

# The Ruined Archive

edited by Iain Chambers, Giulia Grechi and Mark Nash

**MELA\*** Books

**MELA BOOKS 11 – RF02 CULTURAL MEMORY, MIGRATING MODERNITIES AND MUSEUM PRACTICES**

Published by Politecnico di Milano

© June 2014, The Authors



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ISBN 978-88-95194-38-7



This Book ensued from the Research Project MeLa - European Museums in an age of migrations funded within the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (SSH-2010-5.2.2) under Grant Agreement n° 266757.  
Project Officer: Mr. Zoltán Krasznai



Funded under Socio-economic Sciences &amp; Humanities

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**ENGLISH EDITING**

Mark Weir

**GRAPHIC DESIGN**

Zetalab — Milano

**LAYOUT**

Mariangela Orabona

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# Introduction

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## POWERS OF SECRECY (RUINS, SILENCES AND FOGS).

Some Reflections on *Companionable Silences*, an Exhibition  
Curated by Shanai Jhaveri

→ BEATRICE FERRARA

Beatrice Ferrara (PhD in "Cultural and Postcolonial Studies of the Anglophone World", 2011) is Local Project Manager and Appointed Researcher at the Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale" within the EU Project "MeLa\* - Museums in an Age of Migrations" (FP7). Her research interests include the sonic-cultures and cyber-cultures of the black diaspora; theories of affect and post-representation through images and sounds, especially in relation to race; the relation between images, sound and pre-emptive power; the production and circulation of images of migration across different media platforms. She has published several essays and articles on sound, art and new media from a post-colonial perspective. She is the editor of *Cultural Memory, Migrating Modernities and Museum Practices* (Politecnico di Milano DPA, 2012).

→ ABSTRACT

Using a critical toolbox developed at the intersection of cultural and postcolonial studies, this essay develops a series of reflections around the changing premises of archival institutions, touching on the debates on "global art" and "inclusion." More specifically, the essay advocates the necessity for museums and archives with a post-colonial vocation to engage in the possibility of the refusal of the other to appear. The argument unfolds through a critical investigation of a curatorial practice and an artwork, in which the question of "secrecy" (as silence and as a form of foggy vision obfuscating the regimes of representation) is strategic. These are, respectively, the pavilion *Companionable Silences*, curated by Shanai Jhaveri at the Palais de Tokyo in 2013 and the 2012 film-essay *I See Infinite Difference between Any Point and Another...* by The Otolith Group, dedicated to the painter and poet Etel Adnan and included in *Companionable Silences*.

## → FOREWORD. RUINS AND REMOVAL

*A ghost arrived with a handful of roses. "No other flower is a flower," he said. He left them on a table and quit; the more the place darkened, the more they glowed.*

Etel Adnan 2012

An exhibition organized by 21 young curators from 13 different countries revolving around the emergence, in the last years, of the figure (and the related *discourse*) of the independent curator, *Nouvelle vague* was held at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris (21 June – 8 September 2013).<sup>1</sup> Composed of several pavilions, each animated by a specific research question relating to the practices of *curare*—"to take care of" and "to attend to"—*Nouvelle vague* compelled the visitor to take very earnestly the specificity of each single pavilion.<sup>2</sup> To step into the purposely-reorganised exhibition space of the Palais de Tokyo was to accept an invitation to reflect on, be exposed to, and engage with, the multiple ways in which each curator had inflected the question of *curare* by intervening in and acting upon accepted museum practices and archival codes. Moving through the pavilions, the visitor could ideally reiterate—in the living matter of her own body, solicited by an overwhelming proliferation of artworks and exhibition display possibilities—the gestures by which each curator had performed and played with the museum's inherited languages. In this way, the visitor could repeatedly *perceive* the exhibition precisely as a complex *mise-en-scène*.

As Lidia Curti has suggested, to pay greater attention to the language of the museum and therefore to the performance of the carefully orchestrated arrangements of its practices may be a promising act. From this change of perspective—"from mere exhibition to complex rite" (Curti 2012, 189)—it follows that a critical and affirmative disposition towards the exhibition as dramatization would also engender the possibility of playing with the language of exhibiting itself, in order to acknowledge—and counter, by interrupting its workings—the normalising effect of exhibition practices and codes. In this sense, a particularly suggestive aesthetic intervention in *Nouvelle vague* was Leyla Cárdenas' *Removido*—a site-specific intervention presented in the *Collective Fictions* pavilion, curated by Artesur.<sup>3</sup> Almost imperceptible, except from a distance, *Removido* consisted in an outline of the profile of the Palais de Tokyo's monumental

1 For the *Nouvelle vague's* exhibition concept, see <http://palaisdetokyo.com/en/exhibition/nouvelles-vagues-in-the-palais-de-tokyo>, accessed 21 September 2013. For the sake of precision, it should be added that the Palais de Tokyo was the main but not the only scene of *Nouvelle vague*, which was also disseminated in thirty other Parisian galleries. This essay refers, however, to the specific exhibition held at the Palais.

