What you think is the point is not the point at all but only the beginning of the sharpness.¹


The Weight of History
Victoria Horne

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Notes on The Miraculous at Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop
Peter Amoore (with Raphael Rubinstein)

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2. Suzanne van der Lingen & Claire Walsh, Footnoting the Archive: Preface (MAP, 2016): http://mapmagazine.co.uk/9892/footnoting-archive/
The weight of History

Part I – Going back into History

For some time now contemporary artists have exhibited a fascination with the past and a tendency for sifting through its material traces. Hal Foster first diagnosed this ‘archival impulse’ in 2004, observing the condition in artistic practices that retrieve ‘lost or displaced’ historical information for the present. These historical oddments, or indeed footnotes, are said to be salvaged ‘in a gesture of alternative knowledge or counter-memory’. Three years later in the same journal, Mark Godfrey remarked that, ‘historical research and representation appear central to contemporary art. There are an increasing number of artists whose practice starts with research in the archives, and others who deploy what has been termed an archival form of research.’

The exploratory, archival, historical and archaeological compulsions of the contemporary artworld have been ecstatically referred to as an obsession, or most famously, a fever. This brief commentary introduces some of the key logics configuring this febrile longing for bygone times, and makes the point that this archival inclination is perhaps less of a novelty for feminism.

Part II considers in finer detail a film recently produced by Kate Davis in response to material in the BBC archives.

Various factors have been proposed as explanation for art’s archival preoccupation. Looking back to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the ‘end of history’ was notoriously declared with the universal triumph of liberal democracy understood as marking the end to ideological development. This conclusion was alleged to fundamentally reshape our understanding of, and attitude towards, the past – producing a post-political postmodern presentism. Yet even before the horrific dust clouds had settled over Manhattan, in 2001 commentators began heralding ‘the end of the end’. The pivotal moment of 9/11 is often cited, along with the financial crises of the later 2000s, the decade’s rapid technological change and overwhelming expansion in communication, as justification of history’s ruthless return.

The cultural logic of late capitalism has therefore been succeeded by a subsequent age which some writers have named metamodernism or altermodernism, one boldly declaring that ‘postmodernism is dead’. Its demise is evidently linked to the resurgent interest in archives – for, as the theorist Kate Eichhorn puts it – ‘after poststructuralism, where else was there to go but back into history and its material artefacts and documents?’ A number of high-profile exhibitions attest to this amplified historical inclination: Archive

However, it would be remiss to characterise the return of history as a purely cultural phenomenon or to overlook its political dimensions. The return is bound up with the revitalisation of Marxist and feminist discourses, the resurgence of popular activism and collective protest: thus within the artworld this renewed fascination with history often conveys a politically utopian flavour. Despite such optimism the logic of the archive is simultaneously haunted by the anxieties and crises of the twenty-first century. We inhabit a fast-paced technological world of breakneck digital sharing, information overload, and an urgent desire to keep up. The ‘memory boom’ of the information age is plainly evident in the obsessive documenting, saving and archiving of our own daily lives on social media. In 2010 the US Library of Congress epitomised this expansive attitude to memorialising when it announced an ambition to record every tweet made since the inception of Twitter four years earlier. Nevertheless, to date the magnitude of this informational cacophony has proven impossible to manage and the Twitter archive remains unavailable for research. The fantasies of completion and permanence that fuel such compensatory strategies are clearly always bound to some level of failure; and that failure cruelly exacerbates the anxieties of forgetting, of inconsequence, of oblivion. Nonetheless, some artists deliberately resist the frenzy to remember, the impulse to archive. Most famously, Tino Sehgal’s ‘constructed situations’ stand in sharp distinction, the transitory experience of those performances compounded by the artist’s insistence on a complete lack of documentation.)

In general, contemporary art’s enamoured encounter with historical archives is not a particularly fresh discovery for feminists. For women, such incompleteness has long structured our relationship to the past. Since the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s permitted unprecedented numbers of female scholars access to the academy, feminist research has been structured around silence and speaking. Confronted with the enforced absence of women’s achievements from official histories, the collective struggle has been to locate those missing voices. Feminist researchers have therefore described their enquiries as taking place in the gaps, blank pages, margins, and footnotes of authorised chronicles. In the feminist imaginary, archives necessarily embody contradictions: understood simultaneously as regulated spaces that shore up knowledge and power, and as indispensable sites for recording and transmitting knowledge across generations.

One sense in which the archival impulse has emerged in feminist studies, is through its forceful reassessment of earlier revolutionary moments. Eichhorn has identified in many contemporary practices ‘the repeated sense of having been absent from an event that was feminism’, whether it was the 1910s, 1960s or 1990s. This longing for earlier activisms can be grasped in Petra Bauer’s A Morning Breeze, which displays group photographs of socialist-feminist clubs in early twentieth-century Sweden. Presented within a pseudo-archival setting (complete with individual digital projectors) the installation recuperates an overlooked but significant instance of women’s collective self-representation as political agents. Sharon Hayes’ exhibition In My Little Corner of the World, Anyone Would Love You comparably extracts materials from queer-feminist publications and collectives in the US and UK in 1955-77.

