

CONTEMPORARY ART BANK MGCC

Artists' documentary collections: funds of potential relationships.

Synopsis: Based on a presentation of the BAC - Contemporary Art Bank, and the work that is being developed there, examples will be given of how the various approaches to archives and artists' collections are converted into unconventional methodologies, namely for curatorship and research, sometimes enhancing new ways of seeing and reading the works and the narratives already woven in their respect.

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First of all, I would like to situate the point of view from which I speak and the position I hold, regarding the issue of artists' documental collections, which to all intents and purposes, as a whole, constitute data banks and archives. The Contemporary Art Bank is an archive that gathers documentary collections from artists and other professionals in the area, with the ambition of becoming a reference research centre. And, like all archives, what at first sight defines them is that they are, they institute and they contain within themselves a fund of potential relationships. This idea of there being a matter in potency, which could be thought of as a magma, within an archive where relationships can be forged and connections of various kinds can be interwoven, is not foreign to the activity of research and curatorship. Therefore, the creation of the Contemporary Art Bank and its construction and structuring from scratch was naturally a challenge for me and for the team: Pedro Faro, who structures it and technically and scientifically directs it with me, and the archivists Marta Guerreiro and Stefanie Gil Franco, who catalogue and process the materials. For me, in particular, this challenge is associated with my background as a researcher, in an academic and theoretical sense, but also with the more practical aspect of curating - which in itself does not dispense with a component of reflection and theoretical research.

Thus, in this place/position in which I find myself:

- I assume the practice (the contact, the proximity with the materials) as the fundamental basis of all the work,
- I believe that theoretical research involves a practice, based on its own methodologies and processes,

- I manage the execution and the practical implementation of projects, setting up and consolidating structures (at a technical and scientific level, a human resources level, a budgetary level, etc.),

- I don't dismiss curation and the effective relationship with the spaces,

- I see the proximity to artists/other professionals and fields of knowledge as an added value.

Now, within the scope of these assumptions, I will try to argue that databases formed by artists' documentary collections, just like any other archives, only exist when they are set in motion, when they are experimented on, stirred, turned, connected, and when relations are forged between their various materials.

Before that, they may be an amalgamation of precious or innocuous, tidy or indistinct materials, but always an amorphous mass, which does not exist *per se*. Their agglomeration comes into existence in other forms - the form of discourses and contradiscourses, maps and other appearances - when it is experienced, when someone puts their materials to the test and simultaneously puts themselves to the test. When someone dives into a spoil or a set of spoils, tinkering with them, testing them and testing themselves. In this sense, the archive or databases are tactile, practical and testable, and only exist when they are activated.

Now, from this point of view that I occupy, which is that of doing, I argue that to delve into an artist's documentary, it is necessary to start from the principle that each case is different from the others, each case presents its own particularities and that there is not a single work or research methodology applicable to all cases. On the contrary, each collection, like each work of art, like each support, is made of a specific material and therefore requires a particular form of approach that is often indicated by the qualities of its body. Yes, the materials of the documentary collections, the various databases, also require forms of physical relationship: leafing through and unrolling, turning, looking again. They imply time and space. They require effort and singular concentration, concepts and ideas that emanate from their contents, and that will later prove indispensable to the task of associating images and words. They force us to read in the intervals. Thus, each collection implies opening drawers, leafing through dossiers, drawing pads, letters and various notes. And, also, cross-referencing, putting side by side, comparing, detecting gaps, sequences, saving things from rubbish and contempt. It is therefore fundamental to let ourselves be carried away by the material to be treated, sometimes without following or obeying methodologies, protocols and overly defined logical sequences.

In short, I am arguing that it is necessary not to let excessively defined norms safeguarding conservation criteria prevent some digression and some randomness in the experimentation of archives, in the approach to documentary collections, so that the relationships that are in potency in the funds of these archives may emerge and be critically announced.

This is how, sometimes, exhibitions are born, relationships between works, supports and themes that at first sight are disparate and that do not exist in the collections *per se*. This is how publications are born, with theses and dissertations, which do not exist *per se in* the archives and collections.

This is also the way to dialogue with the history of art, sometimes deconstructing its stabilised and predominant narratives, and forming alternative perspectives, which in the archives and the spoils are not written yet.

