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THE SECRET

THE OFF
BULLDOGS

06 INTRODUCTION
Michael Benedikt with Kory Bieg

18 OBJECTS
Kory Bieg

30 OBJECT-ORIENTED ONTOLOGY AS A DESIGN PHILOSOPHY
Ian Bogost

48 FOLDS OF BEING: ACTS OF ARCHITECTURE
Levi R. Bryant

60 AESTHETICIZING THE LITERAL: ART AND ARCHITECTURE
Graham Harman

70 A CRITIQUE OF OBJECT-ORIENTED ARCHITECTURE
Patrik Schumacher

90 RESPONSE TO SCHUMACHER
Graham Harman

98 THIS OR THAT?
Craig Dykers

112 ARCHITECTURE IN THE SECOND PERSON
Michael Benedikt

134 ARCHITECTURAL SPECULATION AND RADICAL SINCERITY
Keith Ragsdale

152 WHAT “NO!” MEANS FOR ARCHITECTURAL CONSERVATION:
THE SECRET LIFE OF DRAWINGS IN COLLECTIONS
Albena Yaneva

170

OBJECTS: A DESIGN COMPETITION

SPHERE WITH NESTED FIGURES **Variable Projects**

ARTIFACTS OF ASSEMBLAGE **Matt Hutchinson**

DRIP FORMATIONS **Eithar Algebail and Hiba Salim**

CLEPSYDRA ANON **Chad Connery and Anca Matyiku**

A SILENT AGENT DOING ITS THING **Sari Palosaari**

SNELL'S WINDOW **Chicago Underground Practice**

OBJECTIVE PERSPECTIVE **Freeland Buck**

AUTOMONTAGE 1.B **John Cunningham**

WHERE IS THE REAL TORNADO? **GRO Architects**

BREAD BONDAGE **Dana Čupková and Ben Snell**

ALMOST NATURAL THING 5 **Faysal Tabbarah**

ANOTHER ROCK **Ellie Abrons and Adam Fure**

THE VESSEL **mcdowellespinosa**

THE HUMANIMAL RECORDINGS **Joris Komen**

THEATER OF LOST SPECIES **Future Cities Lab**

OBJECTS AS OTHERS **Adolfo Moreno**

IN TURN **Maxi Spina Architecture**

FOUNDATION AND GENERATION **Jules Chamberlain and Jonathan Mortimer**

A MANUAL OF (RE)PRODUCTION **Samira Daneshvar**

210

BIOGRAPHIES

WHAT “NO!”

ALBENA YANEVA

MEANS FOR

ARCHITECTURAL

CONSERVATION:

THE SECRET LIFE

OF DRAWINGS IN

COLLECTIONS

Montreal, 2014: the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA). I follow the chief curator, Giovanna Borasi, for a guided tour in the vaults. Silence. Sparkling floors—clinically clean. Dark, shiny corridors. We enter the lit vaults and the silence gets interrupted by the chatter of archivists gathered around a table. We follow Giovanna and we pause in front of the same table; a humble theorist of architecture, I glance at some drawings. “Very familiar!” I say to myself and before I finish mind-whispering it, I realize I am asking out loud: “Are these the Chandigarh...” [I can barely finish my sentence]...“drawings...” [my voice trembles]...“of Le Corbusier?” My fingers shiver in excitement as I imagine

reaching towards the drawings and touching them. The silence is interrupted again by an energetic and collective “No!” My descending hands freeze; my “architecturally” misled brain rebuffs any further thoughts; I can’t follow; I am lost.

I can still hear this “No!”

That moment at the vaults made visible for me the existence of a particular gathering of things and of archivists, curators, cataloguers, and visitors to the CCA like myself—whom I had not noticed before. Reminiscent of a “society of friends”¹ of architectural objects, we form a special grouping around the precious Chandigarh drawings of Le Corbusier (fig. 1).

We gather around objects of importance to the community of architects, believing that the objects can, in a way, respond to our admiration and answer our questions about architectural design and history. These drawings are not interpretable architectural objects per se. It is because there is a group of people for whom these objects *count* as interpretable, and who accordingly deal with them in a recognizable way, that the objects matter, that they talk back to us. The drawings are interpretable and describable only in the context of this particular society of friends. When they are in danger or are about to be damaged, a bell rings and a “lawyer” comes to represent them and speak on their behalf; a “No!” resonates in the room. A “No!” spoken by friends! “Friend” has here a legal connotation; friendship requires listening, understanding, reciprocation, and answering. Friends understand and are capable of representing and speaking on behalf of inanimate architectural objects; they define them by a set of assumptions and expectations about juridical capability. Yet, are architectural objects themselves not notoriously unresponsive? Can drawings talk back to us? Do they talk to cataloguers, curators, archivists, conservators, artists, and architects? If so, how? How is the society of friends of architectural objects being shaped by the practices of conversing with drawings, models, prints, and living files? The interdiction of my touch—the moment of “No!”—set an epistemological problem for me as an anthropologist. What counts as legitimate “communication” with the object’s desire to be known, or its maker’s? The “No!” that paralyzed my senses later caused me to reflect, and later yet to begin a research project on *the secret life* of drawings and models found in architectural archives and collections. The life of such objects, I felt sure, forms a substantial and constitutive part of the biography of architecture.

THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF ARCHITECTURAL ARCHIVES

Over the course of their careers architects produce, assemble, and share a massive number of visual and physical objects: correspondence, sketches and drawings, working

