



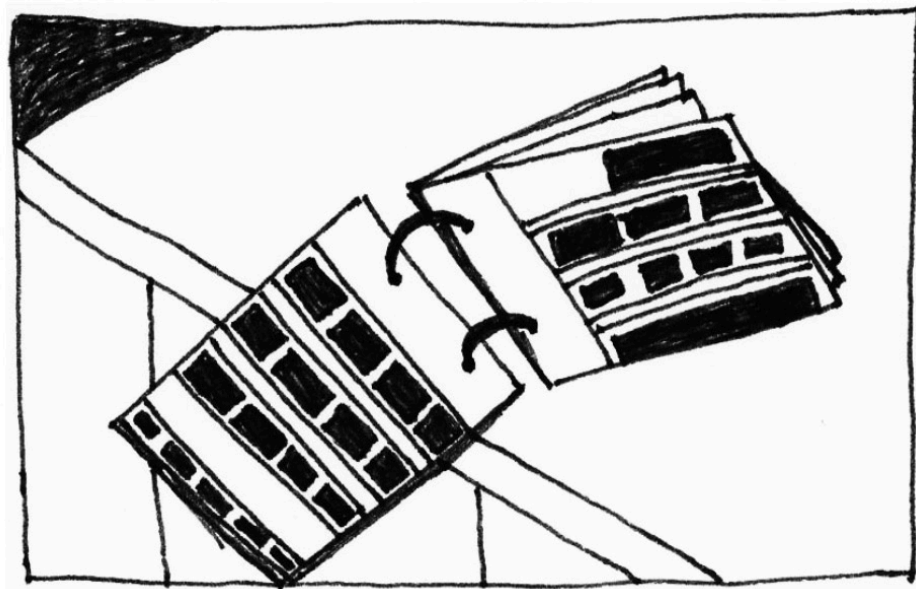
Imagined answer



Question

Sanne van Balen in conversation  
with Kaspars Reinis about De  
Appel archive at the  
presentation of Simulacrum  
'Het Archief'

3 mei 2018



Actual answer

You are not a trained archivist, you did comparative literature studies, so when you came to De Appel how was this?



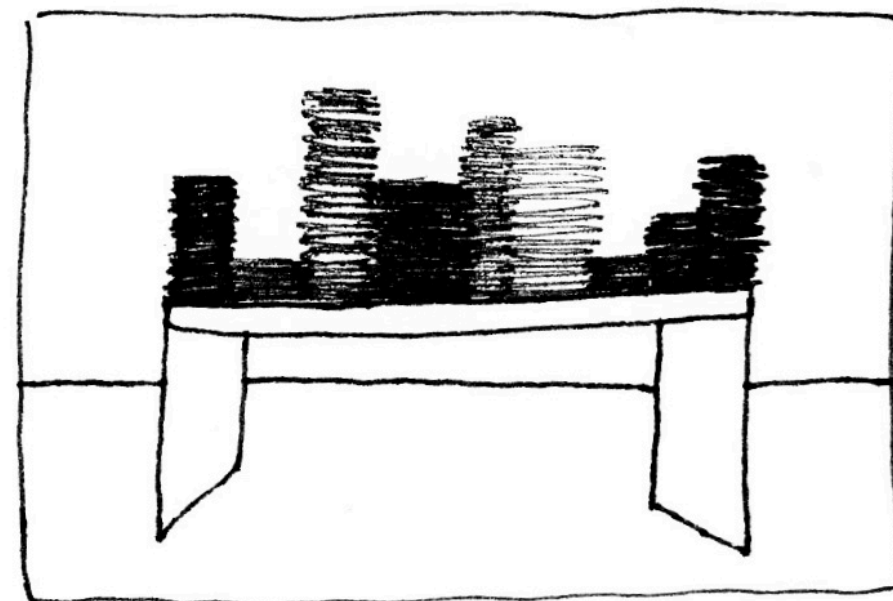
Can you explain a bit about this project [Works and Words] you are doing?