To enter into the spoils and into the archives, I would say, like the French philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman in *L'image ouverte, Motifs de L'incarnation dans les Arts Visuels*, that it is necessary to recognise the existence of a non-knowing / not-knowing, suggesting that in the research process there is always a fraction that remains to be known, that all knowledge involves a non-knowing / not-knowing.¹

There are several thinkers from different fields of research, particularly philosophy, who refer to this space of not-knowing as a space of openness, as a possibility for the emergence of new knowledge and the structuring of new representations.

In *Difference et Repetition*, Gilles Deleuze states that: "*it is necessarily at this point that we imagine we have something to say. We only write on the edge of our own knowledge, on this extreme edge which separates our knowledge and our ignorance and makes one pass into the other. It is only in this way that we are determined to write. To overcome ignorance is to transfer writing to a later stage or, rather, to make it impossible. Perhaps we have there, between writing and ignorance, a relation even more threatening than the relation generally pointed out between writing and death, between writing and silence.* »²

This is not a "confession of impotence" on the part of researchers and thinkers. What can be stated is that the recognition that all knowledge involves a not-knowing, a flaw, an opening, is precisely the assumption that (artistic) spoils or deposits of materials are banks and funds of relations in potency, which do not exist until they are set in motion, shock and relation.

That is, they do not exist until they are put into practice, until they are woven, until they stand out and are given form in a text, in a book, in the space of an exhibition, in a lecture at a conference, in a performance, etc. Until that happens, they remain only an amalgam of unrelated objects and materials and, therefore, they only exist in potency.

Against the informal (but careful) experimentation of archives, I could invoke here the museological use of collections, and also the archival and classificatory drive, often "colonising",

¹ George Didi-Huberman, *L' image ouverte, Motifs de L'incarnation dans les Arts Visuels, Le temps des images*, Gallimard, Paris, 2007.

² Gilles Deleuze, *Diferença e Repetição*, Relógio d'Água, 2000, p. 38.

as Ana Bigotte Vieira suggests in *O que é o Arquivo?*, of contemporary museums in relation to the collections they hold.³

Sometimes museological institutions, also due to their weight and representativeness, take over their collections with a closed, unidirectional vision, of closed and uniaxial readings - something that we have tried to avoid and deconstruct at the Atelier-Museu Júlio Pomar since almost a decade, and that we try not to impose on the Contemporary Art Bank.

Since the focus here is on the Contemporary Art Bank, it is only fair to say that the collection that was received at the Atelier-Museu Júlio Pomar was always (or pursued in this attempt) a reason to open up and enhance readings on the work of the artist and his peers, avoiding enclosing them in already constructed and stabilised narratives.

I mentioned this case to say that museums and their archives (such as the Atelier-Museum), or archives and research centres (such as the Contemporary Art Bank) also have ways of practicing, they require practices and renewal of methodologies. In this context, it should be considered useful that their approach and research be carried out by professionals from different fields of knowledge, so that different methodologies become contaminated by each other, invading other fields, expanding and avoiding crystallizations of form and content.

Naturally conceived in this way, an (artistic) database is not the sum of what one has preserved and wants to show of an artist, a work, a context or an artistic system.

A database is defined (and is continually being defined) by the potential relations that a certain researcher and author draws and weaves within this database, constructing senses and meanings from the present time, from its actuality, where it is also inserted. Nothing of neutrality is presented in this path. There is nothing neutral about an investigation, an act of curatorship, the publication or disclosure of the results of a study based on collections and archives. Of course, questions of ownership and authorship (authority) of the materials and of the research produced from the archives arise, which I will refer to later on in relation to the concrete and technical presentation of the Contemporary Art Bank.

Throughout my experience as an academic researcher and later as a professional and researcher associated to institutions, I could bring numerous examples of what, in practical terms, can result from the practice of archives and documentary collections. However, from these experiences of a diverse nature, it is sufficient to point out that it was from consulting the documentary and artistic collections of Júlio Pomar that, in the Atelier-Museum, the (re)edition of the critical texts of the artist, written and published over more than 70 years, was given rise. These texts have

³ Ana Bigotte Vieira, *What is the Archive?*, Documenta, Lisboa, 2018, p. 121.

followed the history of art and its developments, sometimes taking strong positions by the artist against the regime or the *status quo*, on the medium of art, among other themes.

At other times, direct work or research in the collections of Júlio Pomar led to the discovery of notebooks of drawings in the drawers of his studio, giving rise to an understanding of the importance of drawing and the working processes developed by the artist until the paintings were made, motivating exhibitions based on the relationship between means, previous approaches and works in painting surfaces.

