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Artistic Engagement with Archival Remnants

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Saudade
An Intersection of Archives and Art

Published by
the Expatriate Archive Centre

The Expatriate Archive Centre (EAC) collects the life stories of expatriates worldwide and makes them available for academic research. For us, an expatriate is anyone who lives temporarily outside their 'home' country. Our collection encompasses the late 19th century to the present, and focuses on personal writings, including diaries, letters, scrap-books and blogs, as well as supplementary material like photographs and video.

The *Saudade* project celebrates the EAC's 10th anniversary as an independent foundation, and 25 years since its earliest beginnings in another book, *Life on the Move*. We invited 10 artists from around the world to draw inspiration from specific pieces within the archive. Each artist created an art piece based in some way on the EAC's collection. These art pieces were designed to fit together inside an antique suitcase donated by one of the EAC's founders.

Saudade is a Portuguese word denoting nostalgia for someone or something absent and beloved. We hope that our *Saudade* suitcase and this book documenting the journeys of the artists will stand as a tribute to all those who have left their lives behind to build new lives in new places.

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Artistic engagement with archival remnants
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Archival theorists have taught us that the collections of material saved and studied can only ever be a partial record of the past, and that the items we choose to salvage and store reflect the values of the time in which they were selected.¹ Archiving privileges the documents of some over others, and, while giving a voice to them, silences others.² The process of archiving further shapes the legacy — how material is organised and catalogued, which items are rearranged or removed; all reflect choices about what is important, what elements are interrelated, and what is irrelevant.³ Far from being an objective documentation of the past, then, archives begin as interpretations of it, and are then interpreted over and over again in different ways by the researchers who explore them.

While understanding this critical perspective, historians have nevertheless remained reticent about 'interfering' with the historical sources of an archive: trying to keep a critical distance, to contextualise the surviving fragments as part of a wider, if missing, array of perspectives from the period, and gently crafting a measured interpretation of the evidence while being careful not to impose meaning upon it.⁴ In this intricate interplay between sources and the search for their significance, archival remnants are celebrated as authentic, almost sacred, relics of the past. Interfering with them is firmly discouraged — better to carefully return them as they

1. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

2. David Thomas, Simon Fowler and Valerie Johnson, *The Silence of the Archive* (London, UK: Facet Publishing, 2017).

3. Joan M. Schwartz & Terry Cook, 'Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory', *Archival Science* (2002) Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 1–19.

4. Terry Cook, 'The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape', *The American Archivist: Fall/Winter 2011*, Vol. 74, No. 2, pp. 600–632.

were found (archived), for others to study and reinterpret in other ways, at other times.

How then, do we engage with the issues of exclusion, absence, bias and perspective that reverberate through all archival collections? Artistic engagement is a powerful means to do so — amplifying viewpoints that have been hidden or ignored, imposing interpretations that radically re-imagine the significance of the sources, appropriating objects to convey a larger issue, or engaging with them in a deliberately personal way — making visible the process of giving meaning to materials, rather than pretending that they have their own inherent message to impart.

The artists in this project thus show us a myriad of creative ways to enrich our understandings, of both expats *and* archives.

Euf Lindeboom linked her own family's experiences to those of a Dutch expat who lived with her husband and children in Indonesia from 1948 till 1954.^{p. 150} The woman's memoirs in the archive activated the artist's memories, and she juxtaposes the two, using them to spark ideas for paintings:

*A quote from the memoirs:
For women that 'oil business' was not
much fun.*⁵

A memory:

*We lived in Bogor on Java. My older brothers often made mischief. They took me once to the Botanical Garden. I had to climb through a hole in the fence. They showed me the Carnivorous Plant. They wanted me to put my hand in the calyx ... but I did not dare.*⁶

In response to this she created two paintings:

1. A ground-plan of the Botanical Garden in Bogor.^{p. 55}
2. An 'impression' (ground-plan) of Pladju.^{p. 54}

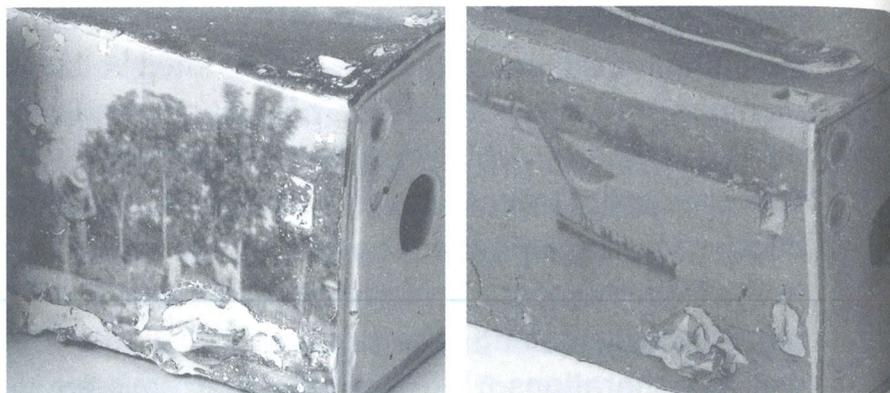
The paintings are printed in a booklet that moves back and forth between historical sources, including family photographs and the notes in the memoirs, and the recollections of the artist and newly created work based on them, from paintings to poetry. Collected together they fuse childhood memories with the records of a mother, linking notes from the past with another person's perceptions of it, looking back, across family lines as well as generations.^{p. 52} The project is a reminder that an historian's investigations in an archive are often inspired by their own place in the world today, and their own particular experiences and memories. What we are interested in seldom arises out of nowhere, driven only by the scholarly trends of the time (as if they were themselves separate from who is curious about them). The questions we ask as

