
Archive and Affect in Contemporary Photography

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Abstract

This article concentrates on two contemporary photographers, Greg Staats and Arnaud Maggs, whose work generates an affective response by engaging in an archival practice. Drawing on Jill Bennett's analysis of affect in contemporary art, including her discussion of the way work can be transactive, Bassnett considers how the work of these artists addresses viewers, and how different archival practices unsettle conventional viewing relationships. In the case of Staats, affect is activated by his engagement with archival sources. Staats draws on family history and Iroquoian traditions to address individual and cultural loss in a process that translates what Bennett calls "sense memory" into "common memory" through art discourse. With Maggs, it is the artist's archiving of cultural ephemera that engenders an affective response. The objects Maggs photographs have been taken out of their cultural and historical contexts and relocated within the discourse of art. Through an analysis of the way selected works produce affect, Bassnett argues that these approaches to photography as an archival practice offer ways of negotiating individual and cultural loss.

Keywords: archive, affect, photography, Greg Staats, Arnaud Maggs

Introduction

From Allan Sekula's "The Body and The Archive" (1986) to Okwui Enwezor's *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (2008), numerous historians, curators,



and critics have attempted to consider photography's relation to the archive in recent years. At the same time, theorizations of the archive more generally have led to a new way of understanding its relation to memory. In his influential deconstruction of the archive, Jacques Derrida has argued that it makes a future possible. To archive is to gather together signs and to move them from a private realm to a public one with the purpose of holding on to the source material of memory (Derrida 1995); it enables memory by becoming a repository of the impressions of our past. Within contemporary photography, numerous artists have investigated the theory and practice of the archive in attempts to understand its personal and cultural implications. Notably, one of the ways these artistic investigations of the archive have taken shape is by engaging viewers through affect.

This article concentrates on two contemporary photographers, Greg Staats and Arnaud Maggs, whose work generates an affective response by engaging in a practice of archiving. The artwork I discuss is not specifically *about* archiving; instead it takes up archival processes to establish a particular mode of address. Rather than focusing on an interpretation of meaning, my concern here is therefore on the way certain archival-based works operate to produce an affective response. Art theorist and critic Jill Bennett describes an affective response as one in which the viewer is inhabited by an "embodied sensation" and is "stricken with affect," where affect is, according to her definition, "a process of 'seeing feeling' where feeling is both imagined and regenerated through an encounter with the artwork" (Bennett 2005: 43, 29, 41). For Bennett, affect

is produced through the relation between an image and its viewers and is not merely something an artist expresses through a work (Bennett 2002, 2005). While Bennett's concern is with the role of affect in trauma-related art, she offers valuable insight into the operation and significance of an affective response to works of art and provocative conceptual tools for understanding the relationship between archive and affect in the work of Staats and Maggs.

Although these photographers approach the archive in quite different ways, they both engage viewers through an affective response. In the case of Staats, affect is activated by his use of archival sources of family history and Iroquoian traditions to address individual and cultural loss in a process that translates what Bennett calls "sense memory" into "common memory" through art discourse. With Maggs, it is the artist's archiving of cultural ephemera that engenders an affective response. The objects Maggs photographs—French mourning stationery and a water-stained ledger, for example—have been taken out of their cultural and historical contexts and relocated within the discourse of art. The care with which he has archived these transitory objects registers in the viewer as a memorial to unknown subjects and forgotten historical practices. By considering the way these works address viewers, I explore how different archival practices unsettle conventional viewing relationships. In doing so, I argue that the affective response these works produce is the basis for a mode of art production that, while not overtly political, is engaged in issues of memory and identity which have deeply political implications. Through my analysis of the production of

affect in selected works, I argue that these different approaches to photography as an archival practice offer ways of negotiating individual and cultural loss.

Greg Staats

Staats is a member of the Mohawk Nation and a photographer based in Toronto, Canada, whose work addresses the relationship between identity, memory, and place.¹ Critics regularly compare his work to that of fellow Iroquoian artist Jeff Thomas, who explores similar issues, particularly identity, memory, and history. Curator Carol Podedworny, for example, has explained that by looking at similarities in the work of these two photographers, we can see how cultural experience influences their perspective, as well as how their perspective differs from that of the dominant culture (Podedworny 1992). But at the same time, she argues, a comparison highlights differences between the two artists and shows us how their individual experiences have shaped their vision. Both artists can also be said to unsettle the expectations of some viewers because they don't explicitly convey "Indianness" through the subject matter in their work (Walsh 2002; Barkhouse 2000). As Andrea Walsh has noted, instead of presenting "visible signs of difference," these photographers address themes of loss and renewal through a combination of cultural and individual knowledge (Walsh 2002). Similarly, artist and writer Mary Anne Barkhouse has described Staats's work as forming "a basis for dialogue about our own shared and individual histories" (Barkhouse 2000). What becomes clear from the comparisons between Staats's and Thomas's work is that, though it is important