Another example I might point out here has to do with the discovery of a set of images referring to destroyed works, with an almost abstract content, which motivated, in the context of an exhibition alluding to the theme, the publication and divulgation - authorised by the artist himself - of photographs of works that the artist (of a realist affiliation) disowned. This gesture would obviously have remained submerged in his career if his documentary collection had not been made available.

This documentary collection will also give rise, in the near future, to the publication by the Atelier-Museum of the interviews that the artist gave during his lifetime and which the museum will compile and republish. On the subject of interviews, which are generally common material to all documentary collections, it should be mentioned that the Atelier-Museum has also developed a collection of in-depth interviews, of which eight volumes have already been published and others are in preparation. These documents are inherently concerned with bringing to the forefront the artist's own voice and his testimony, and today they also constitute a documental collection, like all the catalogues produced by the museum. The museum is gradually leaving traces for future archaeologies.

These are materials that also show the production of contents that materialise and give form to relationships previously in potency, that converge to increase the documentary collection of the museum and the artist, and that may also be developed in the Contemporary Art Bank with the adequate support and format.

One possibility to be considered, still in the future, and which could be proficient, is the connection or association of the Contemporary Art Bank to the CML Contemporary Art collection, considering that this archive or "research centre" could find a specificity associated to the collection that the municipality is building, as well as to its own authors, problems and contexts.

This articulation between the two structures could then transform the Contemporary Art Bank in a more dynamic entity, preventing it from becoming an archive of spoils, disconnected from reality and the present moment, a sum of documents that would preserve a watertight idea of culture and a closed, monolithic identity.

Although its main function is to record and conserve, from this point of view, the primary purpose of a database or archive such as the Contemporary Art Bank would be to enhance and provide the data necessary for the transformation of discourses, in a relationship with practice, to productively affect the observation and experimentation of works of art, triggering the multiplicity and polyvalence of the senses they carry.

Databases, i.e. archives, with their collections, thus constitute productive funds of knowledge which, when activated, may give rise to: unsuspected/unusual relationships between works and authors, reconstitutions of historical aspects and contexts, in their scientific, procedural, financial, epistemological, political but also affective intricacies.

At a more circumstantial and practical level, namely for curators, the documents that integrate these collections and data banks may serve to clarify aspects of the works' montages, or may allow for their entire reconstitution. Sometimes, access to the work's projects, photographs or assembly diagrams (existing in the archives) are the only "locus" of the work's existence, because it may have no existence other than documentation and registration.

This is the case of the works of José Barrias and Ana Vieira, which I mention here in passing, whose heirs of the respective estates resorted to the BAC, for cataloguing the documentary estate (in the case of Ana Vieira) or consultation and technical advice (in the case of José Barrias). José Barrias left a work that can be considered projectual and fragmentary in nature, under continuous construction, only existing when materialized in an exhibition space, and only then acquiring a fixed and stabilized form. Otherwise, it is a set of fragments in potency. Documentation is therefore fundamental to understand how a certain work is given form in an exhibition space. This means that through the various objects and fragments kept in the studio we can ascertain what forms it might take in the future.

As far as Ana Vieira's work is concerned, given the need to redo her installations in order to document them in detail and, subsequently, to lend them for exhibitions, including international ones, it has proved indispensable to consult documentation and work projects and, in the absence of elements, to resort to oral and written testimonies from professionals who worked with the artist.

In the archives, one can also find clues to the whereabouts of certain lost works, which are indispensable for, among other things, the production of catalogues raisonnés, exhibitions, etc. Of course, in the midst of so much information and material, the archives may become unviable or unmanageable, but to prevent this from happening at the Banco de Arte Contemporânea, we have internal and external collaborators who give a first order - that is, they weave the first relationships between the materials - accommodating the elements that make up the collections and proceeding to a first sorting. The relationships that may arise from this are then set in

motion and may benefit museologists, artists, historians, academics, curators, art critics, publishers and other interested professionals and scholars.

I conclude this introduction in order to succinctly, but concretely, present the Contemporary Art Bank saying that the archive and the collections only exist as power. When we activate them through different modalities and from different areas of research (art history, critical theory, curatorship, artistic and academic practice) we create new epistemological and affective territories, that is, new possibilities of representation and wide horizons of understanding. In doing so, linear and preponderant, stabilized historical narratives are interrupted, with consequent omissions and occultations - often oppressive ones.