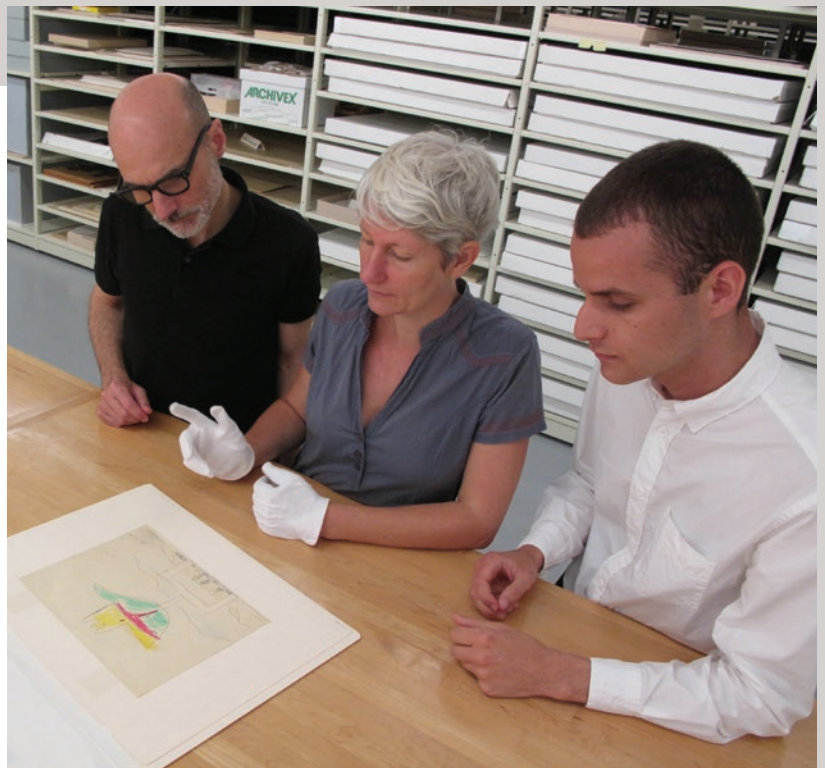


Fig. 1 Drawings of Le Corbusier. Copyrights, CCA.

1 Miguel Tamen, *Friends of Interpretable Objects* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

- 2 Francis X. Blouin and William Rosenberg, *Processing the Past: Contesting Authority in History and the Archives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Terry Cook, "What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift." *Archivaria* 43 (1997): 17–63; Richard J. Cox, *No Innocent Deposits: Forming Archives by Rethinking Appraisal* (Oxford: Scarecrow Press, 2004); Eric Ketelaar, *The Archival Image: Collected Essays*. (Hilversum, Netherlands: Verloren, 1997).
- 3 James Knight, "Architectural Records and Archives in Canada: Toward a National Programme." *Archivaria* 3 (1976): 62–72, 62.
- 4 Alan K. Lathrop, "The Archivist and Architectural Records." *Georgia Archive* 5, no. 2 (1977): 25–32, 25
- 5 Alan K. Lathrop, "The Provenance and Preservation of Architectural Records." *The American Archivist* 43, no. 3 (1980): 325–338.
- 6 Nicholas Olsberg, "Documenting Twentieth-Century Architecture: Crisis and Opportunity." *American Archivist* 59 (1996): 128–135.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 129.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 131.
- 9 Terry Cook, "Building and Archives: Appraisal Theory for Architectural Records." *American Archivist* 59 (1996): 136–143.

models and simulations, observational reports, reading notes, and drafts of papers or lectures intended for clients and sometimes larger audiences. Stored in archives, these materials are meant to become the foundations of design history. While the fate and politics of established archives is largely tackled in literature,² the process of making archives is rarely explored.

The everyday practice of the archivist has been a subject of research and analysis since the 1970s. James Knight noted at the time that the "Literature on the subject of architectural archives is virtually non-existent."³ This body of knowledge is more an elaboration of a disciplinary discourse—that of archival science—than an accumulation of empirical detail. Analysis of what it means to be an archivist of *architecture* tends to come from the archivists themselves, rather than from professional architects (practitioners and educators) or researchers interested in empirically examining the practices of archive making. As a result, the literature emerges from recollections and categorizations of archival practice, rather than from a moment-to-moment observation of how it's done, moves that might otherwise be missed. For all of its shortcomings, this literature shows the uniqueness of architectural materials. Dealing with them has implications for archival practice in general.

The architectural archive might pose various issues for an archivist: architectural records are valuable for a broad range of scholars, "architecture" denotes buildings as well as practices, and architects often do not maintain good records. Architecture as a practice, notes Alan Lathrop, is resistant to being archived as architects are "singularly adept in erasing their past."⁴ At the same time, there has been an increase in the sheer diversity and number of architectural documents and drawings that are needed to run a practice. Advocating the need to reflect more actively on the materials and technologies that architects use to produce records, Lathrop outlines ways of preserving them.⁵

Another noteworthy moment in the literature about architectural archives was a 1996 special issue of *American Archivist*. The introduction came from the then-Chief Curator of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, Nicholas Olsberg.⁶ Here the architectural archive serves as a category for a problem of practice, a problem that a conference at the CCA sought to resolve as they "set out to establish criteria (that) institutions... could use to develop common approaches to the documentation of architecture in the twentieth century."⁷ A critical first step was an analysis that "looks at the whole process of architecture and determines what gives evidence of its critical acts and movements."⁸ Architectural practice itself became the subject of discussion, and the conference listed principles, problems, and a new research agenda. The discussion included a reflection on the implications of architectural documents for the practice of appraisal, techniques for preserving architectural objects, and a documentation strategy. Standard archival theory faced unique challenges. In Terry Cook's 1996 article we see archivists unpacking the complexity of architecture as a specific connection between materials, aspects of practice, and firm and institutional contexts.⁹ Archival practice was now to belong to the discourse on architecture, alongside architecture's many other dimensions.

When the 1996 special issue of *American Archivist* took an empirical turn, it did so around case studies. Lathrop, for example, described the Northwest Architectural Archives with an eye for the appraisal decisions of the staff.¹⁰ Drawing on his experience with the archives of Bruce Goff and Louis Kahn, David De Long argued that the “archives of individual architects should be organized in a manner reflecting, or at least sympathetic to, the specific approach and method of the office in question.”¹¹ Referring to his own experience as an archivist, Gilles Ragot advocated for “the preservation of archival collections of ordinary architects.”¹² Large amounts of architectural material are necessary in order to resist the canonizing tendency of architectural history. What the archivists found in these case studies are singular moments of archival practice. The encounter between architectural and archival practitioners produced something that neither party could anticipate or repeat themselves.

