpretation layer should not interfere with the data itself and if necessary the archival records can be accessed directly.

## 5.2 John Latham as an exception

Because John Latham could be considered an exception in the art world, given his science-related theory, one could argue that *creative archiving* can be implemented on his archive because there is scope to examine the artist's theory and enough material within the archive to inspire new classification systems. Although John Latham's position is indeed unique in art history, he is by no means an exception in terms of his artwork being articulations of theoretical ideas. Many artists, especially during the 20th century, base their art on a theoretical background. A recent study day at the Tate indicated that this is often true and that many artists consider archiving as part of their practice.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, applying *creative archiving* to artists' personal papers is possible for any archive and it offers great potential for future research work.

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. (a) Time-Base Roller, after John Latham. . (b) The basic (T) diagram, John Latham.  
Figure 2: Two drawings of the Time-Base Roller

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## Notes

[1](#)Cook, 'What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift.'

[2](#)Muller *et al.*, *Manual for the arrangement and description of archives*.

[3](#)Meehan, 'Rethinking Original Order and Personal Records.'

[4](#)Jenkinson, *A manual of archive administration*.

[5](#)If the volume of output is possible to be processed, which is often the case with artists' archives, then perhaps such claim is pointless because material should not need to be discarded.

[6](#)Booms, 'Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage:' Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources.'

[7](#)Cook continues his account of the development of the archival profession by highlighting various problems emanating from the development of computing as well as the fundamental changes introduced by digital files. He concludes his paper with re-employing the past practices to address these new computer-related problems.

[8](#)Hardiman, 'En mal d'archive: Postmodernist Theory and Recordkeeping,' 31.

[9](#)*Ibid.*, 29.

[10](#)Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*.

[11](#)Douglas and MacNeil, 'Arranging the Self: Literary and Archival Perspectives on Writers' Archives.'

[12](#)John Latham makes similar remarks with his work in the 'Observer' series mentioned in section 4.

[13](#)Harris, 'Something is Happening Here and You Don't Know What it is: Jacques Derrida Unplugged,' 136.

[14](#)Schwartz, 'Having New Eyes: Spaces of Archives, Landscapes of Power,' 3.

[15](#)Harris, 'Law, Evidence and Electronic Records: Strategic Perspective from the Global Periphery.'

[16](#)Ketelaar, 'Archives as Spaces of Memory,' 13.

[17](#)*Ibid.*, 17.

[18](#)*Selection* in personal papers is undertaken by the creator during his/her life when choosing to keep or discard a document and does not necessarily concern the archivist who often receives the material at a later date.

[19](#)T. Cook, 'Electronic records, paper minds: the revolution in information management and archives in the post-custodial and post-modernist era,' 439 and Schwartz and Cook, 'Archives, records, and power: The making of modern memory.'

[20](#)Douglas and MacNeil (*op. cit.*) explain how such knowledge and experience can be used for rebuilding original order and description for incomplete archives.

[21](#)If we consider the Internet as the ultimate archive, all other archives are disadvantaged within it, hence the struggle of online content providers to stand out.

[22](#)An example of such interpretation is described in section 4.

[23](#)[www.fedora-commons.org](http://www.fedora-commons.org) (accessed 27 June 2011). Fedora allows the storage of digital files alongside their metadata. This can scale from basic Dublin Core metadata to any level of complex metadata, offering flexibility to the archivist while adhering to a standardised approach to managing the archive. Repositories such as Fedora offer a wide range of different methods of presenting data. Depending on the available resources one can build on the presentation layer to enhance visually the archivist's interpretation of the archive. Already structured systems make that possible to archives with fewer resources (e.g. Islandora - [www.islandora.ca](http://www.islandora.ca), accessed 27 June 2011)

[24](#)[www.drupal.org](http://www.drupal.org) (accessed 27 June 2011). Drupal can be used in combination with an existing repository such as Fedora or function as a mini-repository itself, which is perhaps more suitable for smaller applications. Again it offers great flexibility in the management and presentation of the content while allowing for standards to be used for managing the archive. Drupal has been used for *creative archiving* in the case study described in section 4.

[25](#)Walker, *John Latham: The Incidental Person - His Art and Ideas*; Latham, *Report of a Surveyor*.

[26](#)Hudek and Velios, *The Portable John Latham*, 64.

[27](#)Latham, Logsdail and Lisson Gallery, *John Latham: Least Event, One Second Drawings, Blind Work, 24 Second Painting*, 6.

[28](#)Latham, *State of Mind: John Latham*, § 3.3.

[29](#)Latham, *Time-Base: And Determination in Events*, 16.

[30](#)Walker, *op. cit.*, 50.

[31](#)*Ibid.*, 47-49.

[32](#)Velios and Gould, 'Applying Artists' Methodologies to Archiving: a Case Study of John Latham's Archive.'

[33](#)Hudek, *Sun Times*.

[34](http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae)Ligatus, [www.ligatus.org.uk/aae](http://www.ligatus.org.uk/aae) or through [www.ligatus.org.uk/jla](http://www.ligatus.org.uk/jla) (accessed 27 June 2011).

[35](http://www.ukat.org.uk)UK Archival Thesaurus (UKAT), [www.ukat.org.uk](http://www.ukat.org.uk) (accessed 27 June 2011).

[36](#)A further publication outlining this work is planned.

[37](#)Velios, 'The John Latham Archive: an on-line implementation using Drupal.'

[38](#)David Bachelor *et al.*, How artists construct their archives and document the artistic process, session in *Archiving the Artist Study Day*, Tate Britain (12 June 2009), organised by ARLIS UK & Ireland, 2009. For further details, see <https://www.tate.org.uk/britain/eventseducation/symposia/17470.htm> (accessed 10/07/2011).

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