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HOLES IN THE ARCHIVE – TO FILL OR TO LEAVE, THAT IS THE QUESTION...

Jo Melvin

ABSTRACT Holes in the archive – to fill or to leave, that is the question facing the researcher. The archive contains holes caused by lack of information. The dilemma of what to do when there is a missing link or a hole in evidence, generates new lines of thinking for knowledge production. Lacking hard facts leads to different research tactics, following hunches, reflexive and critical stock taking, asking questions and undertaking interviews. In conducting this process anecdotes surface. These accounts are often perceived to be trivial and of marginal research interest. In contradistinction, I assert the reverse, these hand-holds conjure the possibility of new animations. Penetrating the substrate, or as I prefer, 'substrata', is like plummeting the archive. This paper presents case studies from Peter Townsend's editorial archive of *Studio International* magazine where I have employed tactical and dynamic investigative processes.

KEY WORDS

PETER TOWNSEND
STUDIO INTERNATIONAL MAGAZINE
ARCHIVE
RESEARCH PROCESSES
ANECDOTE
GOSSIP
SUBSTRATA
ITEM

HOLES: PENETRATING THE SUBSTRATA When I first heard about the Substrate symposia symposium, I immediately started to think about how the term provides a metaphorical framework for my research strategies. What is particularly salient is how the word, 'substrata' conjures and combines various interpretative referents. These range from layers of geological formation under the surface of the earth's crust and, one wonders, if all layers below are defined as 'substrata', to a metaphorical way of linking interfaces, either as horizontal networks between people and events, or as a 'catch all' to express the matter as well as the fissures and the cracks between them. A line of thinking directly related to my research is the notion of penetrating the substrata because this is like plummeting the archive. Penetration punctuates the surface to create holes, rupturing the surface and reconfiguring linearity. The archive is a site to be excavated and by digging through documents and the consequent emerging questions, I surmise, ventriloquize and draw conclusions.

The penetrating action in the archive is one form of a 'hole'. Another form is the lack or absence of connecting data, when information is missing, mislaid, forgotten or overlooked. However both these 'hole' characteristics serve to disturb the substrata and cause its reconfiguration. Substrata also suggests the presence of invisible links and layers operating below or beyond what can be seen in the immediate, which may or may not function independently from the surface layer. The term invites paradoxical interpretation and juxtapositions of metaphorical matter, which lends itself favourably to the look of an archive with its piles and sheets.

This paper is an extended version of the talk I gave in the substrata symposia held at CCW Graduate School between February and May 2014. It addresses the correlations between the archive as a resource that contains, either materially or by allusion, detritus or waste products. Michel Foucault's writing (2002) on the excavation of knowledge, to dig, sift and to re-figure material informs my thinking although I do not explicitly discuss his work in this essay. I am also indebted to Gavin Butt's book, *Between You and Me*, for the way in which he enlists gossip as a method of triggering speculative investigation, leading to the possibilities of reinterpretation (Butt, 2005). Butt's identification of two strands of argument and exploration trigger my enquiry's starting point. These are 'gossip's role in history' and 'gossip's role as history' (Butt, p.9). Although I do not return to these markers in this essay, they are useful to bear in mind. I address research questions that arise through consulting documents in archives, in parallel with oral histories – which is to say, the conversations I have recorded with artists, editors, writers and museum or gallery personnel over many years. This work begins with my involvement in Peter Townsend's editorial papers of *Studio International* magazine 1965–75. I interrogate the diverse sources by bringing together exhibition catalogues, pamphlets and ephemera which in turn lead to other avenues of enquiry. The counterpoise between what appears to be trivial, or has been discarded, or even lost, is like the relationship between the hole and the earth removed during the process of its creation.

The metaphorical hole in knowledge, encountered in the archive, is an ellipse between information and the potential for substantiation, caused by a lack of material. The other important metaphorical aspect of the hole is how to define the displaced matter of its digging. And the process of research is akin to the act of digging, of sifting, retaining and editing out. By playful allusion to re-contextualizing ways in which waste becomes usefully productive I draw attention to the more profound concerns of the researcher when facing the realization of a dead end and that what is lost and overlooked may not be redeemable. Why and how this matters are interconnected and the researcher has a responsibility to respond to both.

