

LACE

ARCHIVE

Selected Publications
& Print Ephemera from
the LACE Archives
1978-2008

LIVING

THE

Archiving LACE

Liz Kotz

The question of the archive and the construction of a history for current art practice has animated contemporary art for some time now. Previously, a certain set of archival methods were more commonly used by scholars—digging through boxes of documents, retrieving letters and other ephemera, conducting interviews. The generation of contemporary art historians that I am part of, people who completed their dissertations since the early 1990s, were part of a larger return to archival and historical methods. Because we had not lived through the legendary postwar art movements so many of us were writing on—Fluxus, Minimalism, Happenings, Conceptual Art, and so forth—it was almost inevitable that we would take up a kind of historical research that had partly been bypassed or sidelined in, say, the more critically and theoretically-driven art criticism of the 1980s. If at one time a kind of hip academic practice might have fetishized reading Lacan in the original French or going to Paris to participate in seminars with the masters, for us it was more likely to be tracking down that obscure letter from La Monte Young or finding that unpublished version of a piece from 1965 that had languished in an artist's file for decades.

Of course, this kind of archival turn is in no way unprecedented. Much of the so-called "new art history" of the 1970s and 1980s revolved not only on incorporating new critical models, but in reconstructing effaced and marginalized histories, and in finding ways to place artistic production in relation to larger historical contexts. Part of the pleasure of reading Thomas Crow or T.J. Clark on French art of the 18th and 19th centuries was immersing oneself in the complexity and detail of narratives constructed from press accounts, letters and all kinds of other documents. The guiding inspiration for this seemed to be Walter Benjamin's legendary *Arcades Project*

of the 1930s, where he sought to reconstruct the emergence of modernity through a series of detailed fragmentary notes on the 19th-century Paris arcades—and, to a perhaps secondary degree, the archivally-based rewriting of western modernity conducted by Michel Foucault in the 1960s and 1970s. The archive was a lure, an enormous site of desire, and—in ways that are touchier and more problematic, also the site of a kind of professionalization. To do extensive archival work is extraordinarily time-consuming and expensive. All that travel to archives and collections, all those days and weeks spent reading and taking notes at little tables somewhere—it is nearly impossible without the kinds of financial support provided by major academic institutions and a handful of foundations. I wonder now, in the current economic downturn, how this type of archival project will fare, since for many of us, especially those who teach at public universities, that level of research funding will be impossible for quite some time.

The return to the archive that LACE has been conducting is related to this more scholarly project, but also quite different. For the past decade or two—again, it seems to be something that has emerged since the early 1990s—artists have been constructing their own histories of artmaking, and of cultural politics, of the postwar and more recent eras. A kind of mania for collecting animates a lot of recent art, and even artists whose own work takes vastly different forms are often deeply engaged in retrieving lost or under-known figures or projects. While a handful of university presses, like MIT, have made a commitment to collecting and republishing artists' writings, really it has been projects organized by artists, from ubuweb to Primary Information, that have played the crucial role in releasing historical documents, artworks and materials into the present. The haphazard, selective and subjective nature of this kind of archival unearthing is part

of its logic. Of course, institutions like LACE don't have the budgets to republish or recirculate more than a tiny selection of their ephemera or historical materials. After all, there is so much that accumulates over time: all those announcement cards, programs, posters, booklets and catalogues, not to mention the private correspondence and documents that must be filed away somewhere. To be exhaustive or complete would be logistically impossible, and probably sort of ridiculous. Because the very nature of this history is that our interests in it are partial and diverse—depending on whether we want to rediscover the history of LA-based performance or video or the earlier career of this or that artist. Maybe this very selection generates a desire for more. A show at the New York nonprofit White Columns earlier this year, *From the Archives*, presented forty projects, one each from every year of the 40-year history of 112 Green Street and White Columns. It was a great show, completely fascinating, and part of its power was that it made you wonder about all the other stuff that they'd had to leave out. So the show became like the tip of this iceberg that made you wish you could take the time and spend hours in the back rooms opening boxes and pouring over documents—and I bet some people have. This project, Living the Archive, is a lot like that—a selective sampling that hopefully will make you want more.

It almost goes without saying that work and activities that happened in Los Angeles and California have for a very long time been sidelined from histories of postwar and contemporary art. And in museum and scholarly cultures that are, far more than we would like to admit, enormously driven by the art market, it is almost inevitable that the nonprofit sphere, performance, video and so forth would likewise be neglected. Now, it seems like any number of artists, historians, curators and others are working to retrieve, re-use and reconstruct these

histories—though what forms that might take are still unclear. However necessary, the museum retrospective works poorly for performance or film or video. And while scholarly writing usually aims to generate coherent and convincing narratives, that coherence tends to efface the fragmentary, random and excessive qualities that are integral not only to archives, but also to the histories and events and social networks they document. Behind each flier and announcement card and catalogue cover assembled here, there are so many stories and memories and also art practices and models, some well-known and some nearly forgotten. Part of the beauty of this project and similar efforts is that no one can really foresee or predict what will be most useful or interesting or provocative, as these materials again go out into the world.