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Archives of artistic research as potential fields for new research

By Lars Gustaf Andersson

In my research on contemporary experimental filmmakers and video artists I have studied how the artists themselves have used the archive as a creative source.¹ They have not been involved in artistic research in a strict sense but their archival work is analogue to such practices: they have collected data in order to create films and other art works and have used their archives in the creative process.² This has led me to an interest in the new findings which will be possible as results of artistic archival research. The discussions and presentations we have had in the Advanced Study Group *Creative Data Lab* during 2025 have further fuelled my interest in the artistic and scientific processes and how traces of them can be found in the archives. I am myself not engaged in artistic research but am interested in this kind of research as an aesthetic practice. As a scholar within the aesthetic disciplines – principally film studies – I hope to be able to investigate artistic research data under several aspects.

Art as process and work

In traditional aesthetics the scholar tends to study the finished work: the painting, the novel, the film etc. But there is also the possibility of studying the sketch and the process towards the final work.

1 Examples of filmmakers I have researched so far are Carl Slättne and Lena Mattsson. See L. G. Andersson, "In the light of the province: Carl Slättne and his films", *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema*, 2:2, 2 (2012), p. 121–134; L. G. Andersson, "Film och antifilm: anteckningar om Carl Slättne", *OEI*, 69–70 (2015), p. 137–139; L. G. Andersson, et al, *Lena Mattsson: The Window Opens to the World* (Berlin: Kerber Verlag, 2020).

2 The filmmakers or artists in question are not or were not connected to university departments, nor funded by e.g. the Swedish Research Council or with an explicit research intention related to the academic field of artistic research.

In Lund there is a specific tradition of this kind of work, connected to the work of art historian Ragnar Josephson and his creation of the museum of sketches, “Museum of Artistic Process and Public Art”, as well as his seminal publication *The Birth of the Work of Art*.³ When we have access to the archives of artists – both as artists *per se* and as artistic researchers – we can however go beyond the teleology inherent in this tradition and, instead of seeing the process as the way towards a final goal, study the process in itself and its multiple possible directions. The process of artistic research is a field of latency: several ways are possible, several outcomes. The tools of traditional aesthetics and the common ideas of the creative process can thus now be integrated with a study of the process itself, its movements and moments, its scientific and artistic potential.

With access to new archival resources and new research data it is possible for the aesthetic disciplines – in my personal case film studies – to get research results beyond the individual artists or the individual artworks. Hopefully several old questions will now receive new answers.

Art and its aura and consecration

A main problem, when dealing with artistic research as such, is the blurred line between artwork and research material. Much of the discussions around the institutionalisation of artistic research are concentrated upon this issue. When does the art research turn into art? When – to speak with Walter Benjamin – does the “aura” appear?⁴ This question can be understood as a set of sub questions.

Is it for instance possible to trace the consecration of the artwork – or rather the conditions for its consecration – in archival data?⁵ Theoretically we can see the research data as linear developments in time, but of course there will be a lot of irregularities in the material, due to mistakes, obstacles, restarts, new ways of thinking that emerge during the process. Is there a point, during this more or less linear process, where the research turns into artistic work, where, so to speak, art is possible to discern from the research?

3 R. Josephson, *Konstverkets födelse* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1940); Josephson, R. (ed.), *Bilden på muren: studier i Arkiv för dekorativ konst* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1965). See also L. Qvarnström, “Ragnar Josephson and the Skissernas Museum: Museum of Artistic Processes and Public Art in Swedish Art Historiography: Institutionalization, Identity, and Practice”, eds. B.-I. Johansson, & L. Qvarnström. (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2022), p. 57–64.

4 W. Benjamin, *The work of art in the age of its technological reproducibility, and other writings on media*, (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

5 P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

Using the terminology of Pierre Bourdieu's cultural sociology we can ask when the artwork inherent in the research is accepted in lines of *doxa* by the field of cultural production.⁶

This in turn leads to the question whether there are aspects of the archival material, only connected to the research process, that may have a value or status as art, even though never completed? That is, can aspects such as a threshold of originality and artistic merit be applied to archival data? This is a challenge that transcends the question whether the art produced during artistic research has any artistic merit at all – see e.g. the discussion concerning “Edu-art”.⁷ Instead, with a new perspective on the process itself, leaving aside the aforementioned teleology, is it thus possible – with access to archival data – to find a new theoretical perspective on the relationship between process and work? This is a question that transcends the limits of artistic research and could have an impact on the choice of study objects for the aesthetic disciplines such as art history and film studies.

The artistic process

A question related to this is whether the archival data resulting from artistic research can be approached by means of the branch of *unproduction studies* within film studies?⁸ That is, could it be possible to expand and develop this special interest within film studies to art studies in general, through access to artistic research data? Unproduction studies are mainly developed to understand the more industrial processes of filmmaking, e.g. within the Hollywood studio system, but there is a potential here for turning it towards the production of art and maybe to artistic research. How should we value and understand – and maybe use - the uncompleted work? What can it tell us about dominant aesthetic profiles or ideological conditions?

The final and overarching theoretical question is whether access to archival data resulting from artistic research could lead to new knowledge and insights concerning the creative process as such? We can of course return to the problems formulated by pioneers like Ragnar Josephson, dealing with the

6 P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

7 “Edu-art” is a pejorative term, referring to art which is conditioned by artistic research and – according to some critical voices – without relevance outside this field of research. See B. Szyber, *Fauxthentication: Art, Academia & Authorship (or the site-specifics of the Academic Artist)*, doctoral dissertation (Stockholm: Stockholm University of the Arts, 2019).

8 J. Fenwick, *Unproduction Studies and the American Film Industry*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022); A. Beston & S. Solomon, *Incomplete: The Feminist Possibilities of the Unfinished Film*, (Oakland: University of California Press, 2023).

artist's vision and its relationship to the completed work of art, and we can also transcend the teleology and investigate what the process means for the individual artist in terms of e.g. knowledge production or enhancement of skills. A more productive way would maybe be to see this as an opportunity to develop the pedagogy of art, i.e. to invite art students to evaluate and re-search a specific creative process and relate it to their own endeavours. When investigating and trying to understand archived data resulting from artistic research made by someone else you have to be open minded, as has been said about the philosophy of creativity, *to know what we don't know*, that is, to be prepared for the unexpected.⁹

Metadata and access

All these possible research questions are conditioned by the quality of the research data files, or, rather, the organisation of them. They need to be searchable through a set of keywords, but most importantly, through valid *metadata*; this is probably the most important prerequisite for successful and systematic research. If I look back on my own efforts to find archival material and get into it, often in physical archives but to some extent in digital ones, I can clearly say that most of the time was spent in trying to get to know the width and depth of the material, to sort it chronologically and to get to know what each and every item really covered.

If we consider the present and future state of the art, most of the material we will be able to access is digital, but that does not change the importance of systematics, chronological order, and not the least metadata. The production of metadata – selection of keywords, descriptions of content etc. – has to be pursued in dialogue between the individual artistic researcher and a data steward or a corresponding agent, responsible for the archive in question. We have to demand order and systematics of the archive as such, at the same time as we have to grant the artistic researcher – or the artist – freedom within that order. The archive and its framework of routines must not create restrictions and difficulties that obstruct the research, artistic or not.

That is probably the most complex question to balance when establishing an archive for artistic research.

9 N.-E. Sahlin, *Kreativitetens filosofi*, (Nora: Bokförlaget Nya Doxa, 2001).

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