Art Education Historiography After Archive Fever

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Written for and presented at
Nordic Art Education in Motion
Aalto University, February 26 2020

... there, where anything goes wild within change’s archaic identity

Etel Adnan: Sea and Fog

“Change’s archaic identity” – when responding to the title of this seminar, Nordic Art Education in Motion, and, more specifically, to its theme, “Digital competences and computational thinking: preparing children, young people and adults for a digitalized society,” I wish to begin by addressing the archaic identity of change we’re here to articulate (if, indeed, change stands in a metaphorical relation to motion), as well as the preparation that accompanies both change and motion.

“Change’s archaic identity” – a happy coincidence led me to cite this line from the Lebanese-American poet and painter Etel Adnan; a line I had read and forgotten by the time I had to come up with a title for this talk, “Art Education Historiography After Archive Fever;” a line that, in the course of thinking through this topic, found me again. This reunion would have not been possible without another encounter, or reencounter, with Derrida’s Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression [Mal d’Archive: Une Impression Freudienne] – a book whose title I decided to refer to in my talk since I wanted an excuse to read it with thought.

What is it, then, that I’m trying to articulate here, today? Or there, where Adnan’s words point to?

Like how Derrida begins his discussion of the archive with the term arkhé – a place of beginning and command, of commencement and commandment – and by acknowledging that “a science of the archive must include the theory of this institutionalization, that is to say, the theory both of the law which begins by inscribing itself here and of the right which authorizes it,” (p. 4) I see that to discuss art education in motion requires an attention to the archaic identity of the change implicit in this movement; an attention to the force (or forces) sparking and sustaining it; a force (or a set of forces) giving this motion its direction and velocity.

This becomes all the more important if we assume, with Derrida, that an archive is “an irreducible experience of the future” (p. 68) – that instead of being merely a container of things of the past, it carries within itself an anticipation of the future, or,
to be more specific, a combination of fear of a future destruction (or death) and a promise of knowledge (and life) to come. In this sense, to archive is to prepare – both for the best and for the worst; for an oblivion and remembrance; a preparation that sets the stage for archivability as such.

In this sense, to talk about archives here today – under the auspices of our theme – is an attempt to understand some of the institutes (understood both as a ground and a command) of the motion we’re after, especially when – or if – art educators are assumed to prepare students for a society; a digitalized society that is already here – and has been for a quite some time now – and a society that continues to function as a horizon to come – yes, we always seem to be on the verge of some horizon – a horizon that changes everything.

My underlying hope – an archaic hope, perhaps – is to find a way to wildness within this motion – com-motion even – that may help to shake the institutes and horizons governing the preparatory work we’re here to do. I’m not suggesting that such wildness would stand in an emancipatory opposition to an incarcerating order. Indeed, going wild can also mean a feverish compulsion, a fixated search for an order that puts an end to a wildness of the world that one might have taken in. This is, initially, what Derrida means by archive fever, mal d’archive:

We are en mal d’archive: in need of archives. Listening to the French idiom, and in it the attribute en mal de, to be en mal d’archive can mean something else than to suffer from a sickness, from a trouble or from what the noun mal might name. It is to burn with a passion. It is to never rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there’s too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return of the most archaic place of absolute commencement. (p. 91)

Indeed, I’m not here to declare that we – art educators – have been cured of archive fever, even if – as I will discuss shortly – it might seem like that. The after I’m after in the title of this talk means to follow and to search. In this sense, I’m interested in how might this fever help us to rethink art education historiography – a practice so often linked to the attempt to save the future by doing away with the mistakes of the past (an archaic desire par excellence) – as a competency preparing us for a digitalized society.

