Archive Fever?

Unpacking *Archiving Fever*

"There is not one archive fever, one limit or one suffering of memory among others: enlisting the in-finite, archive fever verges on radical evil." [1]

- Jacques Derrida

Currently on display at the Adam Art Gallery, *Archiving Fever* is an exhibition which "seeks to reveal the process whereby moments become history."[2] Consisting of works by eight contemporary artists from Germany, Singapore, Mexico, and New Zealand, the show not only addresses the archive's role in this translation of lived experience into the annals of history, but also explores how such an operation might be illuminated in the context of the art gallery. Like most good titles, *Archiving Fever* works on more than one level. Able to slip fluidly between verb and adjective, the use of "archiving" here seems intentionally ambiguous, creating a pun which unhinges singular meaning. Does it refer to the documenting of fever, an approach most literally taken up in Dane Mitchell's *Dust Archive* (2001)? Or does it allude to an obsessive fervour inherently connected to the process of archiving itself, perhaps best illustrated by Frederick Butler, the subject of Ann Shelton's *A Library to Scale* (2006)? This ambiguity extends beyond the title to a questioning of the very concept of the archive. What constitutes the archive in the digital age, and how the viewer might respond to its representation and reinterpretation in a contemporary art space are questions which *Archiving Fever* sets up, but ultimately (and consciously I think) leaves unresolved.

Such an exploration of the archival concept has a precedent in Jacques Derrida's 1995 essay *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* — a text to which the title of this show seems obviously indebted. But does the allusion go any deeper than face value? References to Derrida's text (either in curator Emily Cormack's catalogue essay or in the wall labels which accompany the exhibition) are conspicuous in their absence. Instead, Cormack refers to Aby Warburg's *Atlas* as an appropriate antecedent, and Carolyn Steedman's *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* provides the basis for an account of archive fever — a concept described in the catalogue essay as a malady, a psychological illness associated with obsessive collecting.[3] However, without at least some acknowledgment of an indebtedness to Derrida, for me *Archiving Fever* faces the danger of turning from an interesting title into a rather cursory and convenient one, in which the French philosopher's canonical status is used to lend legitimacy to the project without addressing or recognising key issues raised in his text.

For as far as I am concerned there is an important (if subtle) difference between the type of psychological sickness that archive fever is reduced to in the catalogue essay, and something which for Derrida "verges on radical evil." While there is insufficient scope to unpack the myriad nuances of his argument here, a fundamental concept which underpins Derrida's account of archive fever is the internal contradiction between a "destruction drive" and a "conservation drive" housed within the very concept of "archive" itself.[4] It is thus not just obsessive collecting which constitutes archive fever for Derrida, but rather the play of that collecting and documenting against an ever-present destructive threat — a spectre of death which places this fever on the outskirts of "evil". Derrida writes:

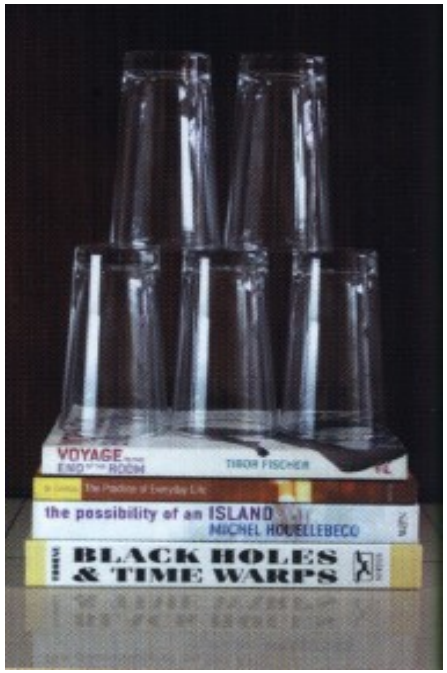
> Above all, and this is the most serious … there is no archive fever without the threat of this death drive, this aggression and destruction drive. This threat is *in-finite*, it sweeps away the logic of finitude and the simple factual limits . . . of conservation. [5]

Perhaps is it unfair to interpret *Archiving Fever* solely through Derrida's lens, an approach which in its narrowness prevents access to a number of the interesting works on display. However, as the show's title bears an important trace of the curatorial imprint, and as it inescapably brings to mind (for me at

any rate) the earlier work of Derrida, it seems necessary to at least acknowledge — to perhaps deconstruct a little — the relationship between essay and exhibition, and explore, however superficially, its implications here.

In fact, whilst absent from the exhibition's accompanying texts, Derrida's notion of the destruction drive (that essential ingredient for his own conception of archive fever) can still be seen to have a spectral presence in *Archiving Fever*. Its most graphic illustration comes, rather ironically (but perhaps appropriately) via a work that never made it the exhibition: Heman Chong's *Black Holes & Time Warps, The Possibility of an Island, The Practice of Everyday Life, Voyage to the End of the Room* (2006). Consisting of assorted books and glasses, the work was irreparably damaged prior to the exhibition, its place in the show now occupied by the original wall label and an accompanying plaque which simply reads:

Unfortunately, we are unable to show the work due to damage caused prior to the opening.



