Archival Liveness: The Paper Archive in the Digital Age

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In performance studies, the conviction runs deep that to record or document a performance is to destroy or, at the very least, contaminate it. According to Peggy Phelan's influential definition, "performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance" (1993, 146). Violence, then, marks the archive, whose existence depends on performance's undoing. Whereas the binaries that structure performance theory discussions about archives associate performance with, among other things, life, bodies, presence and movement, archives house the dead.[1] Inert, permanent, "domiciled," to use Jacques Derrida's word, the contents of an archive no longer have a life of their own (1996, 2). In practice, of course, archives vary widely in what they contain, how they are structured, and the extent to which they are used. Their contents change over time as circumstances like war, fire, flooding, and human error alter their holdings, and as users add new items to their collections. Furthermore, with the rise of digital technology and the advent of services like Google Books and online libraries, the boundaries between an archive and the world around it have become much more tenuous and the archive as a site of "house arrest" for old documents consequently less obvious (Derrida 1996, 2). Nonetheless, the old, analogue, paper archive where documents might sit for centuries gathering dust remains, at least metaphorically, an important conceptual counterpoint for theories of performance. Based on my own experience conducting research in a repository of this kind, it is the supposed deadness of these archives that I would like to examine, first by proposing that a paper archive constitutes less a depository of documents than a network of actors and actants linked together through performance, and second by positing, by way of conclusion, that the imminent digitization and potential disappearance of such analogue collections makes them more "live" now than ever.

Signs of Life: The Paper Archive as Network

Hidden on a quiet Parisian side street a few blocks east of the Luxembourg Gardens, the archives of the Society of Saint-Sulpice—a community of diocesan priests founded in the seventeenth century—provides an excellent example of the kind of repository Derrida seems to have had in mind when writing *Archive Fever*. I found my way to Saint-Sulpice's archives while pursuing the dissertation phase of my current book project on early modern priestly performance and ecclesiastical attitudes toward actors. Although not nearly as well known as France's Archives Nationales or Bibliothèque Nationale, for anyone interested in the religious history of the Ancien Régime, Saint-Sulpice's collection offers a treasure trove of documents from the fifteenth through the eighteenth century.[2] For my own work on the way early modern French priests treated actors, no other archive can compete. The Comédie-Française, as well as travelling performers who frequented the Foire Saint-Germain, occupied sites located just a few blocks from the parish church and Seminary of Saint-Sulpice during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Indeed, by working my way through the collection, I found sermons preached against local performers during Lent, anecdotal accounts of the way actors sought or were refused the sacraments, and, in seminary documents prescribing ceremonial practices,

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information that enabled me to reconstruct the way churchmen would have used processions to assert ecclesiastical authority over the bodies of dying actors.

It would be easy to figure Saint-Sulpice's archives as petrified, domiciled, and cut off from the realm of performance. The site attracts—and admits—few visitors. On a busy day, one or two researchers might occupy the handful of tables in the reading room tucked away on an upper floor of the Society's *Maison provinciale*, or French headquarters. Below, an occasional priest or seminarian passes through the metal gate—painted a cheerful spring green and guarded by two nuns—that secures the building's inner courtyard from the outside world. In fact, in much the way Derrida's *archons* filed official documents in their homes (1996, 2), the Sulpician's archivist resides in a bedroom and private office just one floor above and across the hall, respectively, from the archive's reading room. To locate print sources, users must refer to an old-fashioned card catalogue that lines a back wall, and the index for autograph manuscripts consists of nine handwritten, spiral-bound notebooks, consultable by researchers only upon request. Inward-turning and quiet, the archives of Saint-Sulpice at first glance justify the binaries that oppose such repositories to the repertoire.