Yet one aspect of archival practice does seem to lend itself to more general theorizing: the shift toward digital technology. William J. Mitchell examined the implications, which are: architects might not keep multiple versions of a single CAD file; digital files accessible over a network may not have artifactual value; and it is difficult to know how long media platforms and formats for storing digital files will last.¹³ Multiple authors point to one aspect of architectural practice: the existence of a building in different moments of its development through different kinds of documentation. A number of authors argue that in representing buildings that both *are* and *could have been*, architectural documentation has a unique, uncertain relation to history.¹⁴ Here, archival practice can respond to a particular tendency of architectural production, namely in preserving the records of buildings that never existed, reminiscent of unpublished books, unperformed music scores, sketches, and notebooks of artists.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, archival scholarship continued to look for the implications of architecture on the practice of archivists in general. This time, scholars’ interest converged on the question of architecture and digital documents. An explicit response to the 1996 special issue arrived in Laura Tatum’s 2002 article, “Documenting Design: A Survey of State-of-the-Art Practice for Archiving Architectural Records.”¹⁵ In it, Tatum reviews various contributors’ analyses of digital files while also referring to various conferences on digital materials. She argues that the preservation of digital records has received less emphasis than it deserves. Four years later, Ann Armstrong noted that there is still no consensus among archivists as to how to handle “born-digital” documents from architectural firms, even though CAD drawings are now central to architectural work.¹⁶ Responding again to Tatum, Kathryn Pierce surveyed a number of initiatives for preserving digital documents. To contribute to what is still a nascent body of knowledge, she conducted interviews and observations at one architecture firm in Austin, Texas, concluding that digital preservation is simply not a priority for architects.¹⁷ In Pierce’s fieldwork, as with archival scholars’ analyses at large, the interest seems to be in *grasping architectural practice* in order to mirror it within the practice of the archive.

10 Alan K. Lathrop, “Appraisal of Architectural Records in Practice: The Northwest Architectural Archives,” *American Archivist* 59 (1996): 222–227.
 11 David G. De Long, “The Historian’s View,” *American Archivist* 59 (1996): 156–164, 163.
 12 Gilles Ragot, “The Hennebique Archives: Toward a New Corpus for Contemporary Architectural History,” *American Archivist* 59 (1996): 214–220, 220.

13 William J. Mitchell, “Architectural Archives in the Digital Era,” *American Archivist* 59 (1996): 200–204.
 14 Alfred Willis, “The Place of Archives in the Universe of Architectural Documentation,” *American Archivist* 59 (1996): 192–198; Alice Carey, “The Importance of Construction Documents to Restoration Architects,” *American Archivist* (1996) 59: 176–184.
 15 Laura Tatum, “Documenting Design: A Survey of State-of-the-Art Practice for Archiving Architectural Records,” *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 21, no. 2 (2002): 25–31.

16 Ann R.E. Armstrong, “Architectural Archives/Archiving Architecture: The Digital ERA,” *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 25, no. 2 (2006): 12–17.
 17 Kathryn Pierce, “Collaborative Efforts to Preserve Born-Digital Architectural Records: A Case Study Documenting Present-Day Practice,” *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 30, no. 2 (2011): 43–48.

Thus, a 2010 special issue of *Log* was something of a departure. For some contributors, the question was less about what architectural practice means for archival practice and more about archival practice itself. In particular, contributors looked at the role of the archivist as it converges with the role of the curator. As Cynthia Davidson wrote in the editorial, “Once focused on collecting objects and their documentation, and the relatively unquestioned mode of display, [...the curator...] is now confronted with the expanded idea of the object and the limited space of the exhibition.”¹⁸ Many of the contributors discussed exhibitions rather than archives. Mirko Zardini, the director of the Canadian Centre for Architecture, wrote about the relationship between the archives of the CCA and the exhibitions it produces:

The character of CCA exhibitions is driven by the character of the CCA collection. While the collection may seem diverse and complex, it is coherent in its task of presenting architecture in a wider frame. The presence of very different media and heterogeneous materials is necessary to document and understand a project’s various components and interrelationships [...]. In this sense, an architectural collection is more like an archive than a fine arts collection.¹⁹

Here we see themes with forebears in earlier dialogue: the diversity of architectural practices and qualities and the heterogeneity of architectural materials. But the focus on the connection between exhibition and collection demonstrated a break from the concerns of the 1996 special issue of *American Archivist*. The upshot was this: *there is no self-evident technique for exhibiting architecture to the public*. Jean-Louis Cohen, however, disagrees: “If one subscribes to such a cinematic model, aiming at the sustained capture—or the rapture—of the audience’s attention in order to induce a certain response, exhibitions can by no means be limited to the methodical and scholarly correct unfolding of a “true story” following a biographical or a typological thread.”²⁰ As long as the emphasis is on shocking the viewer, Cohen says, “the job of the curator can no longer be confused with the one of the archivist or the registrar.”²¹ Instead, the curator engages in a “fruitful distortion of reality.”²² If the contributors to the special issue of *American Archivist* were concerned with the archive’s fidelity to architectural practice, Cohen as an architect-historian-curator argues that the poetic role of *distortion* is meaningful as well.

The problem of making architectural archives offers an opportunity for ethnography, the chance to identify the challenge that architectural practice poses for archival practice, and then to direct our attention to the nitty-gritty realities of archive-making in the field of architecture. Tracing the way architectural objects and documents *become* “archival units” requires us to pay close attention to the ways in which practicing architects understand their worlds, *and* to the ways in which we acquire knowledge about those worlds through the architectural objects that remain.

THE SECRET LIFE OF ARCHITECTURAL OBJECTS AT THE CCA

The CCA in Montreal holds one of the world's foremost international collections of drawings, plans, models, prints, and photographs of buildings, as well as the written archives and oral histories of individual architects. All of this material is accessible to researchers. The CCA collection was started by Phyllis Lambert, an architect by training (and a student of Mies van der Rohe) who was also a philanthropist and collector. She began a private collection of photographs in the 1960s, followed by prints and drawings, books, and various publications.²³ In the 1970s she founded the CCA and started collecting archival objects and other materials from many architects; she began by acquiring a body of work from Peter Eisenman. This acquisition was followed by others including the work of Aldo Rossi, Cedric Price, James Stirling, and Álvaro Siza.