Let’s take a look at how Finnish art educators have prepared their students and colleagues for a digitalized society in the past. Interestingly enough, this example was conducted under an archivist sign: Picturing a Century CD-ROM, produced in the 1990s as part of Pirkko Pohjakallio’s Art Education History Project conducted at the Department of Art Education at University of Art and Design Helsinki. Initially prepared as a study project for the 90th anniversary exhibition of the Finnish Art Teachers’ Association in 1996, this CD-ROM was (and still is) an ambitious attempt to make the Art Education History Archive located at the University of Art and Design available for students and teachers beyond the confines of the university. Not only was the CD-ROM a storage for images: it presented a multimedia environment where the user could wander from classroom to classroom.
and immerse themselves – through images, texts, and sounds – in the everyday life of the past. As Pirkko Pohjakallio (n.d.) described it:

The user of the *Picturing a Century* CD-ROM demo first enters an imaginary space, an ‘entry foyer’. It has five doors leading to five classrooms, each representing a different period of the twentieth century. A noisy group of students from various periods is running around in the foyer. Uno Cygnaeus, the father of Finland’s elementary school system, is also there, flying around with a flag on his shoulders. In the foyer there is also a gallery, where the user can access all the pictures on the CD done by schoolchildren in the different periods. A file drawer contains information about the pictures and other documents. (para. 4)

Despite these ambitions, the CD-ROM lived a relatively short life. As Pohjakallio (2009) has noted, the software they used became obsolete in a few years, and multimedia environments shifted from physical disks to online platforms. When I began my art education studies in 2006, it was already considered as a thing of the past – anecdotally, one of my peers (only two years younger than me) didn’t even know what the term “romppu” (a slang word for CD-ROM) meant. What was intended to provide an access to the history archive had itself become inaccessible, as there were no computers to be found that could run this “romppu.” However, it is worth noting that the digital archival work conducted as part of the project did not end with this predicament. The project did eventually go online (in a less immersive form, though) and the site built back then (*Taidekasvatuksen kuva-arkisto*) is still up – even though it has not been updated at least in ten years (http://tka.taik.fi). Indeed, it seems that these archives – our archives – lie currently outside the kind of feverish attention that made the CD-ROM and the website possible.

My reason to take *Picturing a Century* as an example is not to point to a technological failure or to warn about the dangers of relying too much on new technologies. It has, I believe, other lessons to teach. As an “irreducible experience of the future,” it offers an articulation of change’s archaic identity, a feverish recourse to the origins of the profession and the authorization of these origins via a motion that produces various signs of history (we know that we’re looking into the past; the content) as well as an anticipation of the future (we know that we’re looking into the future; the form). Situating itself in this way between the past and the future, *Picturing a Century wrote history* by calling for the future in the present to save the past in the present. To put this differently, the part of the present affiliated with the future – the CD-ROM – restored and remembered the part of the present seemingly devoid of a future horizon – physical archives with their lack of space and accessibility.

At the center of this historiography is motion: art education in motion; a motion to be both embraced (as a guarantor of continuity) and resisted (as a force of destruction and oblivion); a motion to be prepared for, and a motion preparing us for what is to come. It is an archaic motion in a sense that it justifies itself with the force that drives us toward the future to come and, and in its coming, fastens us more tightly to the origins of this motion. Indeed, even in the “entry foyer” of the CD-ROM, everything moves (even though today, we cannot see this movement): students summoned from different decades running around this “imaginary space” of history, a space
overseen by something moving, a flying caped crusader, Uno Cygnaeus, who serves as the origin of this specific history as well as the guarantor of its legitimacy, like the patriarchal Father Figure of the Finnish educational system he is. This motion – simultaneously belonging to the everyday (the students, the pictures, the other documents) and the fantastic (Super-Cygnaeus; the layering of time; imagination) – testifies to a history on the move; that art educators have made history, produced it, and will continue this production in order to prepare themselves and their students for the coming of a horizon of change spanning across the firmament, surrounding them like the cosmos, feverishly looking for a place from which this change is to be observed and articulated.1

It is, then, no wonder that the CD-ROM became obsolete. Like all archives, Picturing a Century was built upon its own destruction, articulating the demise (or the possible demise; the inevitable demise) of the memory it ought to preserve. This is not a question of failure, but its opposite: the CD-ROM prepared its audience for a digital society by bringing them closer to a horizon that was already there and yet never really arrived. Change’s archaic identity, indeed.