2 The reference to the Latin etymology of *curare* as a premise to the whole exhibition is drawn from the *Nouvelle vague's* press release (<http://palaisdetokyo.com/en/exhibition/nouvelles-vagues>, accessed 21 September 2013).

3 *Artesur. Collective Fictions* is the curatorial manifestation of a collective project existing online – a collaborative and free electronic living archive presenting and disseminating contemporary art from Latin America. See: <http://www.collectivefictions.com/presentation/>, accessed 25 August 2013.



IMG. 01 — Leyla Cárdenas, *Removido*, 2013. Site-specific peeled drawing, accumulated paint. Part of the exhibition "Artesur, Collective Fictions," in "Nouvelle vague" (21.06.13 - 09.09.13), Palais de Tokyo, Paris (courtesy Palais de Tokyo Press)



IMG. 02 — Leyla Cárdenas, detail from *Removido*, 2013. Photo: Santiago Tovar (courtesy of Cárdenas and Tovar)



IMG. 03 — Leyla Cárdenas, *Removido*, 2013. Photo: Santiago Tovar (courtesy Cárdenas and Tovar)

external front, where the artist had scratched off the white paint covering one of the walls of the *Artesur's* exhibition space.

More an art-working process than an artwork as such, *Removido* was largely present by its own latent absence. In fact, over the weeks, it encountered its own obsolescence, with the beginning of an inevitable and semi-autonomous process of the peeling away of the paint. Starting from Cárdenas' first scratches, piece after piece of paint fell off the artwork, leaving the floor covered in layers of paint.

This process of obsolescence would only make *Removido* more visible. As it was progressively *removed* from the wall—by the artist, by time, by the wider conditions of a room in which so many visitors would pass by the artwork every day—*Removido* became a trace, a signal, a suspended reminder of a deeper *removal*. The removal of the untold *secret* at the heart of every exhibition: the constructed character of the exhibition's normalising codes, embodied in the “white wall.” The ghostly double of the Palais de Tokyo—a palace built, not incidentally, for the 1937 “World's Fair”—*Removido* works as a reminder, and simultaneously a gesture towards the possibility, and inevitability, of transformation. As Anca Rujoiu writes, talking of the *material* conditions of the artwork and its ruined character:

[*Removido*] tak[es] us to the inherent destiny of a ruin. [Here] residuals, fragments, discarded structures are used as material for sculptures and installations, yet the new context and re-use does not completely defuse their previous history. [...] The strategy of removal is as much destructive as constructive. The act of erasure of an existing entity carries the potential of a new production. Artistic production meets exhibition-making. [P] reparations for an exhibition start and end the same: painting and cleaning the walls, removing carefully the previous traces and their related references and narratives, bringing the space back to a fictional white-impeccable status quo. In Leyla Cárdenas site-specific intervention, it's a reversed process. (2013, n.p.)

Intensely evoked in *Removido* through the inevitable and urgent obsolescence of established practices and categories—and the necessity to face the removal that regulates the normalising process by which a “complex rite,” as in Curti's words, becomes ‘simply’ an exhibition—were the common *issues* making themselves transversally evident in the majority of the discourses and practices animating *Nouvelle vague*.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, as *Removido* proves, obsolescence is only a step on the

4 Different elements addressed in *Nouvelle Vague* included the event of the digital turn (relating to new media, affective experiences, audience research), the new configurations of “the informatics of domination” (Haraway 1991 [1985]), the persisting and the new planetary asymmetries of power (relating to gender, race, resources, ecology and health status), the composite territories of global politics and policies. See especially the pavilions/installations *Ada* (curators Ken Farmer and Conrad Shawcross), *Artesur*, *Collective Fictions* (curators Albertine de Galbert et al.), *File Not Found* (curators The Black Ninja Factors), *This House* (curators Anthea Buys and Mikhael Subotzsky), *Henrique Oliveira*. *Batogogo* (curator Marc Bembekoff).

path towards transformation—a step in a process in which the artwork is always in relation with what lies outside it, metaphorically and materially at the same time. To unravel this process entailed, in each single pavilion in *Nouvelle vague*, a proliferation of different practices, each of them facing a different aspect of what lies at the limits of the art discourse: i.e. its cultural, technological, geopolitical, racial, gendered and economic levels of articulation.<sup>5</sup> In the diverse aesthetic-political curatorial statements/performances composing *Nouvelle vague*, the “inherited palimpsest” of the museum and the archive was performed as an exploded matter, under the pressure of the contingencies and conjunctures of contemporary planetary conditions.