Heman Chong, *Black Holes & Time Warps . . .* 2006
(in its original form)

Situated at the entrance to the Adam's Upper Chartwell Gallery, this plaque is one of the first things the viewer is presented with in the exhibition, and can be seen as a monument to absence, to the frailty and fragility of the "archive". For what this sign acknowledges and represents is the threat of loss which seems to hang over all archiving — the threat which prods many of us to collect and collate, to preserve and publish, to archive in the first instance. The "destruction" of Chong's work can thus be viewed as serendipitous from a certain perspective, and it is ironic (yet fitting) that in its absence the work offers much towards a consideration of the archive's role and function.[6]

Absence, whether serendipitous or intentional, also occupies a key place in Patrick Pound's *Cabins* (2005). Depicting thirty-five cabins belonging to a range of figures of varying historical significance, Pound presents the viewer with images uniformly scaled and out-of-focus, in doing so "revealing the flattening effect of objective, systematic serialisation."[7] Our access to these images is thus partially obstructed by their deliberate blurring, our ability to relate to them as representations of real places literally clouded. This obstruction is taken further by an accompanying wall text which on first inspection would seem to help us interpret the images, for it lists the names of the people to whom these cabins belong.[8] The problem is that there are only thirty-four entries on the list compared to the thirty-five cabins depicted — a discrepancy which threatens to throw the whole index system out of alignment.[9] Whether this absence, this "mistake", is deliberate or accidental remains unknown to the viewer, but either way it creates a disorienting effect which at once renders the index problematic and the work more interesting. It is tempting to view Pound's simultaneous creation and subversion of an archival system — a system which seems to reveal and conceal in equal measures — in relation to the contradiction between the compulsion to document and destroy that lies at the very heart of *mal d'archive.*[10] Indeed, for me, the palpable tension and sense of unease that Pound creates in this work resonate forcefully with Derrida's conception of archive fever.[11]


Patrick Pound, *Cabins* (detail), 2005.

No discussion of the relationship between archive fever and *Archiving Fever* would be complete without a consideration of Ann Shelton's *A Library to Scale,* and unfortunately I only have space for a most cursory one here. Frederick Butler, the subject of this work, compulsively collected and archived for over 50 years, a project which culminated in his "library" of wall-papered albums (comprising thematically arranged newspaper clippings), now housed at

Ann Shelton
A Library to Scale, Part I (detail), 2006

Puke Ariki, New Plymouth. But whether or not this collecting and chronicling conforms to Derrida's concept of archive fever hinges on the question of what led Butler to obsessively document in the first place. [12] Was it an intense threat of loss and destruction that compelled him to archive so thoroughly? Curiously, the question of Butler's motivation is left unanswered by Shelton. It is here that I realise, once again, that any attempt to account for this exhibition solely on Derrida's terms (and my understanding of his terms at that) is destined to failure. For *A Library to Scale* is too interesting a work to be limited to such a narrow focus, and in showcasing Butler's archive in the context of the art gallery — thus granting his project a kind of historical and artistic currency which it otherwise may not have had — Shelton does reveal, in part, the process whereby moments (in this case a lifelong collection of moments) can become"history".[13]

I arrive at the end of my account realising I've omitted many of the aspects of the show which I enjoyed and appreciated. My persistence in pursuing this rather flawed approach, one I realised from the very beginning would confine *Archiving Fever* in an unhelpful hermeneutic prison, comes only because in "quoting" Derrida, the show's title seemed to open itself up to the kind of deconstructive investigation the author himself might have employed. However, if *Archiving Fever* is housed in a curatorial architecture a little shaky in places, it nevertheless is smart enough to not close the book on the archive, and ultimately leaves the question of how we might conceive the archive today up to the viewer. Indeed, in their diversity, the collective works on display show just how fluid this concept of the archive can be.

- Matt Plummer, September 2006

1.Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p 20. The repetition of archive fever/archiving fever in these first few lines is deliberate, and seeks to create an unnerving echo.

2.Emily Cormack, *Archiving Fever*. (exh. cat., Adam Art Gallery, 2006), unpaginated.

3. Cormack. *Archiving Fever,* unpaginated.

4.This concept of the destruction drive, an "invincible necessity", is one which Derrida inherits from Freud. In an account which is often conjectural, posited in a series of hypotheses, Derrida's description of the destruction drive as an inescapable *thesis* can not be overlooked. See Derrida, *Archive Fever*, pp 10-12, 19-20.

5. Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p 19.

6.This irony is further reinforced in the original wall label, which highlights that Chong's work would have presented personal objects which "imply, yet do not reveal, a depth of content." As I've argued here, its absence can in some perverse way be actually seen to grant it a kind of content.

7. Cormack, *Archiving Fever*, unpaginated.

8. How these numerals might correlate to the images, which themselves are not numbered, is a moot point. What Pound seems to reveal here is the way in which interpreting such indexical information is culturally coded, for a westerner's natural reading of these images — left to right, top to bottom — is just one of many possibilities.

9. Whether it is just the last entry that has been omitted (thus the first thirty-four descriptions listed would correlate to the first thirty-four cabins depicted), or whether the whole directory is corrupted by this absence of a thirty-fifth description remains uncertain. I am grateful to Emil McAvoy for pointing out this discrepancy to me.

10. *Mal d'archive* is the original French term for archive fever coined by Derrida.

11. Pound's other work on display in *Archiving Fever — Seven Days-February*, similarly seems to vacillate between a desire to reveal and to conceal.

12. Butler's collecting does, however, clearly relate to Walter Benjamin's claim that "A chronicler who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones acts in accordance with the following truth: nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history." Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in Hannah Arendt (ed) and Harry Zohn (trans), *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 256.

13. Obviously the fact that Butler's archive is already in the collection of Puke Ariki grants it some kind of historical importance, but in presenting Butler's project in the rather different context of the art gallery, Shelton gives his work a kind of publicity and profile — an artistic currency — which it otherwise would not have. This is particularly true considering that *A Library to Scale, Part II* has recently won the $15 000 Trust Waikato National Contemporary Art Award.