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8. Jonathan Crary, 24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep (Verso Books, 2013)
9. ‘Memory boom’ is taken from Andreas Huyssen.
10. I have borrowed this example from Jane Blocker in Becoming Past: History in Contemporary Art (Duke University Press, 2016).
12. Bauer’s A Morning Breeze was presented at the 59th Venice Biennale in 2015.
Re-presenting these artefacts in a five-channel film projection, Hayes explores issues around political activism, community and forms of communication. Moreover, both artists explore radical distribution methods in their projects, producing posters that bring the archival materials beyond the gallery space to intervene within the urban environment. As contemporary artists working with the scraps and fragments of alternative histories, Bauer and Hayes therefore wittily adopt earlier forms of print ephemera and activist culture to reach new audiences.

The short excerpt at the beginning of this article is taken from a book entitled *Dust* by the social historian Carolyn Steedman. In it she characterises the archive as incomplete, stuttering and halting — *stories caught halfway through*. Unlike the cool, scientific analyses of positivist art history, or the heightened romance associated with *mal d’archive*, Steedman introduces her readers to the exquisitely mundane realities of archival research. These might encompass the itchy, uncomfortable beds of cheap summer accommodation, the overly air-conditioned library atmosphere, and the gnawing anxiety of leaving something important unread. Such intimate moments are rarely acknowledged, let alone celebrated, in sentimentalised accounts of research and a comparable sense of the overlooked is one that emerges powerfully in Kate Davis’s film *Weight*. Steedman goes on to describe the archive as ‘a place of dreams’, a phrase that gracefully reconfigures the archive from absolute source of knowledge to a place of active (and activist) invention.

Part II – Into the Archive

Glasgow-based artist Kate Davis routinely employs archival research in an endeavour, as she puts it, ‘to bear witness to the complexities of the past’. 14 In earlier projects her meticulous pencil drawings have reconstructed pamphlet-pages from twentieth-century suffrage history, retraced nudes from the avant-garde canon, and insistently staged intergenerational feminist links by citing the artworks of Jo Spence, Barbara Kruger and Faith Wilding. In 2014 Davis was commissioned by LUX / Artists Moving Image and BBC Scotland to take part in a residency alongside Kathryn Elkin, Luke Fowler, Torsten Lauschmann, Stephen Sutcliffe and Aliya Syed. Davis’ resulting film, *Weight*, adapts John Read’s script for a 1961 documentary about sculptor Barbara Hepworth, superimposing it over excavated images of mid-twentieth century housework. In doing this, *Weight* unlocks a timely conversation around (art) history, gender, labour and value.

Adhering to the leisurely pace and formal conventions of the BBC documentary format, Davis comically undermines this familiar style from the outset. Against the dated sounds of folksy guitar music, *Weight*’s opening title sequence ambiguously locates the study in ‘1961 or thereabouts’. At the same time a platter of dramatically staged potato peels revolves on a turnstile, further alerting the audience to the strange reversals to come. A montage of retro black-and-white photographs moves across the screen depicting groups of women laden with grocery bags, pushing cumbersome metal perambulators, perusing the aisles of supermarkets, hoovering, bathing a child, washing steps. ‘In a kitchen in a home in London,’ intones the narrator, ‘stand some clean dishes. Some people admire them, some are puzzled; many wonder whose work they are. In fact, it’s the work of this woman. For many years a leading personality among women who pioneered housework in Britain.’

Davis has cunningly borrowed the language and structure of Read’s script (‘In a courtyard of a new building in London stands a sculpture. Some people admire it…’) to describe the mundane daily tasks of the homeworker. The ironic juxtaposition between tone and content discloses the latent value system that ranks these activities, while the humorous abrasion between ‘pioneered’ and ‘housework’

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14 See Davis’s website: www.katedavisartist.co.uk
demonstrates the incompatibility between those concepts buried deep within the English language. The montaged images gliding across the screen remind us to what extent ‘femininity’ (as a set of behaviours, beliefs and characteristics) has, in the post-war period, been produced through, and in relation to, unwaged care labour. Here we might think of Betty Friedan’s 1963 description of the coiffured suburban housewife replete with the latest ‘time-saving’ gadgets, yet hopelessly beset by an existential unhappiness. The context may have altered (nowadays we are more likely to see filtered lifestyle images of ‘clean living’) but the cheerful performance of competent domesticity continues to secure the commoditised feminine ideal. One of Weight’s key contributions is to highlight the uneven appreciation of domestic care work in comparison with the solitary, creative pursuits of the artist.