The CCA collection is made out of heterogeneous, irreconcilable parts of the architectural past. There is something of the spirit of the early modern *Wunderkammer*²⁴ that reflects the character of the CCA collection: the multiplicity of objects it assembles, all unclassified at the start. There are three levels here: the CCA as an institution, the collection, and the character of the collection. *Wunderkammer* refers to the spirit of the collection; the collection contains a special assortment of heterogeneous things all arranged relationally. In the CCA collections, we witness the simultaneous appearance of design and society; architectural objects and social processes first rarefy, become less solid, and then merge. But how? The answer to this question requires ethnography: following the daily practices of record-keeping that constitute the work of the CCA, noting the details surrounding the moment by moment *processes* of collecting, preserving, cataloguing, maintaining, and showing objects. The ethnographic approach may well provide new insights about the know-how of archivists. Certainly it will unpack its politics, tracing the formation of the "societies of friends" that interpret the objects made and used in architectural practice, that give them significance, and that speak on their behalf. Questions need answering: To what extent do architectural archives reflect the nature of design as a collective endeavor not just among architects, in their various office roles and specialties, but among archivists, librarians, editors, curators, digital humanists, and conservators? Does thought of future history redound upon the present? How do practices of arranging (cataloguing, archiving, numbering) and taking care of objects (preserving, conserving, repairing, maintaining) produce structuring effects in an archive? How do these effects shape knowledge or generate meaning?

To answer them, I draw on ethnographic observation—inspired by Bruno Latour's actor-network theory, or ANT—of the daily practices of archiving. This entails following curators, conservators, cataloguers, archivists, technicians, registrars and others, accounting for the material and cognitive dimensions of their work, and visiting their labs, offices, vaults, exhibitions, studios, and workshops...in short, shadowing them in quotidian activities, just as I did the office of Rem Koohaas/OMA.²⁵ The ethnographic accounts of the CCA's "friends of architectural objects" are completed by a series of in-depth interviews. I also account for the various trajectories of the CCA objects and how they become entitled to "speak" about or on behalf of a building, an architect, or a

18 Cynthia Davidson. Untitled editorial. *Log 20* (2010).

19 Mirko Zardini, "Exhibiting and Collecting Ideas: A Montreal Perspective." *Log 20* (2010): 77–84, 81.

20 Jean-Louis Cohen, "Mirror of Dreams." *Log 20* (2010): 49–53, 50.

21 *Ibid.*, 51.

22 *Ibid.*, 51.

23 Pierre Chabard, "Between Collection and Mediation: Institutional Strategies Around Architecture in the Early 1980s," *The Cahiers of the National Museum of Modern Art*, no. 129 (Autumn 2014): 52–63.

24 Lorraine J. Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature, 1150–1750* (New York: Lone Books, 1998).

25 Ibena Yaneva, *Made by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture: an Ethnography of Design* (Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2009).

style. I also explore the role of specific events, such as openings and exhibitions, which often take curators back to the archives to rethink the structure, logic, and *raison d'être* of the archive itself.

WHAT “NO!” MEANS AT THE CCA

The “No!” I heard in the vaults followed me all the way through my ethnography of the CCA and meant a lot to the entire society of friends of architectural objects. It denoted an acute awareness of the importance of archives of all sorts, and therefore the need to protect them. Within that “No!” one can detect several distinct voices: “Don’t damage!”, “Don’t destroy the drawing!”, “We care!”, “We are aware of its importance!” Thus, two undertones slowly synchronised together: attention to preservation on one hand, and worry about destruction on the other. What suspended that innocent, iconoclastic gesture I was about to perform was a statement of care and love for the architectural objects. This outlined even more the awareness of the archival value of the Chandigarh drawings. It is precisely that subtle balance between preservation and destruction that defines the CCA as an institution; it also defines other institutions, but it is precisely the way each of them regulates that balance that makes them distinctive. Preserving and caring for fragile objects of architectural creativity is at the core of the curatorial and archival practices witnessed ethnographically at the CCA. Yet, witnessing the tempting dialectic relationship between both idolatry and iconoclasm as forms of preservation²⁶ makes us rethink the practices of architectural preservation where, very often, “value,” “usefulness,” or “interest” explain the cause of preservation of entire collections. Yet, the CCA is a special institution; it is not a museum, a place where exhibited objects are inseparable from the basic assumption that the objects signify something that the visitors see. While in some sets of practices the institution appears to be a place where objects of design creativity are reduced to meaning—and subsequently defined as precious, valuable, of archival importance, and where interpretation is performed—what truly defines this institution is its hybrid nature as a center of research excellence setting an important intellectual discourse on architecture, an archive and a collection that bears resemblance to a cabinet of antiquities.

If the purpose of a museum is to educate, glorifying a certain number of objects, the CCA pulls objects out of the dusty tranquility of storage and puts them on trial, challenging, reactivating, and re-actualizing them in a *diagrammatic way*. As Mirko Zardini, director of the CCA, often explained, “the exhibitions are tools for developing a cultural discourse and setting the intellectual position of the institution. They are not objectives in themselves, used to measure the success of the institution; in addition, through the exhibition the collection is being built; the CCA’s exhibits and research publications are *tools* for developing the collection of objects.”²⁷ Thus, in a paradoxical way, the CCA does not deal with a static *archive*, as a conventional history of architectural forms of expression, but rather with a *diagram* that puts into action a number of forces that will grow the archive: practicing architects are “invited to look at archives and to make sense of them”²⁸; researchers travel great distances to

use the archives; and curatorial teams rethink, reinterpret, and reappraise the CCA materials to produce more objects. In this activation curators, archivists, conservators, and others deal with bits of matter that are unfinished, unformed, and unorganized. The archive uses cartography as an abstract machine. Just like the “diagram that is profoundly unstable and fluent, constantly brewing matter and functions so as to constitute mutations,”²⁹ the CCA collection is never an immobile and inactive set of records, chronicles, objects, logs, and files. Rather, it constantly evolves and develops. Inter-social, and always becoming, it never represents a pre-existent world. Rather, it generates a new type of reality. The CCA *makes* history by dismantling the previous realities and meanings, and by creating many instances of emergence and creativity, of unexpected conjunctions of events occurring at the same time, of improbable continuums. The CCA, one might say, *doubles* architectural history.