to see the work in relation to the Iroquoian ancestry of the artists, the work cannot be viewed as merely representative of a cultural heritage. Although this is a simple point, it is nonetheless crucial because, on the one hand, the history of misrepresenting and stereotyping Aboriginal people in Canada requires it, and, on the other hand, the themes of individual and cultural identity are integral to the affective response Staats's work produces.²

In work that has been exhibited across Canada and internationally since 1992, Staats has explored how identity relates to memory (Figure 1). For *Memories of a Collective Reality—Sour Springs* (1995), a series of fourteen large silver prints mounted in a row on gray davey board, Staats returned to Sour Springs, the community on the Six Nations Reserve near Brantford, Ontario, where he was born, to photograph people and places that had personal significance. By archiving sites of the artist's past, the photographs enact memory as they translate private experience into the public discourse of art. Curator Janet Clark has noted that the visceral quality of the work, built up through contrasts in the formal features of the photographs (light/dark; indistinct/concise), asks viewers to "share in the experience of remembering" (Clark 1995). By engaging with the narrative structure of the series and the exquisite beauty of the photographs, viewers are drawn into the process of remembering. First, the series of images leads us to consider the significance of these sites for Staats. Was this his ancestral home? Did he walk along this road to get to school? Did he play amongst these trees as a child? The work shows us how individual and collective memory is embedded in a sense



Fig 1 Greg Staats, *Memories of a Collective Reality—Sour Springs*, 1995, 14 silver prints, 18 × 24 inches each, mounted on davey board. Courtesy of Greg Staats.

of place, and in the course of looking at the sites of the artist's past, we might reflect on how our own memories and identities are associated with sites in our past. How has a path frequently walked shaped who we have become? Viewers can be touched by this work without identifying with these particular sites or with Iroquoian culture. These sites hold personal and cultural resonance for Staats, but they do not exclude non-Aboriginal viewers.

In fact, by engaging viewers through affect, the *Sour Springs* series can be seen as establishing connections between cultures. It is through affect, generated in what Bennett provocatively describes as a “transactive encounter” with the work, that viewers are able to experience the connection between identity, memory, and place. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze's claim that affect generates involuntary engagement, in turn initiating a state of deep reflection (Deleuze 1972),

Bennett suggests a work can be not just communicative but also transactive—it “touches” its viewers without relying on their identification with a subject—allowing us to feel and become intellectually engaged at the same time. In this way, an affective response lays the groundwork for new connections between viewers and subjects who might otherwise become preoccupied by their differences. Thus, an affective response can be particularly important in relation to issues that are difficult to grasp and links that are not easily forged. The process initiated by Staats' archival engagement may allow viewers to gain insight into the importance of place in Aboriginal culture.

In a more recent series, *Animose* (2002), Staats shifted his attention from sites of memory to everyday objects (Figure 2). This series, comprised of twenty-five black and white photographs, each one presented as a 16 in. × 20 in. silver print, also uses a



Fig 2 Greg Staats, *Animose*, 2002, 25 silver prints, 16 × 20 inches each. Courtesy of Greg Staats.

narrative structure. Another consistency in this series is the importance of the fine formal qualities of the photographs for the way viewers engage with the work. In each image, an object is centered within the frame. One photograph in the series shows a soft object, perhaps a foam pad, which has been tied with string and wrapped in a plastic bag (Figure 3). The soft form bulges under the

tightly tied string and curls from the snugly wrapped plastic. The warped form appears to be sitting on a cracked concrete sidewalk at the side of a road. It is illuminated with a bright, directional light that reflects off the plastic wrap, causing a curving shadow to extend to the left of the bulging form. The formal qualities of the image transform the discarded object into something that

Fig 3 Greg Staats, *Animose*, 2002, detail, silver print, 16 × 20 inches. Courtesy of Greg Staats.



is strangely compelling and imbued with significance. Barkhouse has described the objects in this series as speaking of “passage and absence” (Barkhouse 2000).³ The insignificant, unwanted objects and liminal spaces depicted in the images are given new life by the careful treatment they receive in Staats's photographs. He has transformed the detritus of everyday life into beautiful, singular entities in transition. This series suggests that objects are shaped by their past and made unique by the paths they have taken. They are reminiscent of an earlier series of tender portraits, *Acceptance* (1995), in which he attended to the unique character of each of his Aboriginal sitters. These photographs seem to suggest that although objects are different from people, they still have distinctive spirits.