This is precisely the overtly ruined—and therefore future-oriented—matter that Kylie Message dubs “the new museum” that lies “beyond the mausoleum” (2006, 7). Following Judith Butler's cautionary remarks on the need to consider cultural productions as other than “merely cultural” (Butler 1998, 42), Message addresses the new museums not simply as theoretical projects, but also as a series of practices: “cultural-centre model[s] [...] in relation to the shifting currencies of trade, capital and meaning connected to globalisation” (2006, 39). For Message, a particularly relevant, urgent and important impact on the museum is that of the *postcolonial interrogation*. As the author warns, when dealing with the ruins of archival institutions in order to transform them, it would be a mistake not to acknowledge the centrality and persistence of the postcolonial question—especially since the museum and the archive have been the privileged loci of authority in the patriarchal and racialised ordering of the world under the Western episteme. As she writes, great importance is still to be given to “the *representation* of postcolonial forms of cultural diversity in these public spheres [...] and the *technologies* that speak directly to (and in some cases attempt to delimit) these spaces” (2006, 39; my emphasis).

The question of the technologies—those of representation and memorialisation, their languages and operations—is crucial here. As Iain Chambers has put it, once exposed to its own obsolescence and vulnerability, the “inherited palimpsest [...] remains to be reworked and rewritten in the light of other histories; in the light thrown by others crossing its spaces, languages and technologies” (2012, 17). However, as he continues, “[t]o undo that particular historical inheritance is not to cancel it” (17). Rather, the question is—What to do with these *ruins*? Would it be enough to merely adjust or enlarge the inherited frame of understanding—to incorporate the critical encounter with the postcolonial, or is something more at stake?<sup>6</sup>

This is in fact the central question of this essay. In these pages, I will try

5 This is exactly what Okwui Enwezor has elsewhere defined as art's “affiliations in other domains of practice” (Enwezor 2009 [2003], 232).

6 For a first critical elaboration of these questions from a post-colonial perspective within the EU Research Project “MeLa\* - European Museums in an Age of Migrations”, see the contributions in Ferrara 2012a.

to think *with* two practices—one curatorial and one specifically artistic—that acknowledge the inevitable obsolescence of the inherited languages of archival institutions in the light of the histories that these institutions of memory have structurally marginalised and removed through their normalising technologies of exhibition, representation and display. At the same time, the practices this essay confronts articulate such concerns from a very specific position. They do not advocate an ‘amendment’ of the marginalising technologies of memorialisation mentioned above, for example through the realisation of the objectives indicated on the cultural agendas of archival institutions that are often predicated on the universalising projects of multiculturalism or inclusion. On the contrary, in my opinion[?] there is an altogether more radical questioning of the concepts/praxis that *incorporate* difference while making it the object of knowledge—as when the objective is to “make visible,” “give voice to,” “make room for” or “comprehend” (literally to “take in” and to “enclose”) the ‘Other.’ Going against the grain, the practices presented in this essay play with their power to exercise what I would call ‘the powers of secrecy.’

The expression I use here is of course indebted (indeed is a fond yet humble homage) to the theorisations of the philosopher Édouard Glissant and specifically to what he calls “the right to opacity.” This is a fundamental element in his philosophy of relation and a strategy to favour the survival, the potential to become other, of difference. Against the reifying projects of new and old humanist universalisms, he writes of the necessity of fugitive gestures of escape from the possibility to be understood. He thus addresses the impossibility of reducing the ‘Other’ to ‘me,’ or for me to simply ‘turn into’ the ‘Other.’ In his words, “[t]he poetics of relation presuppose that each of us encounters the density (the opacity) of the Other. The more the Other resists in his thickness or his fluidity (without restricting himself to this), the more expressive [it] becomes, and the more fruitful the relation becomes” ([1969] 1997, 24).