6. Euf Lindeboom, 'Memories of Indonesia', 16 March 2017, <http://eacanniversary.com/memories-of-indonesia-euf-lindeboom/>. Accessed 15 December 2017.

Kevin Andrew Morris, 'Life on the Ve', 27 November 2017, <http://www.eacan-niversary.com/life-on-the-ve/>. Accessed December 2017.

scholars connect to who we are, or who we think we are, and what we want to find out about ourselves, as well as what we may barely recognise about our own history and our role within it.

Kevin Andrew Morris applied his interest in photographs and films in the archives to the creation of new objects.^{p.8} He illustrates the serendipity of the research trail — where connections are made not just through systematic examination but often by accidental discovery or creatively binding together ideas and activities that began as separate initiatives. Morris brought in concepts from another project he was working on, related to 'found elec-



Kevin Andrew Morris, *A Still and Fragile Moment (detail)*, 2017

tronics detached from their original environment and fabricated ceramic artefacts' and his interest in 'lost origins and invented meanings'.⁷ The artist printed still images, from the collection of a geophysicist, onto white ceramic stoneware and

porcelain, made from plaster moulds of the cameras that would have captured these historic images.^{p.8}

Scenes of nature, photographed during the course of a man's daily work in the oil industry, are now fixed, blurrily and perhaps temporarily, onto the thin ceramic surface. The results lead to thoughts of the fragile natural world and its exploitation by the oil industry. Yet the personal connection of the photographer to the places he is visiting, recording, studying, and perhaps enjoying, complicate our notions of a corporate view of the places depicted, offering instead an individual one.

Thomas Nondh Jansen interviewed other expats about what reminded them of home, inspired by his own sense of longing for Thailand, where he was born but did not grow up. Now Jansen says he feels at home in the Netherlands as well as in Thailand — but some of his interviewees clearly still identify more strongly with their place of origin. As one told him, '*sometimes she looks at the clock during work and wonders "what the real time would be in England"*'. The events and objects that remind his interviewees of home are varied but simple, everyday objects or experiences. Even the negative can spark a happy reflection on a past time in a different place — '*one expat always has to smile when he sees a big traffic jam because that reminds him of the busy streets in Lebanon where he is from*'.⁸ Though the objects are basic, the photographs Jansen has made are vivid, with bright colours, piles

8. Thomas Nondh Jansen, 'Collecting Stories', 21 August 2017, <http://www.eacan-niversary.com/collecting-stories-thomas-nondh-jansen/>. Accessed 15 December 2017.

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of objects, and hands sprinkling powders and spilling liquids. ^{p. 20} The series of images evokes tastes and smells, sounds and movement, and all with still, silent, photographs. The project is a beautiful demonstration of the power of simple things to provoke memories and generate meanings.

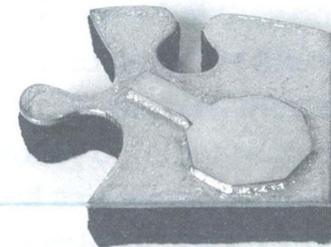
Finally, Natalie Mcllroy took an exotic representation of a Balinese woman on a children's jigsaw as the starting point for her work, noting that one piece of the puzzle is missing. ^{p. 14} As she explains,

*[t]his missing piece began to represent all the fragmented memories that are held within the archive; all the incomplete histories, all the complexities that make one particular historic event. No collection tells the full story and even 'official' historical documents are littered with missing pieces.*⁹

By recreating the missing piece — out of rubber, gold leaf and gold plate — Mcllroy distils the core concepts of critical archival theory into one provocative and succinct artefact. Interpreting the past, the other, the unknown, has been thought of in just such a way — how do we put together the clues to make up a complete picture? Yet as the image of this puzzle implies, the picture reflects a particular perspective, 'a celebration of a relatively unknown culture from a western point of view'. ¹⁰ Even if all the pieces were together, the result would be

misleading — telling us more about the viewer/visitor than the person or culture that we see in the image.

Taken together, the works in the *Saudade* suitcase show us how artists can activate archives to draw out new interpretations, and can raise questions, and suggest answers — by working explicitly with personal interest in, and engagement with, the partial records of limited perspectives. In the process, they offer unlimited opportunities to expand the narratives we discuss and the viewpoints we consider when we imagine ourselves and others.



Natalie Mcllroy in collaboration with Aletta Teunen, *Required Field* (detail showing shape of Kemaro Pagoda on Pulau Kemaro from aerial perspective), 2017