

**Archives: The Raw & The Cooked**  
STEPHEN FARTHING  
MARCH 2009

**To Archive: a verb**

A year or so ago, I was given a box of papers by a man I met in the bar of the Chelsea Arts Club in London, the box was one of those tray type boxes producer's use to ship fruit to market. It contained the following:

*Correspondence starting 25.6.56 between Ruskin Spear, Paul Hogarth and V. Bogatyrev regarding an exhibition entitled LOOKING AT PEOPLE which traveled from The South London Art Gallery to Moscow. An article from the Daily Mail entitled THIS WITCH HUNT, by Shelagh Delaney naming Ruskin Spear as a possible member of the communist party. A carbon copy of a letter dated 1.5. 54 sent by Spear to the Daily Mail stating he was neither a communist, nor a member of the party. Bundles of invitations, letters of congratulation, receipts and photographs. A speech written for the general assembly of the RA on the 29<sup>th</sup> June 1954 about the state of the RA. A hand written first draft about his friend and fellow teacher at the RCA artist Robert Buhler. Various papers relating to meetings at the RA. A hand written piece about the Jekyll and Hyde nature of Ruskin Spear- author unknown, (possibly RB) and several ball point pen drawings by RS of Peter de Francia from about 1974-5, drawn during tutorials at the RCA, and finally two unpublished satirical poems written in rhyming couplets that take de Francia as their subject.*

The man who gave me the box told me he lived in Hammersmith, just a street or two from where the artist Ruskin Spear spent most of his life, he said he had often visited his studio where they would share a bottle of Bells. He explained that he had been given the box by Ruskin Spear's wife, whom he had stopped half way through the process of throwing it into a skip (dumpster) soon after Spear's death in 1990. The man said that he knew from a mutual friend that Spear had been my tutor at the Royal College and thought I could give the papers a better home than he.

The box contained exactly what you would expect a widow wrestling with the contents of her dead husband's studio to throw away. She clearly kept the portfolios, the paintings the plan chests full of drawings as they were assets, possibly even the paint brushes, but not the piles of paper and ephemera, that had no apparent value and really were too sad to plough through. I know some of it went to the Tate Archives so this I assumed really was rubbish. Having escaped the municipal dump, the box (or at least its contents) is now in the Royal Academy Archive. Next month the Archivist will interview the man who gave it to me, then later interview me as the donor to the Academy. His interview will focus on his memories of afternoons spent with Spear in his studio, mine on the McCarthy type stuff about communism and the witty but cruel image Spear constructed on paper of his boss and my Professor, de Francia.

The relevance to artists of the Spear box and the many similar boxes, that have for one reason or another managed to find their way into archives, is their ability in time to open the eyes of those who bother to look; at the degree to which both the radical and deeply conservative can, be hidden behind taste and appearances and most important of all, be within their own time mistaken, one for the other. So this type of archival material is I believe interesting to artists because it is the artist's business to distinguish between the radical and the reactionary, a distinction sometimes obscured by 'packaging' but usually still visible in the raw material left behind on the studio floor.

### **Archives: The Noun**

Archive is a word archivists like to pluralize. They do so to make sure it reads as a noun and not a verb, to establish the archive as a place not an activity. Because there is now more than one way of getting into an archive archives I believe have become more about process than place. Type set words I suspect aren't much affected, it doesn't really matter if you read them on a page or a screen. Writing, drawing, painting and three-dimensional objects are however, quite different, as digital files of drawings, hand written texts and objects are embalmed versions of their subjects, looking very similar but with their guts somehow missing.

It doesn't matter how big the file, images of things tell quite different stories from the things themselves. The web may have the ability to simultaneously draw new and unconventional visitors to archives, even accelerate and expand a scholar's reach. Like a dating agency, it can initiate relationships but not take them beyond the two dimensional, circumstantial texting phase.

### **The Raw**

With this idea in mind I would like to briefly take you to a second archive in London, The Turner Bequest. Housed in the Prints and Drawings room at Tate Britain, it comprises of some 37,000 drawings, sketchbooks and watercolors that were left to 'The Nation' by J.M.W Turner on his death in 1851. If you first visit the web site to see what is there, then go to the building on Millbank and sit with just one of the drawings the first thing you realize is how normal a soft line on a sheet of discolored paper can look in the flesh.

Sitting with a Turner drawing, as opposed to viewing it as a digital image on a screen, the paper stops looking weirdly un-white, the line changes from being irritatingly faint, to become, just soft. The drawing suddenly has a texture, a smell, you begin to see the route his hand took as he drew, get the feel of how quickly he made it, you begin to piece together why some parts are dark and others almost invisible, you can see exactly where he got it right first time and if he made corrections. You are not looking at pixels wondering why they aren't easier to read, you are looking at factual evidence in the raw that very quickly begins to add up as empirical data.

Beyond the image but still on the paper there is a mass of other information. Some of the 37,000 drawings have for example an irregular decaled edge, those have been nibbled by rodents, others have cats paw prints across their back's, those either spent some time on the studio floor or Turner's table top

work space wasn't as sacred as one might expect. Some have both nibbled edges and paw prints, when I first saw these it struck me that Turner must have either had one hell of a mouse problem at his little cottage on the Thames at Chelsea or the cat was a useless mouser. Whichever way you cut it we can deduce from the condition of these drawings that there was a pretty free interplay between the art and the quadrupeds in Turner's studio on Cheney walk.