This paradox was acutely apparent in Hepworth’s own life (1903-75). A determined and tricky individual by many accounts, she was firmly dedicated to her art at a time when women (artists) faced severe discrimination across numerous psychic, economic and institutional strata. Delivered in predictably clipped tones, the 1961 narration emphasises the sculptor’s monumental raw materials: ‘The weight of the great blocks and the storing of her sculptures are among the greatest problems she has to face…’ This, unsurprisingly, was far from the truth (and the misleading phrase appears to have inspired Davis’s exploration and title). Following her first marriage which produced one child, Hepworth and the painter Ben Nicholson had triplets in 1934. With the outbreak of the Second World War their family left London for St Ives in Cornwall, where Hepworth persistently negotiated the dual burdens of motherhood and art making. Her convoluted use of male pronouns to describe her practice (‘The sculptor carves because he must’) hints at the psychic toll of a divided life; she remained both physically detached from a metropolitan artistic milieu and psychologically detached from the universally masculine artist-subject. However, motherhood was inseparable from Hepworth’s creative existence at this time and the theme of mother-and-child crops up repeatedly in her sculptures: ‘I loved the family and everything to do with them. I loved the environment and the cooking. I used to cook and go in my studio. I had to have methods of working. If I was in the middle of a work and the oven burned or the children called for me, I used to make an arrangement with music, records, or poetry, so that when I went back to the studio, I picked up where I left off. I enjoyed it, you see; it was part of me.’

Davis’s film thus counteracts the myopic effects of historical and televised representations, which have struggled to capture the textured realities of lived existence beyond the romantic art mythologies of madness, badness and genius. Given that the filmic or photographic document is culturally invested with convictions of optical realism, the critical significance of the film’s message is given weight through the medium of montage. As Allan Sekula describes, ‘The very term “document” entails a notion of legal or official truth, as well as a notion of proximity to and verification of an original event.’ Through a kitsch scavenging of twentieth-century domestic life, Weight asks which truths are recorded, whose stories are told, and what forms of labour are most valued? Moreover, by exhuming commonplace photographs of customers crowding a butcher’s shop or washed sheets drying outdoors, Davis uncovered further layers of latent archival erasure in the muddling algorithms and key terms that either mark or conceal these moments. Despite its currents of uncanny humour, Weight’s overriding tone is one of melancholy; perhaps for the failure of historical operations to accurately indicate other forms of labour alongside artistic production. And yet, Davis does not wistfully stage images of mid twentieth-century housework in order to recuperate them to a heroic narrative

of creative production. While the resourcefulness required to complete these daily reproductive tasks is not denied, what’s emphasised instead is the utter discordance between the two worlds of home-making and art-making. The extended scene of a mop bucket, brush and rubber glove, vividly lit in the manner of a Baroque still life, ludicrously stages this dissonance.

*Weight* extracts the romantic language of art criticism and grounds it in the quotidian details of lived experience. The turbulent seascapes of Cornwall are swapped for the concrete environments of urban housing developments, and Hepworth’s declaration ‘I, the sculptor, am the landscape’ transforms into ‘I, the woman, am the house’. This playful exchange incisively undercuts the stereotypes and cultural beliefs invested in artistic and domestic subjectivities. It is because both are perceived to be ‘natural’ (women love their children, artists are passionate about their work), that the social, historical and economic forces constituting the field of labour are masked. A clearer understanding of these forces might provoke us to query this hierarchy and to imagine alternative systems.

In conclusion, what do the archival excavations recorded in *Weight* accomplish? The tone and imagery of the film evocatively reconstruct the domestic worlds of mid-twentieth-century Britain. It was, appropriately, at this time that the History Workshop movement was pioneering the idea of ‘history from below’, an approach that supplemented grand examinations of geopolitical conquest with a radical emphasis on ordinary lives and stories. Like the best alternative research, *Weight* too seeks out the gaps and silences of the past and draws out their resonances for the present. Although the majority of political, archival artworks (understandably) seek to memorialise feminism’s inspirational moments of change, Davis looks back to a period in which the excitement and revolutionary potential of second-wave feminism lay ahead. It would not be until nearer the end of Hepworth’s life that women began to collectively organise and theorise the terrain of unwaged maintenance labour. By reconceiving of it as reproductive labour (reproductive in that it ‘reproduces’ the conditions of capital) the home and care work therefore became a terrain for revolutionary struggle; even though its potential may have remained unrealised.

While *Weight* alerts us to an older model of incongruity that has, in the intervening decades, been complicated by the ‘feminisation’ of productive work more generally, its overall themes remain apposite to dissent over unpaid and underpaid labour in a financially bloated art sector. 17 Opening this archive casts new and subtle light on struggles around social reproduction, migrant labour, and calls upon its audience to reflect on what kinds of work we value and why.

17. See, for instance, the Gulf Labor Artist Coalition and Carrot workers.
1961 or thereabouts

Kate Davis, Weight, 2014, video stills.