The way viewers relate to the photographs in the *Animose* series can be described by Bennett's notion of “seeing feeling.” We see to *feel* the life of the subjects, and through seeing, we revive them. Staats turns the now decades-old critique of the objectifying nature of the photographic gaze on its head. Instead of inviting a gaze that exercises power over its object, the photographs skillfully engage viewers in a mode of looking that acknowledges and re-animates what has been left to pass away. Isolated from a broad context through careful framing and cropping, the objects seem strangely alive. In the *Animose* series, aesthetic pleasure is associated with renewal, rather than with objectification. François Dion has described the photographs in this series as “encounters” (Dion 2002: 7–12). As Dion has explained, the series relies on repetition and cumulative effect, and in this way, Staats's approach relates to the ritual

transmission of stories in an oral culture. In picturing a traditional way of translating memory into cultural knowledge, he at once recognizes the loss (of the tradition) and transforms it into something new. By compelling viewers to engage with these ordinary objects in their transitional states, he shows us how memory is a source of strength and renewal. By touching viewers in a way that produces an affective response, the *Animose* series revives the principles of an oral tradition through visual means.

Arnaud Maggs

Maggs's photographic practice is clearly different from that of Staats, although I want to suggest there are certain connections. It is more common to find Maggs's work discussed in relation to conceptual art or the typological photography of German photographers, including August Sander and Bernd and Hilla Becher (Monk 1999; Bédard 2000), than in relation to the work of an Aboriginal Canadian. However, like Staats, Maggs also relies on affect to draw viewers into a kind of archival photographic practice (Figure 4).

The clean exactness of Maggs's images entices viewers with their crisply rendered detail. The vast grid formations, which depend on repetition to produce patterns of similarity and difference, envelop viewers in their expanse. As with Staats's work, aesthetic pleasure is productive. Where the *Animose* photographs are like portraits of objects because of the particular way Staats has photographed them, the photographs of garment labels in *Travail des enfants dans l'industrie* (*Child Industrial Workers*) (1994) are like portraits because of the lives they represent. Philip Monk has described this



Fig 4 Arnaud Maggs, *Travail des enfants dans l'industrie 'les étiquettes'*, 1994, edition of 3, 198 framed color photographs, 51 × 40 cm each. Photo: Isaac Applebaum. Courtesy: Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto.

series as a memorial to the young workers, as each label records the name and labor of a girl who was employed in the weaving industry in France before child labor was outlawed (Monk 1999). This work is engaging because of the repetitive beauty of the colored labels, and it is moving because of the sheer number of labels arranged in a floor to ceiling grid along a wall. The absence of each body is marked by a label, which stands as evidence of that body's labor. It is precisely the absence of bodies that allows viewers to feel the impact of labor practices on these lives. Here, seeing is feeling.

Notification i and ii (1996) use the same grid format to picture the envelopes used to send death notices from the bereaved to friends and relatives of the dead in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century France (Figure 5). The work recalls a lost cultural practice at the same time that it archives the documents of that practice, but as Russell Keziere has noted, the work is neither sentimental nor nostalgic (Keziere 1997) (Figure 6).

Looking at the *Notification* series, viewers might imagine how they would respond to an envelope, marked with a black X, arriving in the mail, even though as Catherine



Fig 5 Arnaud Maggs, *Notification i*, 1996, edition of 3, 96 framed color photographs, 40 × 51 cm each, installed 306 × 660 cm. Photo: Isaac Applebaum. Courtesy: Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto.

Fig 6 Arnaud Maggs, *Notification ii*, 1996 edition of 3, 96 framed color photographs, 40 × 51 cm each, installed 306 × 660 cm. Photo: Isaac Applebaum. Courtesy: Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto.



Bédard notes, the work “is addressed to a viewer who is not the addressee of the sign” (Bédard 2000). Because of the gap between viewer and addressee, viewers are able to

both feel an incremental distance from the experience of loss and, at the same time, to relate to the place of the addressee. In this way, the work allows its audience to

explore a range of emotions: apprehension, dread, sorrow, without having to endure them continuously. As in *Travail des infants*, what is represented are paper traces that refer to people who are absent from the photographs, although in *Notification*, the absence has a transactive function. Viewers must substitute their own loved ones for the absent bodies, which initiates an intense engagement. And then the fascinating differences in the envelopes—some with stamps, seals, and handwriting—and the strikingly graphic presentation of the grid of photographs offer an escape from the anguish of loss. Our feelings about how we would respond to losing a loved one may be juxtaposed with aesthetic pleasure. Through the beauty of the work, Maggs provides a bearable place from which to contemplate loss.