ANECDOTE AND GOSSIP This essay considers how sifting through the archive unearths ephemera in the form of anecdotes or gossip. These lines of investigation create a new parallel network, potentially as complex as that revealed in the particular document examined. I tackle the problem of rhetorical holes exposed in research investigations. The process presents strategies to circumvent as well as to use the gap created by absences and demonstrates how this might privilege an emphasis on anecdotal history. I do not think of these ellipses (or holes) as dead-ends but instead as triggers to generate attention to what might otherwise have been overlooked. I am specifically engaged with recent histories and their archival traces. I write

with the researcher's paranoia to leave no stone unturned, when forming suppositions, and or, conclusions. Note the choice of outcome, a supposition might inform a conclusion but if a conclusion is to be effective it must be substantiated. Questions of how to substantiate the supposition surface continually for the researcher. This anxiety is common in the archive, where one seeks to find the authentic document – authentic in that it will resolve uncertainties. Anecdotes might be overlooked in favour of a scholarly presentation of hard facts derived from various sources and methodologies. Anecdotes are often to be found because the gaps revealed in the archive give leads to the present, generating interviews and conversations. The cracks that might have been forgotten surface because of an overlooked detail, or an unrealized project used as a trigger for an individual's recollection. The following is an example of such an instance. It concerns a small notational drawing by Naum Gabo. There was nothing obvious to indicate this but I had a hunch that there might be something interesting about it, which may or may not be contingent on the slightness of the paper (Fig. 35). When I asked him to elucidate, Townsend wrote:

Jo- this drg(?) [sic] is by Gabo. I asked him about his commemorative sculpture in a [Rotterdam] square and said I was surprised and sorry to see it [as] such a static piece. He said he was too and had wanted something with movement and hope, more in the manner of his endless wave (not correct name) in the Tate. And he took this sheet of paper and said "something more like this". Perhaps it should go in its own folder. (Naum Gabo, SI, Peter Townsend editorial papers, TGA 20028, London.) (Fig. 36).

I found the notation interleaved in one of Townsend's appointment diaries from 1977. This factual 'dating' avenue proved to be a red herring, because the occasion Gabo made the drawing was earlier, in 1966. Townsend's recollection identifies it as by Gabo. Townsend worked closely with Gabo in the lead up to his retrospective exhibition at the Tate Gallery which opened in March 1966. *Studio International* magazine's April issue was dedicated to Naum Gabo and Constructivism (Fig. 37). They worked together on an interview, reprinting the 1920 Realist Manifesto by Gabo and his brother Antoine Pevsner and a contextualizing artist statement. Townsend, in consultation with Gabo, commissioned younger artists, with whose work there was an implicit exchange of ideas to write a series of articles. This included John Ernest and Anthony Hill, both of whom were at that time teaching at Chelsea School of Art. Townsend shared Gabo's commitment to ideological as well as political revolution and the potential for publically sited sculpture to make a difference to the surrounding environment, and contribute to the society's day to day experience. The discussion of Townsend and Gabo's political commitment and affiliations is outside the scope of this essay, suffice it to remark that Gabo made the notation, as Townsend declared, to answer his criticisms of a publically sited work in a Rotterdam square. The work in question, *Untitled Z.T.* (1957) a 25-metre-high free standing sculpture was illustrated in the magazine (Thompson, 1996, p.133). *Studio International* hosted a special lunch for Gabo, his wife and the magazine contributors at the stylish restaurant, the Terrazza in Soho (Townsend, 1966). The restaurant was reputedly the first to abandon the tie as the standard dress code after a visit from the photographer Lord Snowdon, Bryan Robertson, Whitechapel art gallery director and the art critic John Russell to celebrate their collaborative and recent publication of the book, *Private View* (1965). The book profiled a cross generation of artists, dealers and art world luminaries who were established or up and coming in London in 1965

with portrait photographs and an informal biographical text on each subject. As Snowdon came to the restaurant wearing a roll neck sweater, the management jokingly told Peter Townsend they were considering instituting this look as the new requirement. It was on this occasion, during the lunch that Townsend remembered Gabo using a piece of scrap paper to illustrate his intentions for the Rotterdam sculpture (Townsend Melvin interview 1998).