The reason why I do not retain the word “opacity” in this essay, while proposing instead the use of “secrecy,” is to avoid a straightforward linking of the quality of opacity to the visual register—of which it is only one of the many modalities. Although visual opacity will be accounted for in my argument, I will also work with the use of the concept of silence or better ‘aural opacity,’ or more generally with forms of theoretical opacity. Since most of the artworks composing the exhibition I refer to are by feminine and feminist artists, this is also a way to point to the wide and large genealogy of the use of ‘silence’ as ‘absent presence’ in feminine and feminist art and thought. I refer here to the arts of affirming life through bodily opacity, within and beyond the register of the written word and the transparency of the eye (Spivak 1988, Djebar [1980] 1999). Moreover, I use “powers” to refer to secrecy in a way that is consistent with a Foucaultian theory of power, in which power is a two-fold relation that is always reversible and complex. In this sense, I shall see how ‘the power to keep a secret’ is simultaneously the power to keep silent or invisible, to normalise, to reduce to a black space *as well as* the power to affirm a presence by deviating the workings of normalisation.

This means to deploy partial invisibility and creative silence as tools of liberation from the grip of the violence animating the appetite for transparency, which—as Gilroy says—is always an oppressive “appetite for sameness and symmetry” (1993, 97).

#### → SECRECY AS SILENCE

The first practice of ‘secrecy’ I shall discuss is a curatorial act presented again in *Nouvelle vague*, at the pavilion *Companionable Silences*, curated by Shanay Jhaveri, a young curator living and working between London and Mumbai. *Companionable Silences* is a pavilion whose curatorial premises precisely “attend to” and “take care of” the persistence and crossing of *other* memories and histories within the spaces of the contemporary museum in ruins. It consists of a selection of artworks by non-Western women artists who all worked and spent part of their lives in Paris during last century: Saloua Raouda Choucair, Tarsilia do Amaral, Zarina Hashmi, Amrita Sher-Gil, Etel Adnan. The display of the artworks in this pavilion is rather traditional when compared to several other pavilions in *Nouvelle vague*. It unfolds into two small rooms: an actual exhibition space and a screening room. The exhibition space hosts the artworks (paintings,



IMG. 04 — View of the exhibition “Companionable Silences,” in “Nouvelles vagues” (21.06.13 - 09.09.13), Palais de Tokyo, Paris. Photo: Aurélien Mole (courtesy Palais de Tokyo Press)

IMG. 05 — View of the exhibition “Companionable Silences,” in “Nouvelles vagues” (21.06.13 - 09.09.13), Palais de Tokyo, Paris. In the foreground: Zarina Hashmi, *The Ten Thousand Things*, 2009-2010, Courtesy of the artist and of the gallery Jaeger Bucher, Paris. In the background: Amrita Sher-Gil, *Self Portrait as Tahitian*, 1934, N. and V. Sundaram collection. Photo: Aurélien Mole (courtesy Palais de Tokyo Press)



drawings, sculptures, handwriting on paper) by the above-mentioned artists, interspersed with kindred artworks by Camille Henrot, Umrao Singh Sher-Gil and Adolf Loos. The screening space erodes the primacy of the visual and the plastic dominating the exhibition room by embedding the visual in the materiality of the audio-visual, with the voice and poetry of Etel Adnan reverberating from The Otolith Group’s essay-film *I See Infinite Distance between Any Point and Another...* I will return to this work later in this essay.

I propose that the opacity specific to such a practice is a form of *theoretical* opacity, and lies in an overt refusal—on behalf of the curator—to make the exhibition smoothly fit into the overarching, and nowadays very popular, category of “global art.” Jhaveri’s curatorial act proposes instead a proximity without identification, leading to the use of the idiomatic expression “companionable silence” in the exhibition’s title. It refers to a pleasant intimacy of two or more singularities sharing a common situation but remaining irreducible to one another.

As the pavilion’s blurb explains, the artists featured in *Companionable Silences* all shared what could be described—in a rough generalisation that is employed here in full awareness of its limits, and I will return to this—as a “migrant life.”<sup>7</sup> It reads:

[they all] led distinctly cosmopolitan lives, actively arbitrating between disparate cultural and geographical spaces, demonstrating a remarkable self-consciousness of their own changing identities, navigating with confidence amongst issues of assimilation and acculturation. Artistically, they interrogated paradigms of Western authority, negotiating with established modes of representation, while devising room for their own formal approaches.<sup>8</sup>

7 What are – after all – the implications of using the words “migrant” or “global” as overarching paradigms? As notably claimed by Spivak, amongst others, it is important to be aware of a new epistemological function of power that she calls “new orientalism,” which sees “the world as immigrant” (1993, 64).