Répertoire (1997) is another of Maggs's works in which the archive is a central and

evocative element that strikes viewers with affect (Figure 7). This composition of color photographs displays in extravagant detail the pages of turn-of-the-century Parisian photographer Eugène Atget's address book. As is well known, Atget understood his photographic practice as the documentation of Paris. He sold his photographs to painters, interior designers, and stage designers, who used the images as source material, as well as to French museums and libraries, where his photographs were valued as historical documents. There is a lovely layering of archival references in this piece. Just as Atget's address book records a detailed account of his own photographic practice, through which he compiled a kind of archive of the medieval city of Paris, Maggs has archived the records of that practice through his own intervention in the archives of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, where the address book resides. As Bédard



Fig 7 Arnaud Maggs, *Répertoire*, 1997, edition of 3, 48 framed color photographs, 205 × 735 cm. Photo: Isaac Applebaum. Courtesy: Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto.

explains, the force of the piece is in its “capacity to make us feel the visual absence of Atget’s images by evoking them in this roundabout manner.” Maggs has transformed the document of Atget’s life work “into a monument dedicated to the memory of Paris and one of its greatest photographers” (Bédard 2000). It is in the work’s evocation of the archive on multiple levels that viewers can grasp photography’s role in negotiating loss.

Conclusion

I turned to these works in attempting to deal with a personal loss, the death of my father. Initially, I was looking for a way to get some distance from my grief in order to understand what I was feeling and how the loss had affected me. One of the works I thought of first was Maggs’s *Notification*. I remembered seeing the piece several years earlier and recalled how I had been gradually pulled into the work as the realization settled over me that each of the envelopes in the expansive collection were death notices. In Staats’s work, I found a place from which to reflect on the way family history becomes integrated into identity. His *Sour Springs* series, in particular, showed me that memory can be restorative and that an archive can be a source of strength. The transactive mode of engagement that his works establish also reinforced my understanding of the enormous impact that losing traditional language and culture has had on Aboriginal people. At the same time, the work demonstrates the importance of finding ways to gather together memories to restore and renew what has been lost. Staats has connected the disorienting feeling of individual loss to the destructive experience

of cultural loss, and in this way, he provides non-Aboriginal viewers with a deeper understanding of the devastating effects this loss has had on Aboriginal people.

Although there are significant differences between the work of Staats and Maggs, both artists show us how a desire to make sense of loss—to mourn—can find form in an archival practice. Whereas Staats compiles and draws on an archive of personal memory and cultural tradition, Maggs investigates sources of collective memory. Staats’s approach might be characterized as re-animating an archive, while Maggs might be described as the photographer as archivist. But by engaging viewers in an affective response, the work of both artists is transactive. “Seeing feeling” allows viewers to consider how memories of our past can be transformed into the foundation of our future. Within recent debates in art criticism focusing on the aesthetic turn, Arthur Danto and others have argued that aesthetic engagement can facilitate contemplation and deeper understanding, which in turn can be a source of political change (Danto 2003; Meyer and Ross 2004). Both artists do this by offering a way of thinking about archiving that uses personal practices of archiving to move away from the disciplinary characteristics of the institutional archive. What the work of these artists demonstrates is that archives can serve as sources of renewal.

Notes

- I The Mohawk are an indigenous people of North America. Today, their communities are located in upstate New York, southern Ontario and along the St. Lawrence River in Quebec. The Mohawk belong to the Iroquois League which formed in

the fifteenth century to establish peace and was initially comprised of five nations, the Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca. A sixth nation, the Tuscarora, joined in the eighteenth century.

- 2 In Canada, as in other countries such as the United States and Australia, Aboriginal people became marginalized as a result of colonialism. Stereotypes of Indianness developed and became entrenched in Western culture through popular forms of representation. Until the 1990s, Aboriginal art was relegated to anthropological museums where it was commonly presented with a Western framework as part of the nation's historical past. With recent efforts to challenge Eurocentric ideas and to assert the ongoing vitality and significance of Aboriginal culture, art galleries have begun to collect and display contemporary and historical Aboriginal art.
- 3 To see more of Staats's work, go to the Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art website www.ccca.ca.

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