Although the closed and exclusionary nature of archives typically figures among the evidence for their deadening function, this same feature simultaneously reveals the possibility of apprehending an archive as a network composed of both human and non-human participants. In his introduction to Actor-Network-Theory, *Reassembling the Social*, Bruno Latour defines a network as a set of relations in which "all the actors *do something* and don't just sit there" (2005, 129).[3] The "doings" of documents—or, as Latour calls them, "intellectual technologies" (2005, 75)—may not be as explicit as the action of the hands that first moved the ink across their pages; nonetheless, depending on the context, the contents of the Sulpician archives "might authorize, allow, afford, encourage, permit, suggest, influence, block, render possible, forbid, and so on," just like the other objects Latour brings into the social equation (2005, 71). The fact that I had to build relationships to gain access to the archive gives an initial clue as to what the documents might do: they form and safeguard the Society's identity, both historically and spiritually. Before the archivist let me in, he needed to feel assured that I would treat not only the documents, but also the identity of which they form the heart, with respect. Rather than a formal application process—something not yet in place—a series of connections opened the doors for me. A mentor introduced me to one of the Society's members, who met with me to discuss my project and then recommended me to the archivist. Once I was inside the network, the trust extended to me by the archivist translated into a relationship with the documents, which he generously let me read at great length and photograph in their entirety.

Like a true beginner, at the time I did not realize I was navigating a series of gatekeepers. Looking back, however, I can see that something about the way I perform my own identity, along with the nature of my research question, must have found favour, perhaps because, as Erving Goffman would say, I believed in the parts I was (and to some degree always am) playing (1959, 17). When I arrived at Saint-Sulpice, I was doing my earnest best to live into my new role as researcher, trying to think, talk, and act the way a more experienced historian might. My doctoral program's pedigree and my mentor's introduction lent credibility to this role. At the same time, as a pastor's daughter, my familiarity with the role "young girl at church" put me at ease in a religious setting and provided me with a *habitus* compatible with the social codes fostered at Saint-Sulpice. My personal experience therefore suggests that when considering the glue that holds archival networks together, constituting their liveness, the importance of role-playing merits attention.[4] In fact, if the anecdotes about the history of Saint-Sulpice's archive are true, the most important documents in the Sulpician collection survived the French Revolution thanks to the ability of the Superior General's niece to simultaneously perform two identities

well, that of revolutionary and that of devout Catholic. Jacques-André Emery's niece, Philiberte de Varicourt, the Marquise de Villette, was a friend of Voltaire's, who those involved in the Revolution considered a forerunner of their cause (Aubault de la Haulte Chambre 1919, 40). The marquise's friendship with the philosopher protected her from the suspicion that her ties to the Catholic Church might represent a lack of patriotism, making her house a safe place. She used her identity as *voltarienne* to preserve "all the precious objects of Saint-Sulpice: papers, ornaments, relics," including the founder's personal manuscripts, by hiding them in her various residences or recruiting friends to do the same (Aubault de la Haulte Chambre 1919, 40; Boisard 1959, 1: 145). War brought into stark relief the extent to which this archive's future existence depended on the success with which the people who cared for the documents could perform the right social roles at the right time.

In addition to social performance, which can shape an archive's survival, another type of human performance cannot be isolated from a collection's contents: the expertise required to read and interpret its holdings. Derrida addresses something similar when discussing the hermeneutic privilege enjoyed by the *archon* (1996, 2), but the kind of performance to which I refer has more in common with an artisan's skill, honed through long years of practice and lodged as much in the body as in the mind. Such archival craftsmanship plays a particularly prominent role in small, private archives, where the archivist's intimate knowledge of the documents brings them together and connects them to other users in ways no index or catalogue ever could. At the archives of Saint-Sulpice, the retired archivist, Father Irénée Noye, plays this role. He is quite possibly the only living person who can recognize, at a glance, the handwriting of each of the clergymen who, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, created the documents that now make up the Sulpician collection. When presented with a page covered in early modern scribbles, Father Noye can distinguish the founder's hand from that of his secretary from that of a copyist from those of eighteenth- or nineteenth-century Sulpicians who might have intervened on the document. His eyes and knowing fingertips, disciplined through repeated interactions with the collection, have become part of the archive. To acquire his expertise, a younger researcher would need to shadow him, learning to see and touch the documents like he does. Without such an apprenticeship, which would enable another person to "restore" Father Noye's behaviour (Schechner 1985), an important part of the archive will pass when Father Noye passes.

