

**INFINITE RECORD:
ARCHIVE, MEMORY, PERFORMANCE**

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INTRODUCTION

THE PROJECT

Karmenlara Ely and Maria Magdalena Schwaegermann

The archive, if it can be said to be anything at all, is an uncanny potential, like the stage itself. After three years of engaging with *Infinite Record: Archive, Memory, Performance*, “archive” for Norwegian Theater Academy at Østfold University College now refers to a phenomenon of attention. *Infinite Record* has amplified the demand to listen to the present, and by responding we can carry forth, transform, or release the resonances of the past. This project informed our engagement with the topic of performance and memory such that the notion of “archive” for us now also implies methods of relation, repetition, embodiment, listening, and care, as well as polyphonic acts of overwriting, erasure, and letting go.

At NTA in Fredrikstad, Norway we educate acting and scenography students in contemporary theater from the undergraduate to post-graduate levels. Students work closely together to generate new original theater works informed by compositional strategies found in music and architecture. Our practices are based in research, in seeking relationships and potentials produced by theater, and in investigating how performance can engage with both a space and the public via the senses while simultaneously stimulating critical discourse and thought. For almost 20 years the education has invited groundbreaking international guest artists to create unique projects in conjunction with the students.

The early archive of NTA was represented by project records, heaps of photos, videotapes, and traces of performances locked in a storage closet, without much order or framing. We didn’t know what to do with all this data, so it became the starting point for *Infinite Record*, which led to our current explorations. We asked ourselves: What is the legacy of NTA? What do the principles of archiving have to do with the ephemeral arts and an education that seeks to explode traditional patterns of learning? Is our archive something to organize, care for, or forget? We realized that at some level we were asking, as contemporary theater makers, what we had to do with history, and what history had to do with us.

So we invited resident artists and institutional partners to help us answer these questions by exploring the dynamics of memory and archiving in their own works, as a way to enter into the next chapter in our development as an academy responsible for its own legacy. This book is a reckoning and reflection on the three years we spent investigating our archival impulses. This book does not serve as a history of NTA, but rather offers a collection of findings on developing approaches to archive, memory, and performance. The accumulated research found herein — our “listening” — has been very informative in guiding subsequent ways to map our own history as a school as we approach our twenty-year celebration in 2016.

The archive as a phenomenon of reckoning, storage, and engagement with time is a crucial obsession for many theater makers. What we mean by “archive” is complex: we at once refer to the marking of history, the trace of things, and also to any values that trouble us in our march towards death and disappearance. Memory plays a crucial role in how we process our practice. For instance, an actor brings to his or her training embodied histories, legacies, and circles of relation. Through exchanges with the public they shed old bodies and acquire new identities. A scenographer develops new spaces in response to what is there and what is not there. Both artists are working in dialogue with the demands of time, history, and the politics of shared space. Texts play a decisive role in what we consider to be our inheritance as makers. Texts are perforated. They are breathed, spoken, eaten, changed, and exchanged.

This book documents a collective effort to approach memory and archive — a complex matrix of discourse — by means of diverse, opposing, and conflicting methodologies. What NTA values most in the artistic research paradigm is the invitation to interfere with hierarchical knowledge systems. Michel Foucault,

1 Cf. Deleuze, Gilles. "Intellectuals and Power." *Counter-Memory, Practice*. Trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973. Pp. 205-217. [Originally in French as "Les intellectuels et le pouvoir: Entretien Michel Foucault-Gilles Deleuze." *L'ARC* 49 (1972): 3-10.] Print.

2 Cf. Eds. Brandt, Bettina, and Valentina Glajar. *Herta Müller: Politics and Aesthetics*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013. Print.

3 Müller, Herta. *Vater telefoniert mit den Fliegen*. München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2012.

Similar attempts were similarly celebrated: Müller, Herta. *Im Haarknoten wohnt eine Dame*. Reinbeck: Rowohlt Verlag, 2000. Print; Müller, Herta. *Die blassen Herren mit den Mokka tassen*. München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2005. Print.

