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Negotiating the archive

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative artists Carson & Miller's project with the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art utilizes their established practice of play. The project explores the physical and conceptual spaces of this museum's archive. Carson & Miller's play encompasses a variety of games; between themselves, as well as games that have drawn in visitors and staff. These games have proven to be a fruitful strategy for piercing the archive; its physical presence, its mass and meaning, its availability to the visitor. This article is informed by Roland Barthes' punctum and explores how these archive games have opened up opportunities for interaction, handling and touch in its physical, sensual and intellectual senses.

As collaborative artists, Carson & Miller, we use the game, the book and the object as devices for collaboration and production. Our practice is shaped by our interest in narrative, dialogue and exchange. This article focuses on negotiation and it is this principle that lies at the heart of how we work. Here, we will concentrate on our experience as artists working with the archives at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art (SNGMA) in Edinburgh. The principle of negotiation has always been important to our creative practice and is a key element to our work with SNGMA,

where negotiation occurs between artists and archive, artists and archivist, artists and institution and between ourselves (as collaborative artists Carson & Miller).

In an earlier project, *The Story of Things* (2009–2010), we worked with the museum collections and archives of Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections, using the artefacts in the collections not in a traditional, 'accepted' manner but as artists' materials that might be altered and played with – in essence the collections were our playthings. In this context our negotiation, through play, was evident in the arrangements we made in the display cabinets. The central tenet for the project was to work across the collections and archives. In practice this meant that we were committed to looking at and working with all materials represented within the museum. Taking this task on quickly highlighted the potential for collections and archives to provide what Thomas Hirschhorn describes as 'spaces for the movement and endlessness of thinking' (Hirschhorn cited in Foster 2004: 6). This sense of 'endlessness' seems to run counter to a collection being 'in order' with a meaning that is singular and controlled.

In our current project with SNGMA we created a series of bespoke question and answer games to further explore 'endlessness of thinking' (Hirschhorn cited in Foster 2004: 6) as an idea, and to address the tension between the mass of an archive and the singular, personal experience of it. In our work with SNGMA we have so far played a series of games in various locations within the Gallery, which have been designed to both explore the archive itself and the building that is its home; to work with its keepers (Archivist, Librarian) and to engage with the Gallery's visitors. Briefly, SNGMA's archive focuses on twentieth and twenty-first-century art in a diverse range of contexts, with an important collection relating to Dada and Surrealism. Significant holdings include the archive and book collections of Roland Penrose and Gabrielle Keiller and, as the Gallery's website states, 'a recreation of material from [Eduardo Paolozzi's] studio' (SNGMA n.d.).

The first example of one of the bespoke games we created for this project is *A Game of Things*. This game was designed to be played in Paolozzi's Studio by us, as Carson & Miller (see Figure 1). Later in this article we will discuss games that involve visitor participation. Under the supervision of the Archivist, one of us positioned ourselves in Paolozzi's Studio whilst the other stood on the other side of the porthole window which overlooks the Studio. This 'barrier' was used as a game-playing mechanism because it allowed us to see each other and the Studio with the restriction that, as players, we could not hear one another. Player 1, from behind the window, posed – in writing – a question provoked by the environment of Paolozzi's Studio. Player 2, in the Studio, then had two minutes to answer the question (which they captured using a voice recorder). At the same time, Player 1 wrote down what they anticipated would be Player 2's answer. In her essay, *On Being Touched*, Patricia Allmer applies the notion of 'haptic vision' (2009: i) to our way of working, drawing on Barthes' use of the terms 'studium' and 'punctum' and the experience of being touched (i.e. moved) by something. Barthes describes the punctum as 'the element that rises from the

Figure 1: A Game of Things *(2014), played in Paolozzi's Studio, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art: Modern 2, Edinburgh, United Kingdom.*

scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me' (2000: 26). Allmer identifies the punctum as a moment of transformation citing Barthes' own question to himself: '"Why does this […] touch me?"' (Barthes cited in Allmer 2009: i) and goes on to note that '[Barthes'] references to this different order of visual perception use the vocabulary of the haptic, of touch, suggesting that the punctum is the moment where optic transforms into haptic vision' (2009: i).

In this question and answer game the answers given connected directly with the environment of Paolozzi's Studio, the material culture of it; the objects themselves and their arrangement, *and* our experience of being drawn to particular items. The extract below demonstrates how this experience triggered personal connections and reflections:

> Player 1: At what point are there too many things to be meaningful?
>
> Player 2: […] if things are just a mass of stuff, like a pile of papers or a stack of objects in a box that are not categorized in any way […] that's where they lose their meaning, they're just 'stuff' […] Where I am in the space, I can actually see a sort of categorizing of things […] The area I do struggle with is the desk […] When I think about *my* desk that's when things become less meaningful to me […] I know there is stuff there but I don't know what the stuff is, so you can't then attach meaning to it.