8 See <http://palaisdetokyo.com/en/exhibition/collective-exhibition/companionable-silences>, accessed

Indeed, upon first consideration, this curatorial statement might easily fit the paradigm of “global art”—a label, or better a discursive framing that has emerged alongside economic globalisation, which is increasingly spoken of in relation to contemporary art. As Susanne Leebe et al. (2013) outline, this is a very slippery concept, whose exact implications are still under critical scrutiny.

Does a global world need Global Art – or – does a globalized world produce globalized art? What, precisely, is the difference between these two phrases, between making a political claim and the economic structure? When did the term “Global Art” become the assertion of a “contemporary world art” that is composed along the lines of global economization, and what possible alternatives and other historiographies exist? [...]Is the current pervasiveness of “Global Art” in exhibition titles, conferences, funding programs, and their implementation in study courses symptomatic of a (self) surmounting of the Global North? Or does it indicate a universalization of its concepts of art that remain linked to capitalism’s colonizing power of definition and does it therefore finally have more to do with globalizations than with the global? (6)

However, aware of the risk of such a framing, in an online interview accompanying the launch of *Nouvelle vague* Jhaveri decidedly rejects this possibility, by affirming that *Companionable Silences* is actually “not a survey to say ‘Here is a global art history.’”<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Jhaveri seems to encourage the listener to acknowledge the subtle connection between a universalising notion of “global art” and the limits and risks of what is called the ‘turn’ towards “inclusiveness,” upon which the transformations of European cultural agendas in the age of migration are increasingly modulated. In fact, as the curator claims, *Companionable Silences* is not even predicated on supposedly enlarged visions of European identity, whose aim would be to attest to the uninterrupted presence of the ‘Other’ in European art and advocate his/her inclusion in an enlarged artistic paradigm.

I propose to take this clarification as a direct engagement with a ‘power of secrecy’: indeed, it would be possible to consider “inclusion” as one of the names of *removal*—a foreclosure of difference, in which difference itself is domesticated and therefore rendered silent and invisible in the very instance that it is evoked or made visible. According to Leebe et al., in order to avoid the risk of “global art” only being the symptom of a new universalization:

[...] it is necessary both to question the self-historicizations of European culture and art histories and to develop curatorial and artistic models which construe the global within contemporary art beyond a mere hegemonic

24 August 2013.

9 See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSuTEI6ZZvo>, accessed 28 August 2013.

discourse. In searching for a differentiated and multiple global that brings disparities and contradictions as well as the inner perspectives of the actors to the fore, one must discuss art and its production conditions in regard to shared colonial and postcolonial histories, economic and geopolitical relationships of dependence, as well as different cultural traditions and conditions of reception. (6)

In fact, as Jhaveri suggests, *Companionable Silence* is an attempt at acknowledging precisely the political and epistemological framing of similar '(self-)historicisations' of identity. Resisting inclusion and capture within the "global" paradigm as a hegemonic discourse, *Companionable Silence* adopts exactly another mode of 'secrecy' as a critical tool: the strategy of 'silence'. This 'silence' is materialised through different modalities, in order to evoke certain specific theoretical implications. The first of these modalities is to propose that—since it is not enough to build an enlarged artistic canon able to 'contain' difference—the more radical option is the questioning of the historicisation of artistic canons in themselves. As Jhaveri explains, one of the aims of *Companionable Silences* is to bend and inflect, by blending and inflecting the historicisations of Modernist art, the very notion of modernity itself, engendering the presence of a series of co-existing modernities, whose difference sustains productive power. Indeed, in *Companionable Silences* this inflection is not proposed as a plea for inclusion, for example, by asking that these women artists and their artworks be welcomed into an already existing pantheon of male Western "fathers." They do not even construct a 'we' among themselves. On the contrary, as the title of the exhibitions suggests, their presence seeks to establish a relation of 'proximity without identification,' in which the right to be present, to be acknowledged is predicated on the autonomy and *difference* of these artistic practices. It is an attempt to 'provincialise' the Western canon and endlessly pluralise the notion of 'migrancy.'<sup>10</sup> In Jhaveri's words, "It is not about including them in a Western canon, but rather just talking about or focusing on their practices as such."<sup>11</sup>

This relates to the second 'power of secrecy' of *Companionable Silences*, which works more specifically on the theoretical-political level of aesthetics. As Jhaveri explains, the presence of these artworks in the exhibition—their present in-difference that does not ask for re-cognition—serves to signal more forcibly their absence, and thus to pose a political question: "Why are certain material histories or artistic practices forgotten or not accounted for?"<sup>12</sup> This exhibition therefore suggests that in the current moment it is this form of specifically post-colonial inflected historical art research and analysis that is required. As Jhaveri claims, the artworks presented in *Companionable Silences* should be considered *aesthetically* as such, thus implying a retrospective and a deconstruction of the inherited languages of the art canon in itself.

