GHOSTS IN THE ARCHIVE

> *'It was something even more intense than despair that I then observed upon the countenance of the singular being whom I had watched so pertinaciously. Yet he did not hesitate in his career, but, with a mad energy, retraced his steps at once, to the heart of the mighty London. Long and swiftly he fled, while I followed him in the wildest amazement, resolute not to abandon a scrutiny in which I now felt an interest all-absorbing.'* — Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd"

SE Barnet's multi-platform investigation of mass observation, self-expression, and the rigorous mediation of the many-layered results of textual production explores the manifold ways in which we retain whatever lingering traces of individual subjectivity remain. Despite the intensifying regimes of rigid categorization and technological normalization that threaten to turn our incredibly diverse (and seemingly unending) modes of self-representation into regimented and dehumanized data-mines, Barnet locates uncanny modes of attentiveness to the mark, the mistake, the mysterious remainder.

The project forms a two-part exhibition (both co-organized with Sally Morfill), each in turn incorporating participation and performance, the work as much an archive-in-process as a presentation of some final product. The first show, "General title given by myself," began with a call for contributions to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of Mass Observation's "May 12, 1937," a portrait of everyday British life culled from hundreds of nonprofessional 'observers,' who wrote accounts of their lives for a then-new form of sociological documentation. The work of Mass Observation has become renown for its experiment in what today we call crowdsourcing, inviting amateur 'self-anthropologists' to produce a textual record that might present itself as an exercise in democratic expressionism but just as easily provide material for the administrative logics of sociology and its scientific approaches to categorization. Still, the mass observers of the thirties seem much more, well, individual, than the millions of us who today find it utterly normal to share our personal data and shape subjective experiences for public consumption, even as we know they will be used for demographics and advertising revenue, as well as mining-data for the surveillance state, rendering our 'unique qualities' into quanta of minute differences for niche marketing, profit, and policing.

Unlike today's social media, however, the analog and sometimes arduous task of collecting and correcting various typed-up reports (whether diaries or questionnaires) has resulted in an archive of uncanny traces, from the cracked ink of typewriter ribbons to the penciled-in corrections of responders copyediting their own manuscripts. It does not require a lapse into nostalgia to note how the sometimes banal reports (more elaborate than status updates, to be sure, but neither 'literature' as such) retain a patina of human contact and care, a desire for precision and accuracy that—whatever it might say about the English character—

registers a mode of self-awareness and individuality, however mulched into anonymous obscurity the Mass Observation documents became.

Thus Barnet's original gambit, to solicit shared observances of participants' May 12, 2013, was in part to stage a recreation of the particularly *writerly* act of self-observation and narrativity[1]. However one's accounts may be said to differ from one's daily status updates, blog entries, tweets, and other social mediations, Barnet garnered enough material to initiate an installation-cum-publication-house, as performers (or were they 'merely' scriveners, Bartlebys of the digital age?) worked at transcribing, proofreading, and editing in the gallery space, making present the often invisible work of crafting individual accounts and styles into standardized copies of what used to be called the Queen's English (which however now Americanized and globalized, is still the lingua franca of Empire). Throughout the days of performance, prints and scans and 'uncorrected proofs' and mark-ups and galleys filled the walls, turning transcription into a three-dimensional installation of a seemingly endless work-in-process. Imagine the 'ghosts in the machine' nibbling and scribbling away at every status update you punch into your computer, and this might begin to help visualize a gallery-sized version, peopled with text-workers (who are in this context, both readers and re-readers, writers and re-writers) focused in the tradition of durational performance and endurance art. "Exhausting, the Archive" could have been an alternate title for the exhibit, for anyone who has ever experienced the intense concentration required to copyedit reams of text for the rare typo, the uncanny mistake.

The layers of narration and documentation, as well as the seemingly monotonous performance of editing and text management, accrue deeply sedimented relationships with both the original volunteers and the written accounts of their singular lives as well as the numerous functionaries tasked with keeping those voices alive within an otherwise bloodless bureaucratic machine. In Terry Gilliam's "Brazil," we watch as a functionary's typo changes a citizen's life, the chance hiccough in the technocratic machine both a sign of the fallibility of the system and its overarching power. In Barnet's world of reproduction, the embodied mediation of the archive and its care allows us to see and hear both the original authors as well as the attentive (if often anonymous and invisible) labor of those tasked with 'correcting' the 'official' record.

At the same time, it's hard not to think about the mass surveillance state, as well as our daily consensual participation in it, through online status updates, geo-tagged photos, consumption patterns, and social linkages. What, from today's perspective, to make of the personal accounts offered up to a sociological apparatus with the Orwellian name of "Mass Observation"? Can we read the minor errors and typos and their handwritten corrections as perhaps the only remaining traces of subjectivity from a pre-auto-correcting universe? Or are these simply diaristic accounts of unremarkable people, made remarkable only by our archive fever, our nostalgic

[1] NB: I was one of the volunteer reporters.

wonderment at the indexical marks of a bygone era of manual typewriters and snail mail?

In the second part of Barnet's exploration — the exhibit "A day of continual irritation for myself"[2] — she enlists artist Fernando León-Guiu and writer France León to reenact another element of the Mass Observation moment. Based on a proofreading couple renown in the publishing world for their skills and staid professionalism, Barnet films León and León-Guiu slowly and formally proofing scans from the archive against the re-typed transcriptions produced from the staged performances. We watch as the actors-artists-proofreaders sit at their shared table, calmly and methodically going through each text line by line, word by word, occasionally catching and correcting an inconsistency, though mainly performing what seems like a strange kind of ritual, a liturgy of the everyday — call it trance-scripture. It's both captivating and banal, a kind of ambient poetry that while not *completely* without narrative suspense (oh! They caught a mistake!) instead suggests a calm and detached (though still rigorously attentive) care for incredibly personal language, the raw materials of a confessional poetry written for the mother country and now rescued from the 'dustbin of history' to speak again (if only through the nexus of a repetition compulsion set on shuffle).

But this is not merely a clinical autopsy in the dead letter office; the source materials posted along the gallery walls are prints of the resulting proofread documents, derived from transcribed scans, as the archive's now been digitized through the labor of anonymous data-sentries who handle the material as each page gets scanned into the database, one more trace of sensual labor layered on top of the seemingly 'museumified' objects. As words become pictures, the prints thus hover somewhere between documentary photography (a scan is after all, a digital photograph), text art, and concrete poetry, the 'cold neutrality' of conceptual photography unable to fully domesticate the stray marks of individual (if anonymous) hands[3]. Despite representing the source material for the video performances, they retain their own ghostly presence, bringing us full circle to the uncanny remnants of lives lived under different regimes of self-representation.

Today, while we imagine that nothing we do is real unless documented online, and nothing documented online will ever disappear from the digital archive (a dream of immortality, perhaps), we might remind ourselves that what resists coding, what does not merely turn into endless zeroes and ones, what outwits all the (self) correcting machines, what retains some semblance of flesh-heat and organic matter, might indeed be what outlives us with any degree of meaning.

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[2] The wonderfully suggestive titles of both exhibits come from original Mass Observation participants.

[3] It seems important to note that from the Mass Observation archive, Barnet chose texts written by those who worked with words for a living — journalists, clerks, copywriters, proofreaders, etc.

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