The stress on the word *my*, when a connection is made between the desk of Player 2 and Paolozzi's desk, acts as a verbal punctum. The answer also reveals the point where control, order and meaning become more or less valuable. In a second extract from this game, Player 1 and Player 2 have switched places and Player 2 is now posing questions from behind the porthole window, whilst Player 1 answers questions in Paolozzi's Studio:

> Player 2: Do the things in there make it a very gendered space?
>
> Player 1: […] there's a lot of […] clearly male heads and bodies so the actual physical presence of gender in the space is quite visible I think it's fair to say. [There is] a sense of traditional ideas, of how, in particular, twentieth-century-male artists were meant to behave.

The question posed and the answer given offered to the Archivist an additional interpretation of the space; that the environment could be considered from a perspective that foregrounds gender. This interpretation provoked a different train of thought regarding visitor interpretation. Of course, we saw and interpreted the space differently, partly because we were not as familiar with the intricacies of the terrain of the space (physically, historically and intellectually) and partly because we engaged with the space differently – not as an archivist or other museum professional,

but as visiting artists playing conceptually rather than physically with the material. As we have previously outlined, a key element to our play is negotiation and, in this environment, the game is where this negotiation occurred, encompassing our negotiations with each other, with the space and with the institution (in this case very specifically with the Archivist).

We will now discuss a second example, actually an extract from the first set of games we played at the Gallery. On this occasion the Archivist kindly agreed to play a series of games with us in the basement area, where the bulk of the archive is stored (see Figure 2). We themed the games around what we felt, from the perspective of non-experts, were significant areas of consideration in relation to the idea of the archive and what our understanding of the archive became, through the answers given by the Archivist (now Player 1). We titled these question and answer games: *A Game of Keeping*, *A Game of Caring*, *A Game of Seeing* and *A Game of Knowing*. This extract is from *A Game of Caring*:

> Player 2: Do you care about more things than others?
>
> Player 1: Talking about the archive, I have material which I feel more of a connection to or that I find of more interest to myself than others, and I would hope that kind of connection doesn't mean that I will prioritise it or give it a preference over other material […] But it isn't just how much I care about some things, it's also about how much other people care as well. The fact that we have some collections in this archive which don't get looked at very frequently […] in a way, that material is not being cared about in the same way as, for example, […] British Surrealism. So, that material gets looked at a lot and, I suppose, as a result, I think about it more and I think about ways to preserve it more than other material that doesn't get considered as frequently. So, I want to say no to that but I think I probably do, despite myself.

The Archivist's acknowledgement that there is a higher demand for some material is suggestive of a latent hierarchy within the archive imposed not by the Archivist but by the *use* of the archive. In the moment of giving her answer, the Archivist seems to suggest that, in an ideal world, the archive is cared for by it being seen and that the act of viewing the archive should, ideally, be evenly distributed across the material within it. This offers a way of looking (and therefore caring) that is not hierarchical but which suggests a flat ontology, where information is different but holds the same value. A flat ontology evokes a different type of terrain, conjuring up an environment of complete vision not unlike the complete *access* that Andrea Fraser's installation piece *Information Room* (1998) offers to the viewer, although we have no interest in triggering chaos, as Spieker (2008) describes it, or in creating what Fraser herself claims was 'a very big mess' (Fraser cited in Spieker 2008: 181).

Outside of the game, our reflection on the Archivist's answer instigated a desire to look at and handle the material that had so rarely been explored by others. This desire was provoked, in part,

Figure 2: A Game of Caring *(2014), played in the archive store, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art: Modern 2, Edinburgh, United Kingdom.*

as a result of playing these games with the Archivist, but we were also attracted to the notion of the unseen – that is, investigating a kind of unexplored terrain. There is a paradox in our impulses to attempt to view the archive without hierarchy whilst favouring unseen materials in terms of the order in which we explore it. We have addressed this in a more recent game, under the supervision of the Archivist within the same archive store. *An Archive Game*, as we titled it, is designed to encourage a kind of meandering through the archive and asks the two players to direct each other to locations in the archive and to select an item from these locations. In the process of the game we made decisions about viewing material that was not related to the material itself. *Where* we directed one another to was more important than the area of the archive to which the selected item belonged. Paradoxically, once the item was chosen the selection in itself promoted a hierarchy. This returns us to the punctum and Allmer's application of it to the act of selection. As an important aspect of our practice, it is perhaps this idea that, in the end, overrides any theoretical application of value. Arriving at the location to which we had been directed appeals to the notion of 'being touched' (Allmer 2009: i), of seeing something that, in Barthes' words 'shoots out […] like an arrow, and pierces [us]' (2000: 26). *This* is what really matters.