10 The concept of 'provincialisation' draws its specific use here from Chakrabarty 2007.

11 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSuTEI6ZZv0>, accessed 28 August 2013.

12 Ibidem.

Not incidentally, and this is the third and last modality of the 'powers of secrecy' I shall suggest, the reluctance to fit easily into the paradigms of "global art" and "inclusion" is undoubtedly a matter of aesthetics in which the conceptual use of "opacity" becomes extremely relevant. Most of the artworks exhibited in the pavilion are in fact formally very abstract and seem to defy facile attempts at being 'communicative.' Although the arrangement of the exhibition (the distribution of the artworks in space, the lighting, the dimensions of the artworks exposed, which often require the visitor to get very close to them) is very welcoming, communication is not immediate. It requires a modality of attention that is lengthy and profound. This allows the material presence of *mediation* to emerge from the surface of each of the artworks. The 'secret' of every *mise-en-scène* and representation is evoked and rendered perceptible, as a resilient excess which is only partially disclosed to the visitor, attracting her with the invitation to partake in the construction of *a* sense.

#### → SECRECY AS FOG

I shall now look more closely at one of the artworks presented in *Companionable Silence*, the film-essay by The Otolith Group *I See Infinite Distance between Any Point and Another...* (2012).<sup>13</sup> I propose to analyse a particular example of the ways in which the *theoretical* opacity of the pavilion's curatorial premises as a whole is echoed in the *aesthetical audio-visual* opacity of its artworks. From 'silence' as a 'power of secrecy,' I here move to 'fog' as another modality of opacity. The kind of opacity specific to this film-essay is that of a 'foggy' *vision*—a camera technique employed to defy the transparency of the eye—which opens onto the voice of the Other as the place of memories.

Fully aware of the impossibility of reducing the variety of feminine and feminist art presented in the pavilion curated by Jhaveri to the study of only one of its examples, I must clarify the precise reasons that motivate my choice to focus specifically on *I See Infinite Distance between Any Point and Another...* Presenting a series of reflections on this artwork complements my previous engagement with the poetics of the British art collective The Otolith Group as poetics of 'the secret.'<sup>14</sup> As claimed by Demos (2013), all the activities carried out by the Group since its foundation could be said to be under the sign of "opacity," since they all partake in the evocation of a semi-fictional global narration whose contours are blurred and declivous. They are 'trembling audio-visual images,' apparitions always on the verge of mystery. They summon the

13 HD video, colour, sound (stereo), 33' 32".

14 See <http://otolithgroup.org/index.php?m=information>, accessed 19 September 2013. Founded in London in 2002, The Otolith Group is a collaborative entity, pivoting around (and generally identifiable with) the figures of Kodwo Eshun (British-Ghanaian theorist and artists) and Anjalika Sagar (British-Indian anthropologist and artist). The Group is engaged in filmmaking, curatorial activities and theoretical writing. Its artistic practice aspires to the "integrated practice" of the British cine-cultures of the Eighties, such as The Black Audio Film Collective. This is a concept Mercer used when referring to the mixing of artistic practice with the participation in educational-pedagogical activities and experimentation with grassroots participatory aesthetic-political modalities that characterised the black British artistic collectives of the Eighties (1994).

spectator to decipher them through what the Group itself calls a form of “*participation mystique*” (2011).

The Group’s curatorial and artistic experimentations have already provided me with suggestive elements to single out some key issues relating to a re-thinking of museums in an age of migration from a post-colonial perspective (Ferrara 2012b). These I will briefly recapitulate here, in order to introduce the authors and pave the way for the study of the 2012 artwork presented in the exhibition in Paris. The most distinctive aspect of their practices—and the reason of my interest in this context—is their constant focus on the archives of the 20th and 21st century. Having absorbed the Foucaultian lesson on the archive as what, simultaneously, creates a (normative) memory and blocks (other forms of) memory ([1966] 1991), The Otolith Group excavates official archives looking for their unconscious removals while collecting unofficial archives such as personal photographs, drawings, collections of lyrics, records and sounds. These are considered as traces of alternative modes of memorialisation: nodes of a dispersed intimacy, personal yet collective, minor yet part of a resilient “aspiration” to remember and create (Appadurai 2003).<sup>15</sup> In its work, archives are *performed*—re-presented, recuperated and re-actualised—in ways that are stimulating both for their conceptual premises, and for the specific attention given to the mediated character of experience and thus to the centrality of the body and its perceptions in making sense of the exhibition and the artwork. Mixing documentary and fiction, its productions are disseminated with conceptual enigmas, chronological overlapping between present, past and future, elusive characters and dis-jointed sounds and images. The Group’s aim is to disorient and displace common sense assumptions. As Demos writes,