The CCA started with a private collection, unlike most museums, whose appearances were historically accompanied by the presence of the state and the notion of Culture. The CCA has no national mandate, no marriage with the state. What the CCA collects is different from the objects collected by other institutions like the Netherlands Architecture Institute, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Fondation Le Corbusier. The specific CCA interest is in the intellectual production of architecture as a part of a general socioeconomic, political, and technological context—in the process of architectural experimentation and thinking, not so much in the built environment per se. Never was Phyllis Lambert interested in collecting or documenting the built environment, clarifies Martien de Vletter. This explains her interest in the Peter Eisenman archive, which contains very few built buildings, but a great deal of thought. “It is about experimentation; it is about thinking ‘in architecture,’”³⁰ reiterates de Vletter, and she sums up: “it is an archive of people that build less but think more.”³¹ At the CCA, more than anywhere else, the collected objects are marked by the essential transitoriness of architectural creativity. The process-oriented nature of the CCA collection—products of design thinking, experiments, and imagination, still freshly holding the traces of making—is reminiscent of the nature of the many objects I have witnessed in the last years as an ethnographer of architectural practices (OMA, Safdie Architects, and FOA/AZPML, among others). All these objects, as Mirko frames it, “offer enough material for the understanding of the evolution or the process of the architectural thinking in relation to the context.”³² They enter the CCA not just to be “contemplated” and “valued,” but also as resources that can ignite new ideas, as ways of nurturing further design creativity. The archive is not the grand finale of designers’ careers, marking gloriously the entrance of star architects, writers, clients, and practices into a memorable History of Architecture; it constitutes, rather, the “part of an active process.”

HOW OBJECTS TALK BACK IN CONSERVATION

To trace the secret life of drawings and other objects at the CCA, we must move from the vaults to the conservation lab, also on the ground floor. There I found myself

26 Tamen, 2001; Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel, *Iconoclasm: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002).

27 Interview of Albena Yaneva with Mirko Zardini, 15 June 2015.

28 Interview of Albena Yaneva with Giovanna Borasi, 18 June 2015.

29 Gilles Deleuze, *Fourcailt* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1986), 43.

30 Interview of Albena Yaneva with Martien de Vletter, 15 June 2015.

31 *Ibid.*

32 Interview of Yaneva with Zardini, 2015.



Fig. 2 The conservation lab at the CCA: lab atmosphere and equipment. Photo by the author.



Fig. 3 The conservation lab at the CCA: objects "waiting for treatment." Photo by author.

enchanted by the lab's quasi-scientific *modus operandi* (fig. 2). There is something puzzling in the environment, evoking the procedural technicality that the production of architectural models and drawings requires. At the same time, there is something dazzling, enigmatic, and undecipherable there. What we witness there under the microscopes of the conservators, between scalpels and chemicals, the magnifying glasses and the tracing paper, is a relationship between idolatry and iconoclasm. Yes, this is holy; yes, this (object) was just a tool. The environment of the conservation lab is reminiscent of a medical lab, where objects (tissue samples, blood) are treated like whole patients in need of special care (fig. 3). The use of quasi-medical terminology is striking too: conservators “examine” objects, “predict risks” (the danger of falling apart, of mold, of infestation), do “treatments” and “tests,” use “instruments,” plan “interventions,” take “care,” write “protocols” and “reports,” inscribe traces of tests, sign “decisions for treatment.” Karen Potje, the Head of Conservation, tells me without irony: “We are going to get a full health and security check of the objects.” On clean, white lab tables, under bright fluorescent lights, drawings and sketches, models and photographs, are spread out, carefully inspected, “examined,” and “diagnosed.” Reports of each object's undergoings and reactions are being carefully made. The object travels with this report (which, just like a medical record, registers all flaws and interventions). This record is necessary as it allows the objects to be inspected at the start, in the middle of, and at the end of an exhibition to ensure they have not changed. The conservation lab provides an environment where objects undergo a series of operations and gain a status of “better objectile health,” so “patients” can go back home in perfect health! “Home,” of course, means a box or a folder in the vaults, or a crate that takes them back to the institution they have been borrowed from.

Let us now follow the trails, treatments, and modalities of care.

DAVID, KAREN, AND ACTIVE THINGS

I follow David and Karen at work in the conservation lab and we talk about the challenges of architectural conservation, looking at specific aspects of their work. Karen tells me that there are chemical reactions happening in the lab. “That pile of blueprints over there is a pile of chemical reactions, really, potentially, and so they're still *active things* and adhesives involving chemistry, and you have to think about reactions. We're not doing scientific calculations particularly, but we still have to understand reactions between things.”³³ While I expect conservators to talk about the amazing way *architecture* straddles the worlds of art and science, I witness “active things” instead; I am alerted to chemical reactions happening on the site. I can now explain why, in the lab, I can see a number of strange creatures (like insects and bugs) or phenomena (like fumigation or oxidation) that remain remote to our understanding of architectural objects and the very culture of valuing objects with exceptional aesthetic properties. This is not about the conservation of buildings, recall, but of the material objects of architectural design thinking and practice. Karen and David explain to me that their “...job is to try to preserve the collections to make them last as long as possible.”³⁴

34 Interview of Albena Yaneva with Karen Potje and David Stevenson, 18 June 2015.

33 Interview of Albena Yaneva with Karen Potje, 18 June 2015.

While they don't consider themselves restorers, and they are "not trying to make things look like new," they rather try "to keep things from deteriorating, make them secure."³⁵ So volatility–rarefaction–is the mode of existence of architectural objects in the conservation lab, and the drive to stabilize this precariousness guides the work of conservators. In the painstaking process of conservation, they deal with the delicate and unstable character of drawings and models; they detect fragility, overcome risks, treat, and intervene to stabilize the objects in a complex and lengthy process that bears remarkable resemblance to the work of care-takers in a medical context. "Stabilization" tells a lot about the character of the institution. As a research-oriented institution, the CCA's conservation and curatorial practices are focused on "stabilizing the material" rather than increasing the aesthetic value of objects. In this research-type logic, it is important for objects to keep the traces of life—of experimentation, deterioration, and decay—rather than to engage in a new cycle of anaesthetization that would make these objects pristine.

CONDITION REPORTING

Sometimes a large number of objects flock into the conservation lab, especially when there is a big exhibition planned at the CCA. Conservators are surrounded by as many as three hundred objects at once. Some of them "speak" immediately of the need for treatment: as soon as the box, crate, or folder is opened, their odors or other chemical reactions fill the air. More commonly, thorough and time-consuming reporting of their conditions is needed. Assisted by Anne and Emilie, conservators spend a lot of time looking through the microscope to determine the media of an object. Then they examine all objects individually, carefully inspecting and describing them. This is the stage of "diagnosis," of scrutinizing the symptoms, discerning and detecting the flaws in an object: imperfections, tears, scratches, folds, insect damage, stains, and more. A simple and apparently static object, when examined by Anne, suddenly multiplies. A closer look at the condition report shows that an architectural drawing is decomposed due to forty different features: surface dirt, discoloration, and cracks, to name a few. Each object is given a number. The condition reports prepared in this way make sure the objects are "safe to exhibit" or help to decide if objects "need special consideration." Conservators look at the objects not with the aim of identifying and valuing their exceptional intrinsic properties, but rather to engage in a practical and epistemological work on the objects and their effects. They inspect, measure, identify, and inscribe the traces of inspection in the condition report; they produce a copy of the original object, then color-code, number, and inscribe the traces of the inspection back on that copy. This process of condition reporting serves to decide if a treatment is necessary and, if so, to plan the treatment.