I deliberately use an informal and discursive way of writing in order to draw attention to the weaving together of information from different sources which may be considered trivial. I would argue that the apparently slight detail speaks with potential for new insight. Derrida's use of Freud's mystic pad as an analogy that represents traces and layers of memory is a productive model to illuminate this approach (Derrida, 1988, p.13). The mystic pad is a child's drawing board that can be wiped and used again. However the layers of wax below the surface of the drawing or writing leave imprints and faint residual traces which might be slightly visible when it is next used. This creates a textured layer of impressions. It is a type of palimpsest. The term in itself is a useful metaphor to explore the processes by which archives modify meaning because it gives a visualization of how impressions and traces continually revise interpretations of meaning and context. It is liberating to point out that primary sources are open to revisions. The revisions might do violence to and change earlier interpretation which echoes the manner in which the original palimpsest, made from animal skin, needed to be scraped in order for the surface to be reusable.

These layers are seen years after the event, and an interview leading from their examination can draw other, different, even contradictory testimony. The many time-frames in the archive introduce further complexity but can animate it, and bring it to life relevantly in the present. The problem of how to frame questions in order to find answers to material is a perennial problem for the researcher. It is partly caused by a quixotic desire to square the circle – or to fill holes. The model I wish to adopt is non-hierarchical and transparent. I aim to point to the gaps and ellipses rather than attempt to smooth them out. As a method it segues from a tactical use of the space between document, anecdote and memory. It is malleable and utilizes this fluidity.

ARCHIVES, DETRITUS AND CHANCE Sometimes what becomes an archive begins as piles of undifferentiated documents. The reason the piles have been kept varies and it's a chancy business. The archive, strictly speaking is defined as such because of its systematic cataloguing structure which is designed to enable an item's retrieval. Archives are seen as the portal to temples of knowledge. Archives properly designated are hierarchical in structure and sometimes difficult to access. Gaining permissions to read the material can be complicated and persistence is a required characteristic for the researcher. This occurs in particular when the documents are not housed within a public institution or when they are deposited in a public institution but not yet catalogued. Is the archive abject? Like detritus? This is a question I like to keep afloat in my continuous interrogations. My first seriously sustained encounter with archives began in the early 1990s when Peter Townsend former editor of *Studio International* magazine and the founding editor of *Art Monthly* asked me for help in 'going through' (Townsend's euphemism) his papers. At the time these were variously stored in different locations across London. Margaret Garlake, art historian and editorial

assistant at *Art Monthly* recounted how these papers were stashed in bin liners under the office desks. She remarked on the bags' aura, and of how they emanated mystique and importance and although no-one knew what they contained, the portentous feeling was created. Townsend had another larger amount of bags in his two daughters' attic in North London and a further quantity under his bed. Properly speaking, at this point, Townsend's archive was not an archive but a collection of papers. These documents are correspondence, notes, articles, drafts and galley proofs, page pulls, postcards, photographs, tickets, appointment diaries and ephemera. These are now in Tate Gallery Archive and are in two collections. These are *Studio International, Peter Townsend editorial papers, TGA 20028*, deposited in 2002, and the other deposited after he died in 2006, is *Peter Townsend archive, TGA 20094*. (Fig. 38)

When I began the task of examining Townsend's documents I had a desire to slip away from the ownership of authorship that an articulation of the material would require. As if, somehow, it were possible to develop a strategy whereby the information and material in the archive – that is to say, Peter's papers, (I use his name here deliberately to indicate our friendship and to suggest for the reader the complexities involved by the interpersonal and subjective) might be rendered transparently readable, without Jo Melvin's inflection. At that time, my desire for anonymity stemmed from a naïve view that archives and documents (the printed word) are somehow clear readings and are in themselves pure. I, as researcher in this context, have an anthropological relationship to the material, where the subject and the object is subjectively perceived, because as protagonist in the interviewing process and thus garnering new material to create a related archive. This implicates and embeds me as a ventriloquist and presses me to address the responsibility of authorship. I have remarked, already, that the archive contains notes addressed to me. In a very obvious way this extends the material's time frame. There is another growing body of documents, sound files and ephemera which is initially contingent upon my questioning avenues arising in Townsend's editorial papers. This source material leads to projects, exhibitions and publications. One for instance, is the exhibition I'm preparing, *Five Issues of Studio International* which opens in February 2015 at Raven Row, London. This dynamic and exciting process shows the fluid exchange of ideas and their configurations are always open to re-invention.