[for the Group,] within the image there emerges an excess, which disturbs visual perception [...] where the image transforms into a multiplicity of threads [...]. By assembling constellations of historical fragments set within newly imagined scenario, they recover what they term ‘past-potential futures’—arrangements of the sensible that loosen representation’s incrustations, breaking open its sense of finality and historical closure, simultaneously redirecting the outmoded and forgotten as newly determinant forces on reality. (2010, 69)

More precisely, the displacement of assumed chronologies and historicisations is carried out with the precise intention of de-naturalising them in the light of the post-colonial question. As Sagar of The Otolith Group explains, they are interested in “opening up the question of the postcolonial to a series of complex interlinkages which are *implied* but which need to be *unfolded* project by project so that what emerges is a

<sup>15</sup> The Group calls this approach “archaeologies of the future,” borrowing the term from Fredrick Jameson: “[what] allows us to think about the writing of public histories in a private mode” (qtd. in Jhaveri 2010, 73).

complex and baroque aesthetic of constellations” (qtd. in Power 2010, 92; my emphasis). This dwelling in, and unfolding of, ‘the (colonial) secret’ takes place through a fragmentation of the grand narrations of the colonial archive, which are re-opened through the quasi-autobiographical gesture of recollecting personal memories and passing them on, in an attempt to turn the “big story” into “a whole series of smaller tales” (Power 2010, 93).

In this sense, *I See Infinite Distance between Any Point and Another...* is no exception. The film revolves around the figure of the very influential Lebanese women poet, novelist and painter Etel Adnan.<sup>16</sup> Adnan—now 88 years old—embodies in her own story and physical presence, particularly her body and specifically her voice—the mixture of displacement and productivity that lies at heart of a migrant life, a life *in translation*. In the visual essay, the poet is filmed in her house, reading aloud passages from her latest book of poetry, *SEA* and *FOG* (2012). Images and sounds of cracking ice are interspersed in the frames of the poet’s fragile yet intense appearance, alternating with the sound of her faltering yet touching voice. Queer silhouettes of what seem to be flowers—or algae, or spores, little eggs, seeds—appear and disappear on screen, stretching, drawing away, extending, retracting...

Choosing to pay homage to Adnan, The Otolith Group performs a triple action on the archive. In one respect, the film *fragments the Archive* of colonial history (his-story) through the biographical and lyrical narration of a story (her-story). In an other respect, the film *creates an archive* through a gesture of care, of holding, of be-holding from oblivion, as far as it gives a permanent digital life to the rhythm of her voice, her English-French inflections, the breath from her chest and the long pauses in her reading. At the same time, the act of archiving, preserving a new life from the ruins of the colonial archive and the peril of oblivion, does not give us back a fully framed, totally saturated, complete portrait of Adnan. Attesting to the impossibility of archiving without framing, *I See Infinite Distance between Any Point and Another...* reclaims the need to archive, to re-open the frame and re-frame, only to retreat repeatedly to the im-possibility of a total framing. What survives are always *remains* that signal something other that exceeds the archival gesture.

To emphasise this im/possible framing, The Otolith Group adopts its own particular aesthetic ‘power of secrecy,’ making Adnan at the same time visible and invisible. From the point of view of cinematic technique, what dominates the film is *fog*—visual, aural, textual and conceptual fog. Respectful close-ups of Adnan’s skin and flesh, her thumb on the book, her spectacles, a glass of water from which she needs to take a sip from

<sup>16</sup> Adnan was born in 1952 from a Muslim Syrian father and a Christian Greek mother. She has spent her life amongst different continents and languages. Educated as a young woman in French in a mostly Arab-speaking country she grew up speaking Turkish and Greek. Later, she became a student and then a lecturer in the United States. Her first compositions as a writer were in French, while the later ones are in English. Her being caught amidst languages and cultures is what she identifies as the source of her painting activities as well. As she explains on her website, abstract painting became her mode of expression during the tensions between France and Algeria, when she – a supporter of Algerian independence – felt split between two languages and two worlds. See <http://www.eteladnan.com/>, accessed 25 September 2013.

