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Sara Martinetti

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VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF A PAPER EATER'S PRACTICES

Sara Martinetti

Throughout his career, the bookseller, archivist, and appraiser Jean-Noël Herlin, who describes himself as a “junk mail junkie,”¹ has been a voracious “paper eater” whose work methods appropriate and hybridize the artisanal approaches underpinning the long tradition of bookmaking in Europe and the artistic sensibilities that emerged in the 1960s, particularly on the New York scene. According to a conception of information widely shared by his generation, Herlin looks at printed matter as a “vehicle.”²

Throughout his life, with the support of his assistants, he tried to push back the limits of working with printed matter, whether as a bookseller specializing in exhibition catalogues and artists' books, or by building a collection of ephemera, the Jean-Noël Herlin Archive Project. Is there a type of document that continues to elude bibliography? Observing the work of Herlin and other book specialists stepping on the art scene in the late 1960s, I asked myself if integrating documents in intellectual structures was their—mediated—way of inscribing things in life and in history.

In 2014, as part of a doctoral research project around Seth Siegelaub, I followed the advice of London-based artist-librarian Arnaud Desjardin and asked Jean-Noël for access to certain files in his Archive Project. On this occasion, I discovered his unique, all-absorbing commitment to his work with written documents. Although he consciously situates himself outside the worlds of art and academia (among others by refusing to be recorded), I was—paradoxically—able to persuade him to contribute to a “film” documenting his daily work, economy, and ideas.³ Visual anthropology

¹ Jean-Noël Herlin, “Ephemera: Junk Mail Mon Amour,” *Art on Paper* 12, no. 1 (September/October 2007): 44.

² “I didn’t become a bookseller out of a ‘love of books.’ I don’t love books as objects. I’m not a collector. I appreciate first editions, beautiful bindings . . . but for me the book is a vehicle from creator to consumer.” Interview by Jean-Noël Herlin for the film directed by Cengiz Hartlap and Sara Martinetti, Paris, July 21, 2023.

³ The project was initiated in 2017 with Géraldine Beck, and the first shoot in New York in February this year was made possible by a grant from Philip E. Aarons.

informed my choices regarding the boundaries of my field of research and the type of recording, and Jean-Noël—vowing to be “unfiltered”—agreed to share his thoughts as well as moments of his personal life.

In this context, and in relation to art-world figures who, like Herlin, reflect on the conditions of presentation of their limitless endeavor, where does my research fit in? In the course of our collaboration, in which we were joined by sound artist Cengiz Hartlap, the use of moving images, sound, and editing has enabled us to capture, reproduce, and question the conditions of creation of this archive, with the fire in Herlin’s apartment on 103rd Street, which destroyed a substantial part of the archive, as the culminating point in the inquiry. While the archive is a representation that forms in two stages (the loss of a document’s immediate usefulness and its rediscovery with respect to each new situation),⁴ it presents itself in the field as a paradoxically prepared system whose rationale asks to be analyzed.

During my inquiry, it appeared that Herlin’s “writing practices” encompass broader notions than what the term “writing” might suggest.⁵ Some, like compiling an index or writing cross-reference cards, are a continuation of intellectual techniques introduced during the Renaissance. Others, such as exchanging or buying items of mail from art critics or artists that would otherwise have ended



Jean-Noël Herlin on his bed, surrounded by rubble and ephemera from his Archive Project, after a fire in his apartment on 299 E 103rd Street, New York, March 2018. Still from a video by Elie Aufseesser featuring in the film directed by Cengiz Hartlap and Sara Martinetti.

up in the trash (their “junk mail,” in effect), are archival inventions. Still others are common practice pushed to the extreme, such as handwriting bibliographic captions for each ephemera or assigning a price to the thousands of objects that populated artist Lil Picard’s overcrowded apartment.⁶ Others, finally, play with expectations, for instance when he turns his bookseller’s catalogs into rudite works of art inspired by Conceptual Art practices. As a matter of fact, the artistic context intensifies the analysis of the issues at stake.

The first monographic exhibition devoted to Jean-Noël Herlin, which this exhibition journal accompanies, brings together a selection of 500 documents and works, mainly from his personal archives, grouped according to the four main “writing practices” I was able to identify: reading/writing/indexing, bookshop, archive, expertise. The presentation was conceived in conjunction with an immersive audiovisual installation whose scenario unfolds over eight hours and connects several threads: a day in the work life of Jean-Noël; the four sequences of his life’s journey in written matter; events and encounters in New York and Paris, among others with artist friends (Jon Hendricks, David Higginbotham), assistants (Shelley Himmelstein, Michael Jensen, Ellis Mikelic, Zak Vreeland), an art critic and supplier of ephemera (Kim Levin), an archive producer (Julie Martin of Experiments in Art and Technology—E.A.T.), and a client (Giorgio Di Domenico).

The experience of a visit provides glimpses, at best, of a sprawling entity in which work, archive, and intimate sphere are interdependent. By following the writings, the exhibition reveals the complexity and sometimes unsettling implications of Herlin’s radical commitment. His practices confront us with a notion of materiality that we perceive as extreme. Paper is omnipresent—among others in the folders used to store the Archive Project files or as a canvas for graphic artwork—but so are coffee, milk, and sugar, which, month upon month, combine to form organic crusts on jars of jam.⁷ Herlin, who operates like a salesman, never ceases counting.

But money is not the only object; more generally, it’s the value of artistic productions that he constantly questions. Is the precariousness of his solitary, repetitive, and long-term endeavor inevitable? Herlin, the paper eater, acts in extremes, and often in both opposites at the same time.

4 See Jérôme Glicentein, Yann Potin, Paul-Louis Rinuy, and Clothilde Roullier, “Archives, disparition, récréation. Jeu et rejeu dans les arts,” in Yann Potin, Paul-Louis Rinuy, and Clothilde Roullier, eds., *Archives en acte. Arts plastiques, danse, performance* (Saint-Denis: Presses universitaires de Vincennes, 2018), 8.

5 The methodological framework of this research is the anthropology of writing, for which Béatrice Fraenkel has developed the theoretical tools. See a.o. Béatrice Fraenkel, *La Signature: Genèse d’un signe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

6 Jean-Noël Herlin, *Lil Picard Estate. Inventory and Appraisal of Lil Picard’s Archives, Library, Art Works, and Collection of Works by Other Artists by Jean-Noël Herlin with the Assistance of Jennifer Sachs Samet*, expert report, 1997.

7 Jean-Noël Herlin. *Untitled*, 2018–2023. Coffee, milk, sugar, resin on Bonne Maman jam jar.