

## **Stories between things**

The University of the Arts Bremen is working on a 'Dynamic Archive' of artistic and technical working methods. The performance artist Eva Meyer-Keller's contribution could turn the whole thing on its head.

By Jan-Paul Koopmann

They sit for days on a bare floor amongst photos, sticky notes and all kinds of lists in order to refine the details of an extremely complicated joke. But it is actually funny—I'll say that right away—even if it sounds rather dull at first. It's all about the 'Dynamic Archive' of the University of the Arts in Bremen, an Internet project that is currently being stocked piece by piece with artistic and technical working methods.

It is less about the 'what' of the participating institutions, however, as the 'how' of their work. Software developers are taking part, as well as museums like the Edith-Russ-Haus in Oldenburg and the Bremer Schwankhalle from the theatre sector. The Schwankhalle has in turn invited the performance artist Eva Meyer-Keller from Berlin to develop a work to feed into the archive. Her contribution is called "Scores of Matters". It is far from finished, but already it threatens to turn the whole thing upside down.

### ***Things in every drawer***

The work assignment is rather vague, requiring the participants to be critical of their own work. How far can Open Source go in the arts for example? Who should be allowed to do what sort of work with an artistic contribution? This is a particularly important question for the independent performance scene. Only some artists are currently able to draw on the accumulated knowledge of a small number of large producing venues. If it was actually possible to archive the often rather practical thinking behind a performance and make this retrievable, it could be a very valuable tool for the arts. It's just that no one knows exactly how this could be done.

"I don't want to do it the right way at all", says Eva Meyer-Keller. Her contribution plays with the archive itself as well as with the process of archiving but that does not mean that it is not serious. Meyer-Keller has been primarily working with objects for many years, or rather with the slew of associations attached to seemingly humdrum objects when one asks what kind of emotions are linked to them. Which stories are tied up with them? And if you really want to

get down to it, then also how much blood is involved? As an astonishing amount of everyday objects still carry the traces of colonial theft.

Meyer-Keller and her co-workers Ilya Noé and Emilia Schlosser have drawn up a long list of all the things they have worked with in the past for the archive. It includes 'scissors', 'aquarium', 'rum bottle' and 'tampon'. There are around 100 items so far and it remains to be seen if the number stays at that or not. In any case, a website will later be created from them in the end in which they will feature as silhouette photographs from different angles and can be sorted accordingly.

The aforementioned joke is that these objects are not simply forced into a rigid system but rather into several systems at once. The website can display them according to weight for example, or shape and colour, or across the ground plan of an apartment. This is where the absurdity is at last revealed because a tampon, for example, has good reason not just to be in the bathroom but also in the bedroom, the kitchen, the living room. It can and will play a role everywhere if you only dig a little deeper.

To stay with the tampon for a while longer, the category 'weight' is somewhat irrelevant, whereas 'shape' is decisive. It is the other way around with something like sugar, where the quantity is all that matters in hot tea. After it is stirred in, you can safely forget whether those three grams were once in the shape of a cube or a heap of tiny particles.

### ***Thoughts in the labyrinth***

Astoundingly, it is just these sort of abstract categories which give rise to the greatest uncertainties. The shape of sugar is far from irrelevant for the market, Eva Meyer-Keller recalls, because cubes stack so neatly and make dosing easy. On the other hand, the weight of a tampon refers most directly to its raw material—cotton, that classic colonial loot. These thoughts can come up whilst wandering through Eva Meyer-Keller's archive but they don't always have to.

And that is actually the point. Sequences of association are unleashed with some things or with others. They are never compulsory and contradict each other willingly. "Scores of Matters" tries to pick up on just this sort of non-linearity and document the simultaneity of different paths and thoughts.

This means that the explanatory text that accompanies the photo of the tampon depends entirely on which path the reader has taken through the archive to arrive at it. The

fundamental rule of performance art also applies to this archive: There is no such thing as general objective knowledge, what counts is subjective experience. This is quite a stretch for an archive, even a dynamic one.

Ilya Noé lays a row of objects out on the floor, a sequence of almost random associations. The tampon dangles on a string like the teabag, which leads to the tea filter which looks like a pair of scissors. There the sequence ends, because Emilia Schlosser asks why the metaphor of the 'gap ('scissor' in German) between rich and poor' is so inadequate. It describes a *lack* of social symmetry, with one side having a lot, the other side very little. A thought in the labyrinth that may or may not stick.

In Eva Meyer-Keller's performances, it is important what happens when objects are used a little differently than they usually are. This was seen in her piece "Death is Certain", also shown in Bremen, in which she destroyed fruit, monstrously breaking them apart into organic pieces. "Things on a Table" is another example, in which one and the same object lying on a table sometimes appears as a symbolically overloaded still life and sometimes as a tacky advertisement, depending on sound, light and context.

Meyer-Keller's latest work, "Living Matters", recently premiered in Essen, is even more complex. In this piece, laboratory procedures with different devices and preparations narrate an idea of scientific work, behind which hides the story of Henrietta Lacks, a Black American woman whose cells were taken and cultivated without her knowledge in the 1950s and still used today in medical research. These are also the stories which play between things. "Living Matters" never mentions the case of Henrietta Lacks directly.

Even the dynamic archive will not make something like this visible. But perhaps, losing our way among the data sets, a comprehensible, tangible thought will arise that something beyond our control is happening, or has already happened. And then, all these pieces of paper and data might become something like a performance in digital space.

**Lecture:** Thursday 12 December, 7pm, Bremen Schwankhalle

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