IMG. 05 —View of the exhibition “Companionable Silences,” in “Nouvelles vagues” (21.06.13 - 09.09.13), Palais de Tokyo, Paris. The Otolith Group, *I See Infinite Distance between Any Point and Another*, 2012, © of the artists. Photo: Aurélien Mole (courtesy of Palais de Tokyo Press)



time to time, her short white hair, the texture of her clothes, her reflections in the mirror, pieces of writing, pieces of print, pieces of paintings, bottles of paint, items of furniture. This is all we can see of her. Her image in full only appears a couple of times. Moreover, the images of *I See Infinite Distance between Any Point and Another...* are always slightly out of focus and, on a few occasions, the eye of the viewer almost unwillingly mimics the eye of the camera seeking to establish the focus. In the film, this also results in a conceptual approach to mediation and representation, to “dramatisation” as the secret heart of every re-telling of reality. The presence of mediation—a body behind the camera that frames a body in front of the camera—is in fact strongly emphasised not only through those images that do not fit into the principal narration of the film-essay (such as the cracked ice), but also by the presence of the film crew on screen (adjusting a microphone, composing the set...).

All of this frustrates the desire of the eye for sharpness, echoing an aesthetic trend that, according to TJ Demos, is a common feature of diverse contemporary artistic works dealing with migration. According to the scholar, contemporary artists situated in Europe, North America, the Middle East and North Africa have engaged with mobility bringing about a radical and still ongoing reinvention of the conditions of the moving image through a continuous and productive blurring of representation and the strategic failures to represent narration and the tactical disruption of linear accounts. This is an attempt to confront the ambiguous yet prolific conditions of migration, which is also an expression of the emergence of a very strong and compelling politicisation of the aesthetic domain.

However, the Otolith Group’s ‘power of secrecy,’ their ‘foggy’ approach is not limited to the visual register. It also extends to the relation between the strictly textual (the writing) and the aural (the reading). The text which Adnan reads presents an entire section dedicated to *fog* as a way to *translate* memory in a visual register. Fog, relating to water, evaporation,

the sea, becomes the figuration for the coming and going of memories: the mobility of the sea and the movement of thoughts. Its impalpable yet heavy presence, in terms of the perceptive displacement it provokes, inflects language and semantics. In fact the same fogginess the film adopts as a visual language lies in the structure of Adnan’s written text, as well as being the topic of her writing.<sup>17</sup>

As Selcer remarks in a delicate short essay entitled “Reading” (2013), in *I See Infinite Distance between Any Point and Another...* the poetry constrains, or frames, the movement of thought and the dimension of orality, and reading—as a gesture and as meditation—doubles the text and infuses it with life.

If the act of writing bypasses orality, reading aloud resurrects something that exceeds the voice. There is a rhythm of reading that is different from the rhythm of speaking. It contains a has-been, a telling, a reaching into permanence and re-enacting it. [...] The voice’s multitude of frequencies, which had been transmitted silently to paper during writing and which echo while the reader is in the book, get resurrected. It’s the text, deprivatized. This is when the body of the writer becomes significant—in the moment when one body comes into the collective body. [...] Etel’s gender (and age perhaps) inflects all this. [...] The camera records this body with so little distance—the wrinkle of the neck, hair wisp, a confluence of freckles—that it is an obvious specificity, not standing in for any desire of the viewer the way the filmed female usually is. The body is not on display; it’s one texture among the others [...] Filled with itself, presencing. (n. p.)

Again, in the archival gesture of the camera recording and making permanent the impermanence of a voice, which itself is resurrecting a life from the permanence of the written text, The Otolith Group’s film-essay does not propose transparency, but opacity. In the singular, specific inflection of Adnan’s voice there is an excess of potential meanings, which constitutes its secret power, the power of its allure—in the echo and reverberation of other voices. I wish to suggest that *Companionable Silences* and *I See Infinite Distance between Any Point and Another...* can be seen as reflections on the necessity to rethink the languages of the archive, not merely in order to advocate the inclusion of difference but to question and interrogate the limits and potentialities of escaping from representation. As artworks as diverse as those selected by Jhaveri and the one by The Otolith Group seem to propose, it is not possible to take care of the memory of ‘the Other’ without acknowledging the languages that have excluded him/her from representation. At the same time, it is necessary to contemplate the Other’s inalienable right to *refuse to appear*. Silences and fogs bear testimony to this right and to the effort of memory-making, notwithstanding the inevitability of the desire to fully frame and comprehend.

<sup>17</sup> See <http://otolithgroup.org/index.php?m=project&id=144>, accessed 20 October 2013.

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