THE DEATH OF RUBBISH: SERENDIPITY, GOSSIP AND ANECDOTE The following case study shows how what might have been regarded as trivial and overlooked can become illuminating and cast new light on events, to give a different nuance and understanding of the context. In an anecdotal fashion it re-situates the networks between people and illustrates how a causal exchange of ideas can become a tool and instrumental in examining their influence and effect. In turn this adds another layer of interpretation. In 1970, Jonathan Benthall sent Peter Townsend an article called *The Death of Rubbish* by Michael Thompson, published in *New Society* on May 28th of that year. The sub-heading read: 'People have usually seen society on a vertical model, like the digestive tract, with rubbish like excrement at the base. This could be changing.' (Thompson, pp. 916–7). The transfiguration of rubbish has proceeded so far that waste and detritus are read as signs of illumination and commercial value. Thompson developed this position in his book, *Rubbish Theory: the creation and destruction of value* (1979). The book became very popular and although long since out of print, it is evidently still in demand because copies command a high price

from specialist book dealers. The investigation of rubbish, known as ‘garbology,’ to see whether items of saleable value might be among the trash has developed as a result of this observation. It is from the discards of former civilizations that archaeologists have reconstructed much of what we know about the past, and it is through discussing the phenomena of how our society deals with rubbish that William Rathje and Cullen Murphy expose domestic shopping to provide a mirror of the typical behavioural patterns of today (Rathje and Cullen Murphy, 2001).

Thompson’s article refers to William Burroughs’s character teaching his ass [sic] to speak (the talking asshole routine in *The Naked Lunch*) where he instructs it with an unnatural knowledge and productivity. Shit is transformed into a use value, the commodity value of words, and knowledge. Thompson drew indirectly on the anthropologist, Mary Douglas’s designation of ‘dirt’ as ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas 1991, p.33). Benthall was working as an exhibition organizer at the ICA, and had been taught by Mary Douglas in the anthropology department at UCL. He commented to Townsend how pleased he was in finding a ‘very good article by Michael Thompson’ in the second issue of *Art-Language* journal with the observation, ‘unfortunately it turns out his assessment of conceptual art is now about the same as my own.’ (Benthall 19/10/70). This was low in estimation. Thompson had also studied with Mary Douglas and Benthall described him to Townsend as her former student and ‘bright anthropologist’. Benthall’s regular column in *Studio International*, ‘Technology and art’, elicited irritation from two of Townsend’s editorial assistants, Charles Harrison and Frank Whitford, formerly students together at the Courtauld Institute of Art, who generally did not agree with each other but on this occasion they both regarded it as an arbitrary designation for a column (Harrison, 28/3/07, Whitford, 25/10/06). In their view the methods used to produce the work should be intrinsic to any discussion of it and singling out technology isolated it, as if its application was unusual. John McEwen, another of Townsend’s editorial assistants introduced Benthall to Townsend, and to the magazine. He and Benthall had met at Eton and both went on to Cambridge University. These interconnections, inflections and disagreements are not declared in the ‘clean’ publication.

Thompson’s article refers to William Burrough’s character teaching his ass to speak (the talking asshole routine in *The Naked Lunch*). The idea of giving an arsehole the power of speech, resonates in the non-hierarchical approach to uncovering research material because it gives a voice to waste products, even if it is a form of ventriloquism. This voice from the depths emphasizes the horizontal aspect of substrata and identifies how the points of intersection surface through rupture.