The documents in the collection perform, too, as the relations and transformations facilitated by one of the papers saved by the Marquise de Villette show. According to Sulpician accounts, she hid the memoirs of the Society of Saint-Sulpice's founder, Jean-Jacques Olier, in the bedroom of her house on what is now the Quai Voltaire, where the philosopher died during his last visit to Paris (Aubault de la Haulte Chambre 1919, 40). Best described as a spiritual journal, this set of eighty-four notebooks in Olier's hand constitutes, in Latour's terms, a "mediator": an actor or actant that "transform[s], translate[s], distort[s], and modif[ies] the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry" (2005, 39). At the time of their creation, these journals performed by mediating Olier's relationship with his spiritual director, at whose command he wrote them (Faillon 1873, 1: xxxv). Olier then gave what he had written to his director, who used it to help guide his spiritual walk. Following the simple and yet very helpful definitions of performance offered by Marvin Carlson in his introduction to performance studies, the journals could therefore be said to perform in at least two ways. First, they provided a representational space in which Olier could both construct his spiritual identity and observe himself on the page. In other words, the journals introduced that special distance between an actor and his actions that Carlson associates with "patterned behavior" (2004, 3). Second, Olier's journals stood in for him, at least to a certain degree, as his director evaluated his spiritual progress, determining whether or not Olier was "keeping up the standard" in his quest for holiness (Carlson 2004, 4). One can be sure, as with any self-representation, that what the director saw in Olier's writings would not

have been exactly what Olier saw in them himself. In Latour's terms, the journals transformed the elements—Olier's inner life—they were meant to carry, making the journals a "doer" or performer in their own right.

After Olier's death, his journals perform by asserting what Jane Bennett calls *thing-power*, a term she uses to denote "the efficacy of objects in excess of the human meaning, designs, or purposes they express or serve" (2010, 20). Although an intimate document whose content "allows the reader to witness firsthand the progressive elaboration . . . of [Olier's] spiritual experience" (Olier 1995, 21), the journal's materiality confounds even the most initiated eyes. Written in Olier's difficult hand, the manuscript's densely covered pages taunt the reader, at once inviting her in and shutting her out. The journals are so difficult to decipher that a typed copy stands in for the original, designated by the same call numbers as the manuscript version. In their form as well as their content, then, Olier's journals remain somewhat untamed. This vibrancy, to use another of Bennett's terms, makes them the opposite of what Robin Bernstein calls a "scriptive thing." A scriptive thing functions "like a play script, broadly structur[ing] a performance while simultaneously allowing for resistance and unleashing original, live variations that may not be individually predictable" (Bernstein 2009, 69). Rather than broadly structuring the reader's performance, the indeterminacy of Olier's memoirs provokes in the reader a desire to script Olier's text, to give it a name and a role suited to the present's needs. Its thing-power, by presenting the reader with an enigma, paradoxically elicits a desire to reestablish dominion over an object that does not follow the rules.

Like Émery's niece, who could perform the appropriate social roles in order to guarantee her efficacy as a mediator in the network linking documents and people, Olier's journals are thus made to play various roles in order to fulfil the mediating tasks required by each new generation of readers. The members of the Society of Saint-Sulpice use them, in concert with Olier's other autograph manuscripts and those of his immediate successors, to establish their history and negotiate their relationship with the past. Modifications made to the journal's order bear witness to the work it does in this regard. Whereas during Olier's life his notebooks mediated his spiritual development, which meant their content could loop forward and backward in historical time in response to the memories and insights Olier felt the Holy Spirit showed him (Bertrand 1900, 1: 29), the notebooks' subsequent users needed them to help them discover their founder's experiences in chronological order. Those who inherited the notebooks rearranged them into eight bound volumes so that, wherever possible, the memories Olier recounts unfold in sequence from 1631 to 1652 (Bertrand 1900, 1: 29), even though this pagination does not follow the order in which he composed the pages, an order now forever lost. Similarly, when called upon to represent Olier's spirituality to today's readers, or when made available to those readers as a potential mediator of their own spiritual lives, his journals are spliced, edited, and presented as excerpts.[5] The document thus changes forms according to its social task. This shape shifting attests to the document's agency, and by extension its "liveness."