TREATMENTS AND DISOBEDIENT PATIENTS

Karen carefully inspects the condition reports and thinks about the specific treatments that drawings and models might need: they might need to be treated with chemicals, need tear repair, or need to be unfolded. Karen and I look at a drawing and its

condition report together. “Treatment” has a complex, multifaceted meaning here. It stands first for handling and dealing with objects, using a chemical agent to preserve particular properties of the architectural drawings and models; but it also stands for the care [quasi-medical] given to the [patient] objects for their “injuries,” “illnesses,” or the threat of dilapidation and destruction. Moreover, treatment also refers to the manner in which conservators, but also other members of the society of friends of architectural objects, deal with architectural works. Treatment is a part of the daily caretaking activities in a conservation lab. These are “not very glamorous treatments,” the conservators joke. They work in a tight timeframe to get the objects ready for exhibition. They do not engage in invasive treatments like washing works of art on paper or de-acidifying them. Their tasks are more modest, as Karen explains: “We’re just doing the minimum to *stabilize things*. We may have to do surface cleaning. When the objects are ready, we will need to mount them on mats or mount board. We have to think of a safe way for them to be exhibited. Then we will kind of negotiate with the exhibitions department.”³⁶

The use of the term “stabilized” here is revealing. It points to the fact that architectural objects in the lab are in a state of failure, decline, departure, degradation, fading; that is, a state of change. Conservators stabilize objects in such a way that it becomes unlikely that they will give way, crumble, collapse, fall apart, or overturn. Thus, objects-in-conservation are far from being solid, motionless, or concrete; rather they fight with themselves.³⁷ Unlike stabilized architectural objects that are not in conflict with themselves, and therefore do not need the artificial environment of the conservation lab, their internal coherence increases. When stabilizing the objects, conservators think about the conditions in which they will be exhibited: in the CCA shows upstairs, far from the vaults and labs on the ground, a drawing (and yes, it could be one of the Chandigarh drawings of Le Corbusier) will be exposed to more viewers, dirtier hands, and warmer climates than it was in vaults. All these conditions matter as they could expose and harm the drawing. Different options for exhibiting the objects—“framed with plexiglas glazing,” or “encapsulated between two pieces of shiny mylar,” or “showing it flat on the table”—are explored and discussed with the curators. Yet, these are not three aesthetically different ways of showcasing the value of architectural objects; straddling the world of aesthetics and risk, of idolatry and iconoclasm, conservators offer three ways of preserving the integrity of the architectural objects, of stabilizing the objects, of ensuring they have the same effects. Curators think about the best way to make an object *speak*, aesthetically and meaningfully, to *others*. Conservators conserve, of course, but also *converse with* the object so as to keep it “healthy,” coherent, safe, intact.

This is easy to see, or at least to productively metaphorize about, with physical, material objects. However, when digital objects are at stake, preserving also means slightly altering things. As David says, “Preservation has a different angle in the digital world because you’re forced to change.”³⁸ The question is no longer simply about keeping the integrity of the objects—the files, the disks—that contain the original data, but is

35 Interview of Yaneva with Potje, 2015.

36 Ibid.

37 Gilbert Simondon, *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques*, (réédition avec postface et préface) (Paris: Aubier, 1989).

38 Interview of Albena Yaneva with David Stevenson, 18 June 2015.

about how these objects will be accessible over time and in future digital formats. To preserve in the world of digital archives is to keep track of such changes, and to convert, and convert again to adapt.

SIGNING FORMS

Conservators tell me that it is essential they provide *equal care* to all architectural objects; and they often joke that they “have tape on the back of their fingers.” They are not expected to make “value judgments” of any sort. “Once something’s put into our care, all things need to be given the *same level of care*,” explains Karen. “But when you’re here and you end up with thousands of objects, you are going to make some choices.”³⁹ Like a good doctor, a good conservator sets priorities and gives patients different levels of care tailored to their conditions and specific needs. This morning, Anne’s careful condition reports have resulted in her flagging all the collages that need urgent treatment: the ones that have a loose piece or a piece that is falling off. Then, Karen, sitting at a computer, writes to the curator and the CCA Collection Director explaining the proposed treatment and asking her to *approve* it. Then she writes back to the institution that requires a loan and fills out another form, then *signs the form* saying the CCA will approve the loan provided the treatment of the object is done first. The regime of treatment invites the architectural objects to enter a contractual relationship where materials and tools, objects and their friends with different expertise, all *converse with* and *talk on behalf of* the object-in-conservation. Signing forms refers to a juridical regime of responsibility and care; signing sends us to the practical regime of answering a number of questions: Who cares for what and for how long? Who is in charge of providing the care? Who speaks on behalf of what and where? Signing redistributes the care among beings, bodies, instruments, and objects. Yet, caretaking is not meant to suddenly transform less autonomous and dependent drawings into more autonomous and independent ones, so as to make them rapidly human, talking things. Caretaking does not swing the object from one extremity to another—from liberty to dependence, from subjectivity to objectivity, or vice versa. Conservators never naturalize the process of conservation by saying “this is an old drawing, how do you expect to make it talk?” As care providers, they rather follow and assist the slow modifications of objects. Objects-in-conservation are continuously in the process of acquiring degrees of freedom and autonomy; they exist in a collective effort of care, torn between independence and dependence, objectivity and subjectivity; they transform in becoming.

TESTS, INSTRUMENTS, AND TIRED BODIES

In the context of the conservation lab, tests are more reminiscent of treatment trials or experiments than, say, of blood tests in a doctor’s office. When Karen tells me that she did “tests” on the objects she wanted to mend, she explains that what she expects from the tests is “to find out what adhesive would work to make sure that water wouldn’t cause anything to run.”⁴⁰ As tempting as it might be to follow the medical analogy, here it can not be followed to the end. Testing the object will not lead to the discovery of some inner parameter of its functioning. The “clinical” chemistry and “molecular”



Fig. 4 Karen, inspecting drawings through the microscope. Photo by the author.

diagnostics that take place in the conservation lab aim at testing how the object will react to possible strategies of mending, repair, and improvement with the help of various substances and instruments. The idea is to minimize the risk of worsening the object's condition.