The third example we would like to consider is *A Library Game*. In our extended investigations of the archives at SNGMA we identified the library of Roland Penrose as an area of the archive which is highly visible to the visitor but out of reach. Quite literally, the books sit on a mezzanine level without public access. Penrose's library was acquired by the Gallery and the integrity of the order he kept his library in has been maintained. On an early visit to the Gallery we played a game – just between ourselves – with Penrose's books which we called *A Silent Library Game*. Founded in the principle of the Surrealist game, *Exquisite Corpse*, we wrote instructions that, not unlike the archive game we have just referred to, directed our opposite player to a particular, sometimes quite precise, place within the library – sometimes to a book itself, sometimes to a sentence within a book. The record of the instructions and their outcomes were put on the library wall as a temporary intervention. The experience, indeed privilege, of being able to access and pick up and read the books in the library was similar to our experience of exploring the collections and archives of Manchester Metropolitan University Special Collections when we worked on *The Story of Things*. We wanted to extend this experience to others and so established a different library game, played on our next visit to SNGMA in March 2014.

In *A Library Game* (Figure 3) the notion of access within the Keiller Library, specifically between the ground level of the library and the mezzanine level, was opened out and we became a conduit to visitors in the Gallery, selecting and then handling books from Penrose's personal collection. This resulted in a fruitful interaction between the visitors who we engaged in selecting the books, the Archivist who both supervised and participated in this game (providing an expert view) and with us, as Carson & Miller. In this instance we orchestrated the play, served as players

Figure 3: A Library Game *(2014), played in the Keiller Library, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art: Modern 2, Edinburgh, United Kingdom.*

and assisted the play as it unfolded. We made what Patricia Allmer and John Sears have identified within our work as a 'field of play' (2007: v) out of both the architecture and content of the space. As visitors came into the ground floor – the public area – to look at the exhibition cases, we invited them to select a book or books from the shelves on the mezzanine floor which they could see but not touch. Player 1 was positioned on the mezzanine to follow the instructions of visitors – engaged in the game by Player 2 – and to fetch and deliver the request to the ground floor where, under supervision from Player 2 and the Archivist, the book was explored by the visitor. In turn, once the book had been viewed, Player 2 placed the item onto the mantelpiece in the Keiller Library. As the game continued, a new, temporary library was formed, making this a transitory disruption of the book collection material and cutting across the established order and principles of access.

The Archivist noted in our correspondence after the game that it had 'opened up the archive and special books collections to the public both physically and intellectually'. In this 'opening up' these material and conceptual dialogues often provoked complex and personal connections that connected 'back' to Penrose and his gathering and ordering of his library. For example, two visitors engaged with the game in different ways. One selected a compendium of Gustave Doré's work, *The Doré Gallery* (*c.* 1870), which was brought down for him to look through. It quickly became apparent that the visitor had prior knowledge of Doré's work and wanted to share this with us and his companion. Part of his desire to interact with the book was to identify a specific image, which he found within the volume and which instigated more dialogue about his interest and reasons for selection. His companion, meanwhile, made her selection, unprompted, from the 'new' temporary library we were forming as the game was being played. The visitor made her selection on the basis of a professional interest, something we had not anticipated but which acknowledges 'the visitor' as someone who may make connections beyond the expectations of the prescribed role and identity of the gallery visitor.

To conclude, we would like to draw together our observations so far on our game-playing strategies within the archive of the SNGMA. The games – in their variety of structure, location, players and subject – have provided us, and we hope our fellow players, with new ways of interacting with archives that, in turn, encourage a form of negotiation with the material, its subject matter, its methods of storage and display, and its keepers. In these games, these negotiations create many points of entry that open up opportunities for intimate connections with the archive, which cut through its mass, as the Archivist has observed, both 'physically and intellectually'.

The principle of 'cutting through' speaks to the notion of a latent hierarchy in the archive and aligns this idea with a terrain that is necessary for us in order to play: to play is to take a different route into this terrain. We reflected earlier on the Archivist's desire to value everything equally alongside the conflict in this impulse; how the archive is used is not necessarily the same as how

it is ordered. In many respects, as artists we share this impulse and sense of conflict. Our games encourage the Surrealist idea of objective chance where selections are permitted on the basis of being drawn to – being pierced by – something that, in turn, permits, to reiterate Hirschhorn 'spaces for the movement and endlessness of thinking' (Hirschhorn cited in Foster 2004: 6), where sense, logic and order – or 'archive reason' (2004: 22) as Hal Foster identifies it – are altered and revalued in such a way that does not necessarily devalue the use of a traditional archive but promotes an alternative ontology of the archive.

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