Olier's journals have never been published in their entirety, and this perhaps says the most about their potency as "doers." To some degree, editorial concerns explain the lack of publication. The journals are long and, in places, repetitive, which makes publishing the entire series a difficult proposition in a competitive book market. Another, more interesting reason, however, has contributed to a Sulpician reluctance to publish Olier's autographs. The responses his writing might elicit—in other words, what his manuscripts might *do*—prompted his successors to leave many of his works hidden on the archive's shelves for fear Rome might see them as promoting a spirituality not entirely in keeping with the modes of inner life the Holy See deemed orthodox in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries (Le Brun 2008, 8; Mazzocco 2008, 43). Only recently has the Society begun to bring these writings into the light of print, or to allow

scholars to do so, now that the cultural and institutional climate has evolved in such a way that the threats of Jansenism and Quietism no longer have the same potential to cast Olier's mystical experience as heterodox acts.[6] An archive's secrecy or apparent sequestration from the realm of cultural performance can, therefore, signal the degree to which its holders perceive it as a mediator, as alive, as able to act in unpredictable ways.

Am I Killing My Archive?

Although an item in an archive resists disappearance to a greater degree than a dance or a play, at least in theory, I did not engage with the Sulpician archives like a permanent and unchanging thing to which I could return at any time. Far from it. I related to my archive as I would to a live performance on which the curtain was closing. I frantically took notes, photographed everything, grieved the things I did not have time to see, and built my own digital archive out of the traces of this encounter. I archived the archive. As Derrida would say, I was "*en mal d'archive*" (Derrida 1996, 91). The countless hours I spent bent over liturgical books that stretched to upward of one thousand pages, the dust on my hands, the various textures, smells, shapes, and sizes of the manuscripts I consulted: all this I captured in JPEG images, which I then converted to PDF documents and organized on my hard drive, creating a digital library from which I could write. An urgent desire to preserve the documents in the Sulpician collection from physical decay or destruction drove me to photograph much more than I needed, strictly speaking, for my research. Rather than photographing just the relevant pages of an old book or folios of a manuscript, whenever possible I photographed the entire document. At the end of my research year, I gave a copy of all the images I had taken and PDFs I had created to the librarian so that they could serve as the modest foundation for the Sulpician archive's digitization.

Despite my conservationist intentions, in the midst of the laborious photo-taking and PDF-creating process, I often wondered: am I killing my archive? If disaster were to strike the *Maison provinciale* such that future researchers could only access its contexts via the PDF versions I created, what would be lost? Would it be the same archive? Most certainly not. Alternatively, if future researchers chose not to visit the archive and to rely instead on the digital versions I created, could they really claim to have consulted the manuscript I had attempted to preserve? My photographs capture very poorly the creases, the folds, the blank pages, and the words that bend down into the spines of the bindings added after the fact by librarians to loose-leaf autographs composed by authors who wrote all the way to the edge of the page. Rendered as PDFs, the documents lose their three-dimensionality, their sentience, and the contextual clues embedded in their physical state. Furthermore, the images I created extract the documents from the collection and thus from the relationships with other manuscripts and objects in the archive that have helped shape their meaning. The sign of this extraction is my hand, which I often photographed alongside documents as a relational measure, a proxy for the objects which, in the physical context of the archive, reveal important information about a document, like its size. Like a still image of an actor on stage or a dancer in flight, the pictures of my hand register the translation from "live" to "digital."