At this point, I will shift gears a bit. After all, I haven’t said anything yet about computational thinking. Even though it is a concept that hasn’t found its way to my professional vocabulary yet, I won’t spend too much time trying to define what it means. Instead, I’ll try to think it with the feverish motion I’ve already discussed and the preparation this motion might entail.

Much like Aristotle’s understanding of narrative structure, computations tend to be framed between a beginning (an input) and an end (an output). What happens between these two points is a process, an algorithmic operation of rules proceeding in steps that give the process its order and legibility. Notably, this process needs data to work: one must enter something into it in order to use it or to perceive whether the operation does what it is expected to do.

Returning to Derrida’s reading of the term arkhé, aren’t we here also pointing to commencement and commandment? A grounding rule for an operation that sets things in motion; a motion that, in the end, produces something that, perhaps, can be understood as true and thus authoritative? From this perspective, the truthfulness of computation – its rendering of the real – lies in its ability to conduct a change that nevertheless stays true to its point of origin, its arkhé that grants the data inserted in it its grammar, legibility, and truthfulness. Like Aristotelian beginnings and ends form stories when events are placed between them, so do computations write fictions of truth when one assumes that the relation between their inputs and outputs make sense. This means that a fault in computational process can be considered as a

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1 In Michel de Certeau’s terms: “historical research is staged, strictly speaking, in the relation between the extreme poles of the entire operation: on the one hand, in the construction of models, and on the other, in the attachment of a ‘degree of meaning’ to the results obtained after all the combinations of processed information have been completed. The most visible form of this relation ultimately consists in granting relevance to differences proportioned to the formal units built beforehand; in discovering heterogeneity that can be of technical use. In relation to the material produced through the advent of serial constructs and their combinations, former ‘interpretation’ becomes the manifestation of a deviation relative to these models.” (Certeau, 1988, p. 77)
grammatical error: a misstep in the path of rules that governs the legibility of whatever the computation is expected to write.

Again, we encounter motion: this time, a motion between ends and beginnings united in a feverish search for truth and order – or, to be more precise, a truthful expression of order that can be put to work wherever this expression is perceived. Indeed, if computational thinking refers – as one author had it – to “the thought processes involved in formulating a problem and expressing its solution(s) in such a way that a computer—human or machine—can effectively carry out” (Wing, 2014, para 5, my emphasis), it is possible to say that at the center of its operation lies a double bind between perceiving an expressible order and turning that order into a sequence – a process – that explains the archaic identity of whatever is perceived.

The fundamental assumption here is, of course, that an order always expresses itself, or even more radically, that there is no expression without an order. In other words, there is no nature without Laws of Nature; there are no human societies without a primordial Law that keeps us together; there is no future without History; there is no history without an Archive. Our task – a computational task – seems to be to find and formulate these orders, express them, and use them; in short, to lay down the law.

If computational thinking is, then, a competence that prepares us for a digitalized society, what does such law-abiding mal d’ordre tell us about preparation? Whereas Picturing a Century wrote history in order to prepare art educators and their students for a time to come that – most importantly – was already present (“an irreducible experience of the future”), one could argue that computational thinking allows us to grasp the ground of this experience, its very order and expression, its arkhé and truth, so that the change implicit in the horizon we call digitalized society can be managed and controlled (again, this is a horizon that is, at the same time, already here and something that lies ahead; it is a society that has simultaneously changed and will change everything). As a competence integral to such preparation, computational thinking interminably moves toward (com- together + petère to aim at, go toward, try to reach, seek, etc., OED) the difference it seeks between beginnings and ends; toward an exhaustive expression of a change – a historical change, even – to be made useful, even beneficial, for those claiming to perceive it. Writing fictions of truth, computational thinking makes sense of the motion it itself strives for – feverishly, endlessly – in order to fasten this change to its archaic identity; to turn change into an expression of an originary Cause whose signatures we must learn to read and, most importantly, whose grammar we ought to follow when writing Laws of our own.²