*Did I ever tell you about the man
who taught his asshole to talk?
His whole abdomen would move up and down,
you dig, farting out the words.
It was unlike anything I ever heard.
Bubbly, thick, stagnant sound.
A sound you could smell.*

(Burroughs last accessed 3/11/14)

WHAT GETS LEFT OUT: What to keep and what to discard are editorial decisions
A SOUND YOU COULD SMELL common to any project. Research exposes what was
once confidential in letters, for example, in notes of ideas
committed to paper or recorded from conversations. Often these documents reveal the dirty side: art’s interpersonal connections, passions, opinionated reactions, anecdotes, hearsay and gossip. It is this kind of dirty matter which gives the archive its peculiar status, and distinguishes it from the ‘clean’ publication. Often overlooked, the dirty or the banal can invigorate. It is transformative in its effect. Reinforced by its new value, which I am asserting is caused by a dirty gossipy register, the changed status of the archive’s matter adds inflection, and nuance to the historicized account and by establishing a vivid reconnection, it reanimates the original product and purpose of both.

There is a great deal more than the magazine as text, not simply in the authors’ copy and all the hopeful unpublished submissions – this is another story – but in the signs of editorial intervention. Often these are naughty asides, humorous, such as the comment ‘do ya wanna bet?’ that Charles Harrison penned on John Baldessari’s NSEAD exhibition announcement card, which was filled with the statement: ‘I will not make any more boring art’, repeated as a school child’s lines (Baldessari, TGA 20028).

For a short time contributing editor, Frank Whitford, was the correspondent in Berlin. On a PhD scholarship, he had given up a decent salary as one of the *Evening Standard* cartoonists for a thesis on German Expressionism he subsequently abandoned. He wrote to Townsend about his frustrations with academia’s alienation from the tangible experience of art. More than exposing personal frustration in their retelling as gossip or anecdote, the letters present a position that became one of the key components in editorial policy. This was hands on and pragmatic, as Townsend was far more interested in giving artists the magazine’s pages to use as they saw fit, than in commissioning art critics and historians to write theoretical explanations. Frank Whitford was the contributing editor who from the beginning of this period was not interested in theory. He recalled frequently dropping by the Museum Tavern at the end of the day to meet Townsend, who, as he described, ‘loved a gossip’ (Whitford, 25/10/06).

One such story Whitford recounted was an occasion in the Tavern when the poet and writer William Empson and Peter were exchanging recollections of their time spent together in China, drinking pints of Guinness with crème de menthe chasers. The magazine was going to print but Townsend would not allow the externally set schedule to impinge on a vital social exchange. I found it fascinating and amusing when Townsend explained that the Plough was the pub most favoured by the editorial office because its two entrances meant that the ‘conceptualists’ and the ‘formalists’ could arrive and leave through different doorways and meet him, seated in the middle easily accessible and visible from both sides of the pub.

Haphazard, incidental accounts are often excluded from historical perspectives. The circumstances surrounding Gabo’s notation, or indeed its attribution, would not have been possible without intervention. Jonathan Benthall’s sending Townsend a copy of Michael Thompson’s *The Death of Rubbish* is a serendipitous instance and it is a device used to substantiate this reading. These overlooked details provide a means of reliving the complexity of an event. This transfer of emphasis upsets normal

expectations of editorial authority. Townsend regarded his editorial role as akin to that of a conductor, never of a soloist (Townsend, 1975).

Both in the archive and by interviews the serendipitous encounter can provide more insight than seamless coherent written accounts. Haphazard and chance, combined with continual reflection directs my attempts to navigate among the paradoxes inherent in personal accounts of an occasion or situation, with the idea or ideals posited by it, and its various forms of documentation.

Anecdotes and gossip are too often cast out of academic writing as merely incidental to the event and its historical-material analysis. The main characteristic of gossip is that each person's account varies, if only slightly, and no objective version of events can be assembled. Much of my work relies on following leads from the ephemera that appear in the diverse archival material, resulting in interviews and their inevitable recourse to gossip. In his account of the editorial atmosphere at the *Partisan Review*, William Barrett noted that 'Certainly people gossip; the main topic of conversation as Jane Austen remarked is the failings of other people' (Barrett, 1982, p.45).

The anecdotal is a handhold with making sense of research; its necessary subjectivity animates the personal. This method demonstrates how the researcher can become entangled in the layers of communication in a particular document. Far from obscuring, the flimsy and fragmentary accounts provided by anecdote illuminate evidence of the anxieties inherent in artistic practice and other concerns central to editorial policy.

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