I first came in contact with De Appel after visiting the show by Hiwa K with a group of fellow students from Utrecht University. I was instantaneously curious about the work that De Appel does and even more about the rich archival and library material its archive holds. I have no training in archiving, also the curator of De Appel archive Nell Donkers, has no formal archival training. She is trained as an artist, book maker, and is an autodidact when it comes to archiving. It is her strong passion for the archival practice that actually transformed the library of De Appel into what can be considered a significant and organised archive of performance, conceptual and video art. Don't get me wrong, there is a lot more here at De Appel – correspondence, posters, exhibition conceptions, photos, press releases, journals books, artworks, and even things that resist categorisation.

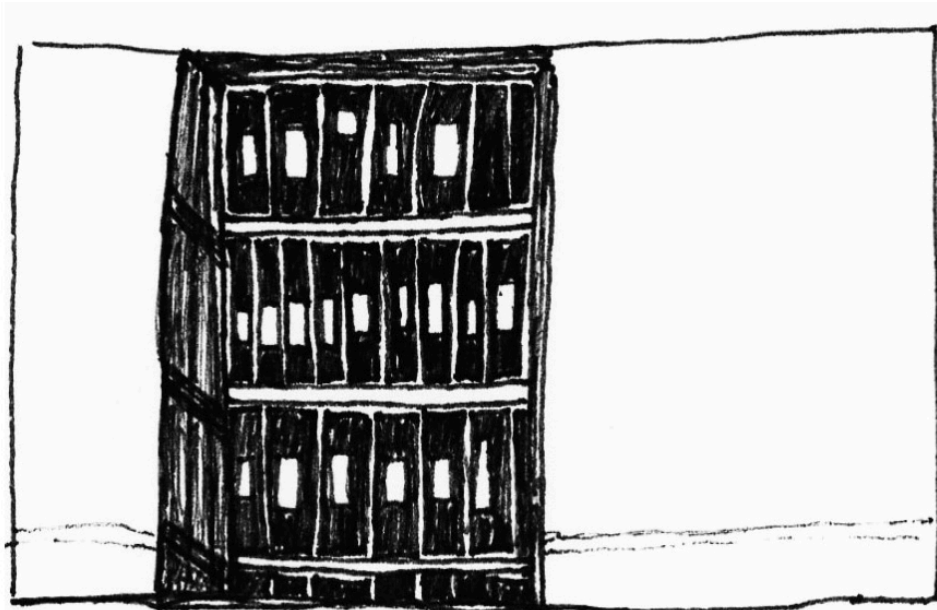
I'm trained as a researcher, I'm a comparatist, I compare literature, read philosophy, contextualise art, photography, and deeply proceed following interdisciplinary studies. Therefore the work at the archive started with the possibility of learning, which, I have to say, is a sort of an addiction for me. New information, challenging

I was dropped in the middle of unknown terrain, with an expectation to either proceed or fail. My training is deeply post-structuralist and post-humanist. This enables me to think along the very practical and hands-on work of archiving. I always reflect during the process, I am careful, I am fully aware of the responsibility for the future to come, this is the promise that is at the heart of every archive, of every archē, every trace, this is a promise to which I adhere, as a Derridean. At the heart of the archive there is always the concern for the future. It is a question of the future, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. I quote Derrida's Archive Fever "The

First, I came to De Appel on the 30th of November 2017, and immediately I was lured in by this something I do not know. What is an archive, what does it mean to think archives? I am a comparatist, I read a lot of Derrida and theory and it was something I wanted to try. I would say it was a new challenge and new information. But when I first came into contact with De Appel I was struck by how large the collection was. The archive is not just documents and dusty books somewhere. It is an immense archive of creativity. I made a selection of documentation there is at the archive [on the beamer]. No order, but most of the materials are from the words and works project.



Well, when I came there I was dropped into the middle of unknown terrain. I didn't know what archiving was, I had to learn quickly, the project at hand was 'Works and Words'. The Footnotes is an addition to the current exhibition. Or a special way of presenting archival material, which deconstructs in words and motive the main exhibition. It serves as reorganizing or restructuring the archive to make it more readable. In particular, this Works and Words Footnotes looks at the 1979 event, which gathered more than 100 artists and contributions by these artists in Amsterdam. It was conceptual photography, performance art, video art. These were artist from former Eastern block, Poland,



There was all kind of material lying around in the archive about this exhibition and why did you start looking at this again?

archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only now in times to come. Perhaps. Not tomorrow but in times to come, later on or perhaps never." (Derrida, Archive 36). Therefore archival work is very exciting and ever-surprising process for me. The attunement to structures and personal preference to order and clarity allowed me to very quickly catch on what it means to archive, what it means to proceed with leaving my own trace, my own understanding of a clear structure at the archive.