4 "Milk is the TWIN-BROTHER of Tar/ IN White or BLACK ONE CAN lie/ Mother is moving a CANDY IN [her] Mouth BACK AND forth/ Father IS CALLING the Flies" – This is a rendering of the wording of the relief that should not be understood as a translation of the poem but part of the riddle without which the form would lose its references. At the same

in a 1972 conversation with Gilles Deleuze, defended art as a valid and independent form of knowledge that need not obey traditional scientific methods.¹ Foucault's case holds up because artistic forms have the ability, through their diversity, to evoke "other" knowledge, even knowledge that challenges the preconditions of knowledge. This is relevant to our pedagogy at NTA, as we train theater artists using sometimes serpentine, non-traditional processes, while inviting other disciplines into our spaces in order to challenge theater conventions. We often ask theater to resist or critique its own history, including the aesthetic and cultural power structures of the avant-garde.

Artistic research processes in Norway value experimentation, juxtaposed relations, and live encounters as proven values for spending time and resources. This is an alternative to familiar modes of marketable academic production. The act of critical reflection is therefore an essential part of our artistic research processes, where theory, expression, and other grammars arise out of a myriad of digestive mechanisms used to engage work (including work that is perhaps impossible to digest). An example of this is when we invite unfinished ideas from our seminar processes to be presented and explored publicly. This symposia situation is a collective learning experience where failure is welcomed, if not consciously invited. It is not just a "knowledge market." Artistic research and critical reflection might also mean dreaming together, without objects or objection. But this dreaming follows a trajectory or thread; it has a structure and a direction, a flow. *Infinite Record*, in its book form, is yet another framework for gathering these threads together. It is a situation, a network of human relations, and a reflection on encounters with time.

PERFORMING ASSEMBLAGE

This book also functions as a sculpted relief, the result being perhaps a performance of its own. A book almost always consists of interconnected letters forming words within a specific semantic framing that give meaning to the performative "stage" design emerging on the empty page.

The celebrated poetic work (Fig. 001) arrives from the German-Romanian writer Herta Müller, Nobel Prize laureate of 2009, points in that direction.² *Father is calling the flies*^{3,4} is a provocative example of



[Fig. 001]

performative writing that also functions as an “unreadable text.” It is approachable only through the interplaying facets of architecture (color, three-dimensionality, capitalization, context, archive). At the moment the letters/words are staged by the scenographic design of the author, the former content and context of the snipped advertisement pieces they arrive from are forever lost. But the text, seen anew, operates as solitary form—in relief, as performance—locating its new coordinates, so that it might live on as celebrated poetry.

The work has taken a journey “down the rabbit hole”⁵—a metaphor in the English language that serves as a threshold symbol for the entrance into a ‘grotesque world,’ “where the unconscious is entered, and archetypal realms are revealed” (158).⁶ It is frequently used when referring to a shift in one’s immediate environment, a shift so substantial that one’s concept of reality is challenged or even changed, resulting in the loss of objectivity. Entering archival work can be compared to venturing down the rabbit hole, searching for long lost contexts, re-establishing contexts by means of critical methodologies, experiencing the eternal loss by means of conscious and unconscious introspection. When one looks at Herta Müller’s piece, the multidimensional staging of the words behave like masked protagonists in a performance, but their archival identity is irretrievably lost. Coping with the loss of the absolute and re-assembling masks and memories from the fragmentation of a globalized world are recurring themes of *Infinite Record*.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF THIS BOOK

The “process” of *Infinite Record: Archive, Memory, Performance* has ended, but this collection represents its afterlife. Not a comprehensive representation of the project but rather a collection of its potentials: here you’ll find traces, scholarly voices, performance writing, and artistic works. One could begin reading from anywhere in the book. The items, like the individuals responsible for them, do not agree; they do not seek harmony but are left to coexist. While there is a logic to the order of the entries, there are infinite equal and opposite resonances that arise through reading randomly. This is supported by the layout: we consider the book’s designer a scenographer. The book is conceptualized as a stage work with four “scenes”:

Scene I: *The Rabbit Hole*

Scene II: *Memory Mountain*

Scene III: *Wunderblock*

Scene IV: *No Escape*

We invite the reader to relate to the book as an interactive play where one can enter and exit the scenes at will.