It means that when these relations are activated (in potency in archives and spoils) a complex interpenetration of space and time takes place, and a political and social critique of the space in which we live and represent ourselves takes place. This critical construction is political and has political consequences.

In this regard, Michel Foucault recalls in *L'archéologie du savoir* that *"the different works, the dispersed books, the whole mass of texts that belong to the same discursive formation - and so many authors who know and ignore each other, criticise each other, invalidate each other, plagiarise each other, meet each other again, without knowing it, and obstinately interweave their singular discourses in a web of which they are not the masters, of whose whole they do not perceive and whose dimensions they measure poorly, all these diverse figures and individualities do not communicate only through the logical sequence of the propositions they advance, nor by the recurrence of themes nor by the obstinacy of a significance transmitted, forgotten, rediscovered; they communicate through the form of positivity of their discourse"*.⁴

It is worth taking the risk, because we too, each one of us, as an individual but also a collective being, are not one and the same all the time. We are and we transform ourselves at every moment, just as when we delve into the spoils and the archives.

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The **Contemporary Art Bank** results from a protocol signed between the CML, EGEAC, the Fundação Carmona e Costa and the Instituto de História de Arte da Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa in 2018.

Under the management of EGEAC - Empresa de Gestão de Equipamentos e Animação Cultural de Lisboa and particularly under the coordination of the Atelier-Museu Júlio Pomar since 2019, its mission is to receive, treat, conserve and study documentary and artistic collections, owned

⁴ Michel Foucault, *A Arqueologia do Saber*, Almedina, Coimbra, 2005, p. 171.

by historians, art critics, artists, or their legitimate heirs, active since the 2nd half of the 20th century. The collections received are potentially composed of fundamental works and documents for the understanding of contemporary art. They come from ateliers, offices or reserves of these professionals, not always in appropriate conservation conditions, often at risk of being lost or dispersed. They constitute a heritage that deserves to be studied, preserved and disseminated. The materials in question involve texts, studies, drawings, sketches and projects of works, completed or not, photographs and negatives, letters and correspondence, documents of various kinds that help to contextualise the artist's work and the relationship with other artists, essays by commissioners and critics, catalogues, written and visual materials related to the work of observation and substantiation of the artistic reality.

The collections that the artists, their rightful heirs or other owners wish to have worked on by the Bank of Contemporary Art are submitted to its Advisory Council, composed of specialists, who give their opinion on the relevance and on the physical and material possibility of receiving and processing the collections in question on the premises where the archive is based.

Within this scope of work already defined, the Contemporary Art Bank aims to establish itself as:

- A research and investigation centre of excellence, with the possibility of receiving trainees/collaborators/researchers, providing them with research work in a real context.
- A source for historians, theorists, curators and other professionals from various fields of knowledge, promoting different ways of approaching and dealing with archives/funds.
- A centre for the production of content/knowledge that can be transformed into publications and/or exhibitions.

The integration of a new collection requires a prior diagnosis and often begins in the studios, offices, homes or other places where the collections are to be found, and is then developed and completed at the premises of the Contemporary Art Bank.

The nature of the work to be done is defined after the diagnosis has been made and may include:

- a) inventory,
- b) catalogue,
- c) record (photograph, scan, photocopy, etc),
- d) treat,
- e) accommodate and pack,
- f) insert in a database;
- g) study,
- h) divulge or publish.

Regarding the dissemination of information and contents of the collections, it is worth mentioning that there are constraints regarding copyrights, use of images and information in lectures/publications (academic or otherwise) that should be considered individually.

I mentioned earlier, regarding the non-neutrality of research, curatorship and publications produced from the collections, that questions of ownership and authorship of the materials and research arise from this, but also (simultaneously) control of access to data, levels and classifications. The establishment of these differentiated accesses (access: free, broad, limited, restricted, forbidden) involves in itself restrictions and hierarchies, which should be equated and re-equated frequently by the institutions themselves, under penalty of becoming obsolete, castrating or invasive, destructive of the archive itself and of its inherent quality of power. This is reduced when confined by too many norms and limitations.

This is a fine and sensitive balance, a tension that is played out and must be continually reassessed between the power of the institution and the potential user, so that the excess of standardisation and regulation - which must exist in order for the collections to be accessible - does not demean users and does not make those collections and the knowledge that is encapsulated in them inaccessible.