² As James J. Bono writes about science and scientific inquiry during the Renaissance and Early Modernity: “God’s Book of Nature is thus an artifice of His writing. His contingent inscription of things; as such His works must be read by scrutinizing carefully their details for clues to their internal order. The very diversity and differences marking things must be grasped in order to understand that text, to grasp the language of things inscribed by God. The language of things might be particular and empirical or it might be relational, even mathematical. In any case, this theory of a language of things, of God’s inscription of nature, valorized a hermeneutic practice of ‘de-in-scription,’ or description, of nature. Where [scholastic] exegesis championed unity and the turn to words and symbols, the hermeneutics of deinscription gloried in the particularity of things and processes, championing diversity and the turn to empiricism – to God’s works.” (Bono, 1996, pp. 83-84)
As I’m nearing the end of this paper, it is worth to return to its beginning, to its very first word (its *genesis*). Indeed, how to understand that *there* where Adnan points to; that *there* where anything goes wild within change’s archaic identity? Perhaps we must go to the origins I’ve left in the shadows thus far, to the paragraph in which this passage appears:

Geometry’s ecstatic powers overtake the mind. Geometries undefined. Not an apology for perfection, nor an alternative notion of form, but the fusion of sounds with light, there, where anything goes wild within change’s archaic identity. (Adnan, 2012, p. 9)

No computations, then, but geometries, ecstatic even; a fusion of sounds with light. Indeed, we seem to remain in a feverish milieu, constantly in motion. And if there is one thing we might have learned from the preceding discussion, it’s that there is an intimate relation between fever, preparation, and motion – all pointing, in one way or another, either to a future completion or destruction or both. One might say, then, that Adnan’s *there* can also be seen to contain an allusion to an archaic horizon of *difference* in respect to the seeming recognizability of an unnamed and yet archivable here.

But whereas historical research and computational thinking – when writing their fictions of truth – reach for such horizons in order to put things in their *right* places, Adnan’s ecstatic *there* can be understood as a place out of place (ἐκστασις, ἐκ out + ἱστάναι to place, OED); a unity of opposites (coincidentia oppositorum) of form and formlessness where fever writes fictions of another kind – fictions, perhaps, without a Cause (*wild* ones, *rebellious* ones). It might be the kind of writing that Hélène Cixous refers to when she says: “Writing is not arriving; most of the time it’s *not* arriving” (Cixous, 1993, p. 65); a writing one cannot master and that does not master; an order-less expression irreducible to a place of commencement and commandment. In other words, infinite writing, a com-motion writing *within* change’s archaic identity.

So how could something like this prepare us – children, young people, adults – for a digitalized society? What kind of competences do I have to offer?

Instead of offering competences meant to keep us up with a motion toward a time to come (or, more generally, to keep up with time) I see that it is important to recognize that *we already are in motion*; that there are multitudes of motion, and that to reduce this multitude into a feverish search for an historical order of time – through a constant recourse to origins, to a soothing, originary difference that sets things right – is to do away with change’s *anarchic* identity; its ecstatic, geometric powers, its motion undefined. This might require an uncoupling of preparation from competences: that the *movement of seeking* embedded in the idea of competency would not set things ready for whatever is to come (prae- + parāre to make ready, OED), but rather it might offer sensitivity toward various forces of com-motion operating *within* every change already in the making – historical or not.

That said, if *making sense* is what historical research is often claimed to do – that is, making sense of the present by making sense of the past – so that historians can
prepare us for a future to come, then art education historiography after archive fever may challenge this making-sense by paying attention to a wildness within the change we seem to be after; an archaic and anarchic wildness irreducible – perhaps – to beginnings and ends. No computations, then, but ecstatic com-motions within the archivability of the present.

References


