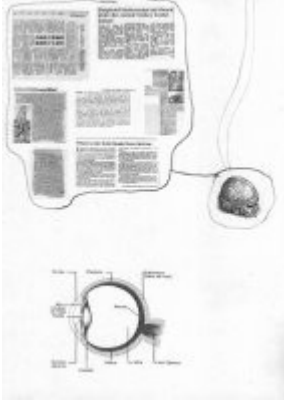


## Ruins, Archaeology and the Gap between Images - 2005



Ruins, Archaeology and the Gap between Images  
(text to publication and exhibition "The Need to Document")  
Zbynek Baladran

The multitude of images, which surround us, which we work with, which entertain us and of which we are a part in today's digital world is so great that it is not at all easy to orient oneself among them. Each image has a specific context or is part of other images referring to other contexts. Modernism and the period that followed left us with a fragmented world, which is more dependent on images than ever before. Thanks to the media boom and the general subversion of the hierarchy of perception of individual images, they make up a vast, indistinguishable audiovisual field. (By 'image' I mean the totality of all kinds of digitalised audiovisual components: text, static pictures, moving pictures, sound, etc.) We have become accustomed to an environment packed full of images and have learned to ignore them. Television offers us images on several dozen channels at once; we have access to other images and their links on the internet, not to mention other possibilities. Images that are a hundred years old exist side by side with images that are ten years old and images that are a few seconds old. Today it is easy to create, modify, combine and distribute images. Images are accumulating in this field and waiting to be used. In this text, I would like to look at the way in which we find images and how we can treat them when we want to use them as part of our testimony.

The difficulty in distinguishing between images and their great number create an impression of a cluttered environment. The various layers overlap, disappear, reappear, participate in and use one another. Combinations create new units, which again dissolve into other images. This sort of sight evokes the ruins of a crowded city. Not an abandoned city, however, but a living one that is in constant motion. The various layers of ruins are constantly changing, collapsing even further, falling into oblivion. But not for long. They always reappear from the bottom layers to create the surface. Newly created images also become ruins. The rapidity with which this happens is proportional to the speed at which new images are created. It is the space-time of human culture and history.

To understand how ruins can be searched and images interpreted, we can use the terminology of archaeology. The analogy with the archaeological methodology is well suited to the description of searching in an unfamiliar environment, where the only guide is the apparatus of our knowledge and the context of the site to be searched. With the term 'archaeological field', we designate a specific spatiotemporal area as the site of investigation of archaeological finds in the layers of earth. It is the framework for our expectation and presentiment of new contexts. In this case, one can designate the space of the ruins as the

archaeological field, that is, the set of visible, suspected or buried images. The delineation of the archaeological field occurs within the framework of the original aim of searching – what are we actually looking for. Each segment of human activity has its sum of images. From those on the surface that determine the interpretation of any kind of activity, to those that are buried, disintegrating in the lower layers, those that are forgotten. All archaeological objects, in our case images, emerge as fragments, with no clear indication of continuity. What we see and what we are able to interpret is only the broken part of some whole unit in the past. The network of contexts and connections with other objects serves as a guide to the reconstruction and interpretation of the fragments. Because, as an artist, I am interested in the search for and interpretation of images, I will give a personal example of how to delineate an archaeological field. I know that in many families there were always film amateurs, collectors and enthusiasts who owned some kind of film material. (8 mm, 16 mm, 35 mm films, VHS and old video and audio tapes.) I was interested in what could be read from these fragments of personal history, located outside the main interpretive framework of the perspective on the past. For that reason, I concentrated on a reconstruction of images of the past from materials that were not from the large specialised or public archives, which have their own specific focus. (Although that has changed in recent times and interest in the peripheral genres of moving images is increasing.) The image of the past must therefore be different, splintered, less explanatory and more subjective. In terms of time, we are talking about roughly the last fifty years, that is, a period which is still part of our memory. My archaeological field was the temporal framework of the existence of media recording moving images, and the deposit site was the individual ownership of films. The means or 'archaeological equipment' that I used was an advertisement published in printed periodicals and on the internet. In the course of half a year of collecting, I received about fourteen hours of various recordings. The film materials collected in this manner consisted of strange fragments of home movies, animation and feature films. They included newsreels, documentary films, recordings of private events, various experiments, unsuccessful takes and the like. On a temporal axis, these film fragments would seem unconnected, randomly grouped. They would make up a strangely incomplete network of connections spread outside the main current of history, in the period from the 1930s to the 1980s.