Perhaps surprisingly, then, my work in an analogue archive leads me to draw a comparison between paper repositories and live theatre. Philip Auslander argues persuasively that theatre performance became "live" only when television and film threatened to eclipse it. "The 'live' can be defined only as 'that which can be recorded,'" he writes (2008, 56). The same holds true for the old book and manuscript collections that performance theory has traditionally opposed to performance. Thanks to the advent of the personal digital camera, researchers like me are systematically and voraciously digitizing everything they read in an archive. Menaced by digital recording, analogue archives are consequently more "live" now than ever. Many of France's

public repositories, fearful, it seems to me, of being digitized out of existence, place strict restrictions on the use of photography. France's Bibliothèque Nationale, for example, limits researchers to forty images per request, and the librarians do not hesitate to count the clicks of each exposure.[7] Policies like these have less to do with promoting the creation of new knowledge or conserving the physical documents and more to do with ensuring that digital copies do not displace their print and parchment corollaries. Similarly, repositories that do not limit photography, like France's Archives Nationales, have not taken steps to gather and organize the images created by users. A wiki, for example, where researchers could upload the digital pictures they took of each carton would create a tremendous resource for the study of French history but would threaten the physical archive's primacy. Indeed, the success of online collections like Gallica—the Bibliothèque Nationale's digital library—do make it more difficult for international researchers to justify making the pilgrimage to France, even as these collections expand access to a global community. By haunting paper repositories with the spectre of their own disappearance, digitization paradoxically brings them to life.

As the reading strategies adopted by researchers in my generation suggest, the new "life" with which imminent digitization has endowed analogue archives will not oppose the digital to the live in an absolute way. Rather, like the mediatized performances examined by Auslander, the network of actors and actants assembled by an archive like the one at Saint-Sulpice will include both paper and digital versions of the documents, and the act of reading will involve going back and forth between the two. The PDFs I created do not replace the manuscripts. In fact, each time I return to the archives of Saint-Sulpice, I take them with me so that I can refer to them as I re-consult the physical versions. While the physical version gives me a fully three-dimensional reading experience, the PDF allows me to zoom in and out or simultaneously consult the digital versions I have created of similar documents housed at other archives. As a reader, I am not unlike the sports fans discussed by Auslander who attend a "live" game but want to see close-ups and instant replays and enjoy the benefits of a "simulcast" (2008, 25). The mediatized culture in which I came of age has thoroughly shaped my skills and sensibilities as a reader. This will be all the more true for the next generation of researchers, for whom snapshots and selfies do not so much record the past as provide a way to engage with the present and, in Rebecca Schneider's words, "hail" the future (2011, 139–40). Accustomed to transforming daily life into performance by documenting their every action, tomorrow's researchers may not see the archive and the repertoire as oppositional.[8] Instead, the consumption of mediatized performance will be an important model for understanding the way archives and their users operate in the digital age. Rather than performance's opposites, the archive and its theories will be unthinkable without performance.

Notes

1. The touchstone study on the relationship between performance and archives is Diana Taylor's *The Archive and The Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in The Americas* (2003). For a recent overview of scholarship on this question, see Gunhild Borggreen and Rune Gade's introduction to *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance* (2013, 9-30).

2. A sampling includes liturgical texts like Missals and Rituals, priestly correspondence, seminary rules and handbooks, manuscripts written in the hand of the Society's founders, and documents pertaining to a wide variety of Counter-Reformation figures, ranging from nameless clergymen to eminent Sulpicians like Fénelon and future saints like Vincent de Paul.

3. To be more precise, Latour uses the term "network" to describe a narrative that reveals the action of each participant. In practice, however, the word "network" stands in for the relations brought to light by the narrative.

4. Alison Moore's work on the restricted access to the Private Case of the British Library and the Collection de l'Enfer at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France points in a similar direction. In order to consult these erotica collections, users had to perform the right combination of "High social class, gender, educational privilege and specialist induction" (Moore 2012, 200).

5. See, for example, Olier 1995.

6. See especially the three treatises edited Mariel Mazzocco (Olier 2008; Olier 2009; Olier 2011).

7. The policy technically states that photography "can be limited to 40" pictures, but in my experience the number forty is treated as a strict ceiling. One librarian even threatened to confiscate any images I took beyond forty. For the policy, see http://www.bnf.fr/documents/reglement_repro.pdf.

8. As Auslander argues, "the act of documenting an event as a performance is what constitutes it as such" (2006, 5).

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