A huge microscope draws my attention. Purchased to carry out treatments needing a lot of manual dexterity and precise manipulation, the microscope is a daily tool. With it, Karen and David inspect the object carefully to “identify it,” (fig. 4). “Identification,” in their terms, means that sometimes features of the architectural objects are not discernable to the naked eye. After careful inspection, the conservators confirm whether a specific treatment is needed and define it. They also use the microscope to identify the media used, because sometimes an image has to be reproduced for an exhibition



Fig. 5 Karen, removing adhesive residues from drawings. Photo by the author.

or a book. This information about the media will be displayed on the object's label and will also help conservators to better understand how to treat it. In all, what does the ethnographer witness? People looking through, finding out, and gaining knowledge about the media of the architectural object—knowledge that in turn informs conservators and then curatorial and publication teams. Under the microscope, drawings dazzle before they are exhibited and models yield secrets no one needs to know.

TWO TYPES OF “SURGERIES”

Conservators also use magnifying glasses on a daily basis for protection, better vision, and to avoid straining their eyes. In the cupboard David opens for me, I find a multitude of other instruments and materials: spatulas, blades, loops, and flashlights, sandpaper-type things, a tacking iron, erasers, and sponges. When administering a treatment—such as unsticking surfaces or treating a drawing that smells—the conservators' actions resemble a surgeon's. I follow Karen as she works with some drawings that are stuck together; she has to pull each one off individually. While inspecting the drawings, she found that many of them had stickers added to them, and the adhesive around the stickers had migrated out between the sheets. A quick and easy way to detach them would have been to dust a bit of cellulose powder onto the drawings and then rub them with an eraser. This would dry and then remove the adhesive. However, Karen used a different method. She took the Teflon spatula and handled it cautiously to remove the adhesive residues (fig. 5). A spatula is used for mixing and spreading pastes in painting or cooking, for lifting, or as an instrument of pushing aside or lifting in medical examinations. In art and architectural drawing conservation, it serves a dual purpose; its thin and flat surface allows for easy manipulation. Karen maneuvers the Teflon spatula to slide effortlessly between the drawings. Cautiously, she removes the adhesive little by little. What a spatula does, explains Karen, can sometimes be achieved with a solvent, but the drafting foam has a coating on it that might be solvent sensitive. That is why she chose to remove it mechanically with the spatula. Karen's “surgery” upon

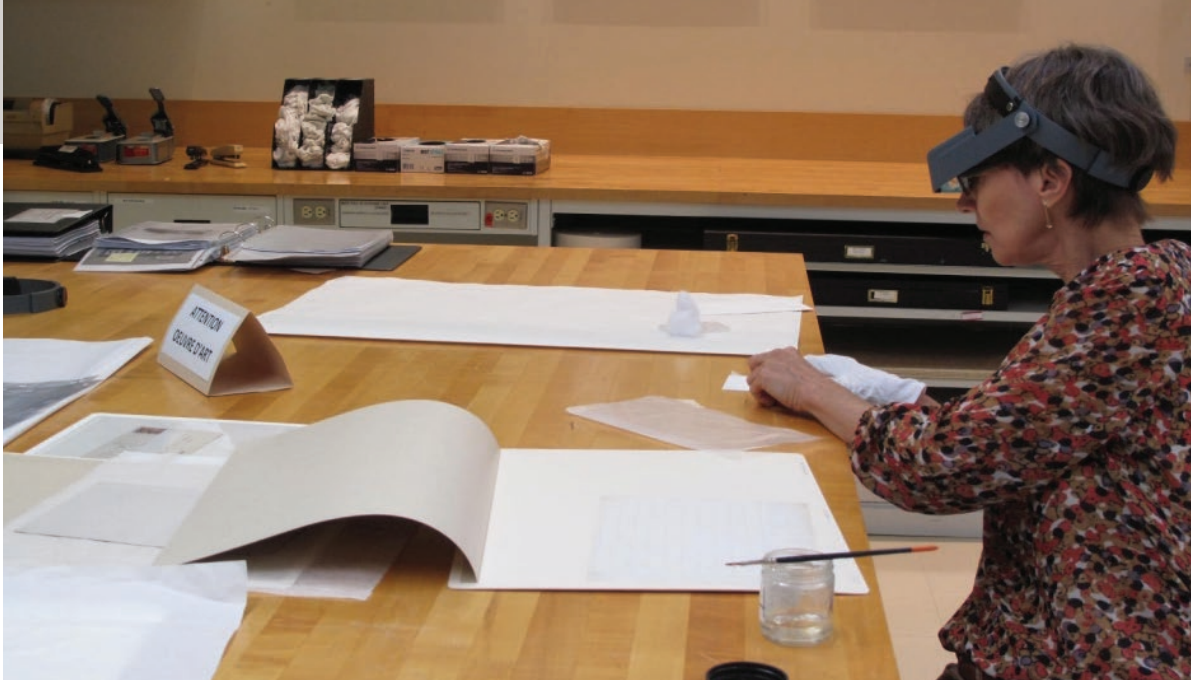


Fig. 6 Karen, performing “surgery 2”: eliminating the odor. Photo by the author.

stuck-together paper surfaces does not happen in the world of instruments alone, nor does her subjective appreciation of the drawing and judgement about the sticking problem. What we witness, as the procedure unfolds, is a number of entities—objects, instruments, and bodies belonging to groups of their own kind—constituting the world of this specific operation of conservation.

When the need for treatment is identified immediately—through smell, say, upon opening a box—conservators follow a different set of procedures. Karen and I look at some plans that have arrived from New York City, done on a drafting film: “Hang on, let me put my gloves on,” she says.