Still on the subject of the studio floor, vermin and the archive – although this time the cerebral archive of the living – five years ago I interviewed the artist Will Barnett, who at the time was in his early nineties. He told me that he was born in Maine and moved to New York during the depression with the sole purpose of becoming an artist. He was in the same year as Jackson Pollock at the Art Student's League, but kept out of his way because he drank too much. He talked a lot about other artists he knew and met, one encounter he remembered quite clearly was when he was taken early one Sunday Morning by a mutual friend, to Arshile Gorky's studio on Washington Square. The tall handsome Gorky apparently came to the door waving a bunch of papers, screaming "Those fucking rats, those fucking rats they eat my collages during the night".

It's not simply a question of pixels and pictures. There is also the archive of the mind, of what people know, of knowing how things are made, how they have weathered – and not just how archives help us build bigger, but also more interesting and sustainable pictures.

I have never met an artist who spent time sitting with, looking at, thinking about, or perhaps redrawing a drawing in an archive that didn't appreciate the point of the exercise. Perhaps along with, perhaps instead of church, temple, mosque, gym or bar, the archive for artists is not simply a place for research, but renewal. For me, hearing that story about Gorky from a man who had met him, then joining it in my mind to the mice that nibbled the Turners, was a high in archival research.

### **Voyages of Discovery**

As the twentieth century drew to a close and the frontiers that traditionally inspired innovation and invention in the visual arts began to appear less far away, less exotic, less dangerous and much more familiar, I suspect many successful artists found they had been encouraged by curators and the marketplace into corners that neither provided much space for innovation nor a quick way out. With the renaissance ideals and Medici inspired approaches of the last two decades already beginning to seem out dated, I suspect it is time for what science calls a paradigm shift.

During the last two decades a substantial number of artists seeking change, especially those not blessed by commercial success, have developed relationships with the research areas of universities, many of these artists have for one reason or another found themselves working in archives. During the last two decades artists seem to have turned the archive into a new frontier, partly I suspect, because of a lack obvious alternatives, partly

because artists really see these store rooms as new territories.

If exhibitions, public commissions and publications are *the cooked*, then archives and collections are *the raw*. An archive can be a box of stuff kept under a bed or a carefully catalogued collection preserved in a climate-controlled vault. We visit archives to turn pages, to visit the past, to gain a better understanding of people places, events and time and sometimes to simply feel the glow of nostalgia and to just remember.

### **The New World**

Of course archives don't simply contain the raw they also contain stuff that is in various stages of preparation and digestion – a good example of this type progression are the holdings that relate to John White in the British Museum.

On 15<sup>th</sup> July 1584, when John White in his capacity as recording artist to the first British voyage of discovery to Virginia drew for the very first time an Algonquian Indian village, probably the last thing on his mind was art. What he was most likely consumed by was first the excitement of being in a new world, and secondly the responsibility of recording it. Back in the ships cabin however White clearly spent hours turning his 'raw' sketches into palatable water colored images suitable to his mind for an audience back home. Although not exactly raw these images informed the more 'cooked' engravings Theodor de Bry's made to illustrate the 1590 edition of Thomas Harriot's *A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia*.

So while the White's archive at the British Museum in London contains stuff that is not all quite as fresh as first sketches made in the field, together they record a journey not simply to the New World but also a voyage in terms image construction. There are parts that are raw, like his drawing of a pineapple clearly made directly from life, and others that are either cooked-up, or in the case of published books, already partially digested.

### **A Strange Obsession with Buttons**

On 20<sup>th</sup> January 2009 I visited the British Museum print room to make a drawing of Pisanello's *Hanged Man*. I chose it on the strength of a digital image believing it to be like White's Pineapple a raw sketch from life. As a result of making the drawing, I wrote this text.

It took me time to realize that Pisanello's very calm images of hanged men, were most probably not drawn from life. The line was too slow, there were no corrections and the component parts were far too carefully arranged. What I realized after two hours drawing was that each figure was most probably a polished copy or version of a drawing made earlier from life / death. It also became clear during the process of drawing the drawing that the page wasn't one image but a series of drawings put together as an 'arrangement'. With this in mind I redrew my own drawing, made directly from Pisanello's pencil drawing as a polished pen and ink version.

In that re-drawing I highlighted not so much the way Pisanello drew (I just wanted my image to look slow and calm like the original) as the detail I saw

through a magnifying glass. By the end of the process I was counting barely visible buttons on carefully described folds of cloth. What still puzzles me is how, as he looked death more or less square in the face, Pisanello could become obsessed with drawing buttons, which within the bigger picture of things must be trivial detail. If Madame Defarge demonstrated her indifference to death-row by knitting, then Pisanello displayed the same *sang-froid* drawing buttons.

Artists approach archives from different directions. Most however are actively looking for the new and are seldom burdened by a detailed knowledge of what they are looking at. Feeling no need for footnotes or proof of truth, they are free to make whatever they wish of the stuff before them. Like gift shops, archives sit mid way between the past and the future, as places where the present is of little importance and the future attaches itself directly to the past. As such they are perfect stalking grounds for those artists still looking for new frontiers.