The term 'archaeological field' is an analogy for the impossibility of seeing an image of the past or of anything else in its entirety. The archaeological field defines the spatial and temporal coordinates, defines the area, the search and the reconstruction. Often we are unable to determine the true date and reason why a specific artefact was made (as was my case in viewing the collected films), or we attribute to it characteristics that turn a banal phenomenon into a fundamental historical turning point. Of course, it has to be added that error, which we always have to reckon with, is also an important interpretive instrument. It is as if reality had escaped and could not be captured or interpreted in a straightforward manner. In the sense of Foucault's archaeology of knowledge, archaeology is the description of the emergence of testimonies. A testimony is an event, which cannot be exhausted by speech or sense. Something always remains, something unique or capable of being transformed into other testimonies and inserted in the dense interrelations with other testimonies. Zielinski's archaeology of media makes use of Foucault's definition of archaeology and expands it, looking at the history of the audiovisual discourse over the past 150 years. He reconstructs this discourse from material objects connected with the history of audio-vision, and also seeks out phenomena that seem to have no connection with audio-vision. In cultural history, he finds figures with utopian visions, strange inventions and models of reality that seemed to be on the periphery of intellectual events. Zielinski's conception of archaeology is about the process of seeking, which treats itself to the gift of the true surprise. By that he means searching in areas, libraries and archives, the collections of which are poorly organised. The finds that one discovers in them are all the more valuable because of the surprise factor; things that a person did not expect but which can offer solutions that a

person wouldn't have thought of if he were looking for something specific. He thus offers a surprising history of audio-vision and expands its seemingly unambiguous context. In this sense, the archaeological approach is an open perspective on the world that allows us to connect phenomena, which were previously incommensurable. This recalls the well-known modernist approach of the collage. The only difference is that we do not want to shock with an unusual connection, but rather to experience, through connecting, the interpretive possibilities that arise among different units of images.

Time appears strangely incomprehensible. On the one hand, it creates the illusion of linear continuity; on the other hand, one can think of it as isolated moments, which connect up, overlap, run together or exist parallel to one another. The perception of time constantly raises for us the question of what the present moment is and what kind of relation it has to other moments in the past, present and future.

It has to be said that the linking up of the present and images of the past creates a peculiar relationship, which could be described as a kind of contamination of the past by the present. Images do not speak to us clearly with the complete context of their origin. They are necessarily distorted and supplemented by our interpretation. We impress upon them our current position, our current stance. One way or another, we enter the past and influence the outlook on the past for the present and for the future. Any kind of find is contaminated by our presence and our ability to interpret it. Thus, in a certain sense, we are a part of it.

There are too many illegible items in the nature of the 'archaeological field'. For this very reason, this kind of reading of the past cannot claim to be an absolute testimony. The experience of reading thus acquired compels us to move on from individual interpretations, to be constantly in motion, and to seek new connections. It is, of course, necessary to maintain a critical distance and to refrain from accepting all connections unreservedly. From what I have written above it follows that, in relation to the creation of contemporary models and descriptions of reality, the most important thing is the present moment and our position in it. Our openness to the images and their interrupted context depends on understanding that each present moment immediately moves into the past. We must not forget, therefore, that our present is also a component of the future reconstruction.

The collage, the approach introduced by modernism, became a universal and comprehensible model for creating and interpreting images. This approach has also opened up for us in time. It seems natural to us to jump from page to page on the internet, to read books at random, to make notes, to watch video clips that are broken down into separate frames, or to switch television programmes with the remote control (zapping). As if our eye and our brain considered this kind of structure of perception and reception to be natural. The important thing is, as I have mentioned above, the relation between the individual images in the gaps between them. Individual constructions are no longer interesting, but rather the tension, which is created by the absence of building parts in a construction. We will not manage to reconstruct reality in its original form; we have already had to reconcile ourselves to this. In the archaeological field, whether we notice it or not, we constantly assume that most of the interconnected images are hidden. With the help of sophisticated cultural technologies, such as deleting, inserting and replacing, we have the opportunity to work in such a way that the various features can always be regrouped in a different manner. Like what Aby Warburg did in his *Mnemosyne Atlas*, in the early twentieth century. Warburg grouped various images, reproductions, photographs, texts and objects on a certain theme on a board with a black background. He altered the position and order and thus created new relations between the individual image elements. He then repeatedly photographed the panel. Which was the outcome of his hyper archive. It is similar with the structure of switching television programmes, which in itself is an excellent example of an archaeological

field. We don't want to see the programmes on all channels, either successively or at once. We are only interested in fragments of individual programmes and the possibility of interacting in each subsequent moment. In this way, we create perspectives across events. We know very little about the structure of switching, but it would seem inadequate to understand it as unconscious switching back and forth.

To a certain extent, the method of archaeological seeking is largely based on chance, which always hides in the sites of inscrutable ruins. Intuition is thus the best consultant on a journey to unexpected discoveries. It depends, of course, on the interpreter's ability to incorporate such random images into the structure of his testimony.

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