If you move them you might get a whiff of something unpleasant. I think that’s because the plastic is deteriorating. They’re not too bad, but some people say they smell like fish. Anne is cutting this carbon paper, which has activated charcoal in it. We will put some of that in the folder to try to absorb some of the odor, which is probably caused by the acid that is coming off the paper or the plastic. We don’t want that mixed with anything else in the collection either.⁴¹

A treatment that aims at eliminating the odor compels the participation of another agent in the conservation process: activated carbon paper. Carbon is commonly used to absorb small molecules such as benzene, toluene, ethyl-benzene, xylene, and organic compounds, and is recommended for water filtration and odor elimination. In the CCA conservation lab it is used to deal with irritating odors that come off of crates, boxes, and folders that often present unpleasant surprises for the registrar staff. Karen divides the stack of drawings into much smaller folders. At the end there are forty folders on the table. Then she places a big sheet of carbon paper in each folder to absorb the acid. She explains, “This paper actually absorbs not just the odor, but the chemical causing the odor.”⁴² As worried as she is that people will find the fishy odor irritating, she tries to prevent this from happening (fig. 6). Odor requires urgent treatment, not just because

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.



Fig. 7 Anne, manipulating the edges of a photograph. Photo by the author.



Fig. 8 Instruments: the scalpel and the magnifying glasses of conservators in the lab. Photo by the author.

it is unpleasant, but because it can spread quickly. The ozone can damage the material further, and will chemically catalyze reactions. Karen needs to make sure that the contaminated objects are not in contact with any other objects—just as sick patients should not be in contact with healthy people—because the acid causing the smell could affect the rest of the collection. The process is complete when the carbon has reacted to the acid that has caused the odor.

What the conservator does here is very different from the “surgery” performed on the stuck drawing in the previous scene. The smell treatment does not require a complex mediation of instruments or the dexterity of precise and timely operations where the conservator’s skills, body, and knowledge are mobilized in full. Here, activated carbon paper is the agent. It does the mediation quickly and efficiently by facilitating the process of absorbing the chemical causing the odor. If the risk in Karen’s surgery of the stuck drawings is to damage the surface, and to some extent the drawing’s quality, or to hurt herself in the process of cutting, the risk in treating the smell could be much bigger—that is, to damage the material or to spread the odor over a larger number of objects. As we follow how conservators use a variety of instruments and materials to manipulate objects, entice chemical reactions, and perform treatments, we witness how mediated their engagement with the archival architectural objects is. It is astonishing to see how strongly mediated their work is, contrasting sharply with unmediated acts of contemplation, admiration, or touch. The quasi-medical treatment of an architectural object is not performed through the lived experience or subjective appreciation of a conservator, nor does it happen in the objective world of instruments. Treatment is about activating different modalities of interaction with the object: finding the right ways of handling the object; identifying the media of the object; revealing the conjunctions of time and space; tracing rhythms of manipulations; capturing the intensity of the conservator’s presence; measuring the degree of risk; accounting for careful handling, fragile surfaces, sharp tools, and strained eyes. Conservation links bodies, beings, risks, tools, and objects with their modalities of action: time, and space,

and architectural friends with various expertise. It is impossible to detach the secret life of these objects from the ontology of conservation. Whatever secret life they have, or are imagined to have, in the world of aesthetic architectural values, is not the life they have for conservationists.

CONSERVATION: BETWEEN VALUATION AND EFFECTS

Preservation of architectural objects requires description, careful identification, and scrutiny in terms of analyzable properties rather than in terms of aesthetic effects. Yet, the CCA mode of preservation is effect-connected. The architectural objects we witnessed in the conservation lab are no more or less interpretable than they are knowable. “Interpretation” is understood here as set of actions performed with reference to a *collection* of objects, rather than as an attempt to make contact with the intrinsic properties of the object, be it an architectural drawing or model. What conservators call “interpretation” is apt to be described by others—registrar staff, cataloguers, curators, archivists—as an incomprehensible exercise of identification. Following Karen, Anne, and David, I witnessed at every moment the striking resemblance between the operations they performed and medical procedures (figs. 7, 8). The ontological regime of treating an architectural object is similar to the ontology of medical treatment, for it balances the efficiency of healing and the risk of damaging a body (human or other). Solvents and carbon papers are reminiscent of drugs in the way they exercise a therapeutic effect while also generating side effects. Risking destruction while wanting to heal appear to go hand in hand. Aesthetic interpretation might attribute language and intentionality to architectural objects. Doing so, however, tempts us to skip all further consideration of the finer ontological distinctions that exist between those objects. Handling objects in conservation mode, however, activates just those fine ontological distinctions. Indeed, it sets them in full swing.

None of the “friends of architectural objects” at the CCA believe in the “imaginary museum” of Malraux,⁴³ deeming as they do that the coherence of the fragments can be only achieved in the human imagination. Preoccupied as they are with acquiring more objects, indeed entire archives, as well as with taking care of every component—the friends of architectural objects must engage again and again with the awkward, disparate objecthood of the collection, and its raw *Wunderkammer* effect.⁴⁴ Far from valuing objects for their exemplary properties and the desirability of their presentation, the CCA’s engagement with the objects is an elaborate exercise designed to make architectural drawings, and other unspeaking objects in the collection, *speak*, tell a story, make connections. My experience of the conservation functions of the CCA told another story, as it were. Behind closed doors, archivists, conservators, and technicians are concerned with the ephemeral, transitive nature of architectural objects as both material and cognitive entities. Far from reaching audiences, or lauding the durability of expressive forms, or finding threads of continuity through time, and by extension through architectural history, they converse with objects themselves, take care of them, make them stable, coherent, and ready to speak. ♦

43 André Malraux, *The Psychology of Art*, vol. 1, *Museum Without Walls* trans. Stuart Gilbert. Bollingen Series (New York: Pantheon Books, 1949). The concept of *musée imaginaire* rests on a philosophical view of art and art history as essentially arising out of dialogue between works. This dialogue happens only if the artworks can be compared, which becomes possible thanks to the photographic representation, whether in the museum space or in

the imaginations of individuals. Malraux’s privileging of curatorial over artistic production is a first instance of explicitly locating the creative act in the process of assembling, grouping, and displaying works of art.

44 See note 24 above. *Wunderkammer*, also known as Cabinets of Curiosities or Cabinets of Wonder, were encyclopaedic collections of objects in Renaissance Europe whose categorical

boundaries were not completely defined. The objects included were categorized as belonging to natural history, geology, ethnography, archaeology, religious relics, works of art, and antiquities. Wunderkammer expresses the early modern culture of wonders; there, the objects are freed from the demands of utility; they bridge the natural and the artificial. The opposition between art and nature is also blurred.