Historically De Appel has always gathered documentation of the events and the participating artists. From the very beginning there have been documentation exhibitions adding an extra layer to the exhibition, performance. Not always, but especially with larger projects. The founder of De Appel, Wies Smals used to be a librarian at The Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. She ran a book store at De Appel, participated in book exchange, also published books, gathered exhibition catalogues, art journals, etc. Therefore, as long as there has been De Appel, there has been a strong passion for the archive and library. The incoming and outgoing correspondence is neatly archived in large binders. Regarding our current archival activities: FOOTNOTES is a recurring exhibition format at De Appel. Its aim is to build upon, comment or deconstruct a motive from the main exhibition from within De Appel Archive or from an historical perspective. FOOTNOTES#3 takes a new look at the 1979 international art manifestation Works and Words, gradually opening it up via De Appel website. Various ephemera relating to this groundbreaking project is uncovered and re-contextualized online. This Footnotes presentation is a research trajectory through De Appel Archive and reflects on the possibilities and limitations of transcultural exchange. Now, almost 40 years later, I have the opportunity to retrace the event of 1979 Works and Words. Archives are not perfect. An archive project like Footnotes 3# serves as a possibility of reorganising, better structuring

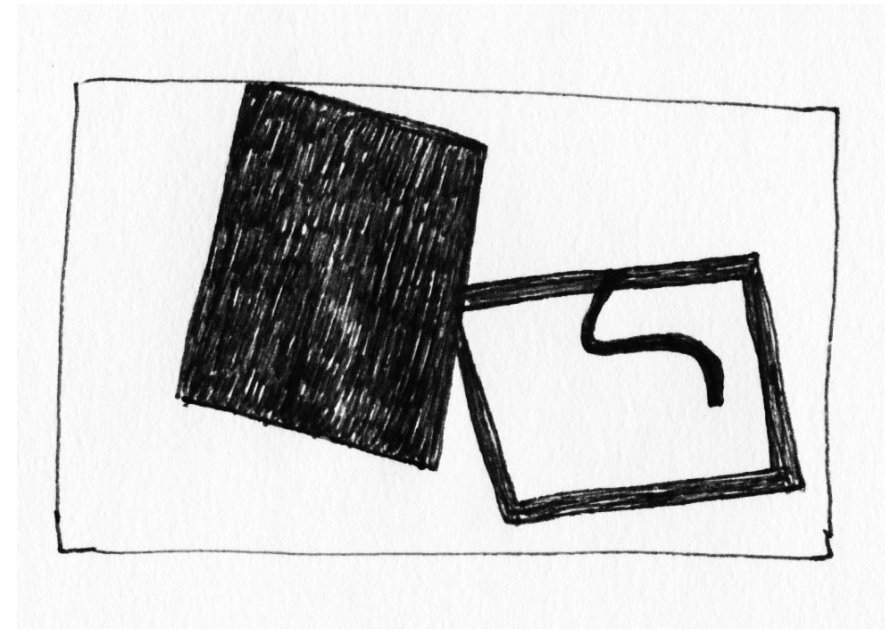
Yugoslavia, Hungary. Therefore there is a lot of archival material that makes you see how amazing it is, that this event took place. It's the communication, it's the missing letters, it's me trying to understand a world that is so different. For the West this was one of the most important events, especially for the Netherlands.

It's not my idea but Nell's. Over time there has been a lot of research inquiry about events that took place. There is an interest from the Eastern European art institutions on this event. And it seemed fitting, there is also a request for the catalogue reprinting and this is something we are working towards. Right now, on our website we are explaining more and more information about this event.

I am attempting to contact the artists and former participants to get more insight about how these events proceeded.



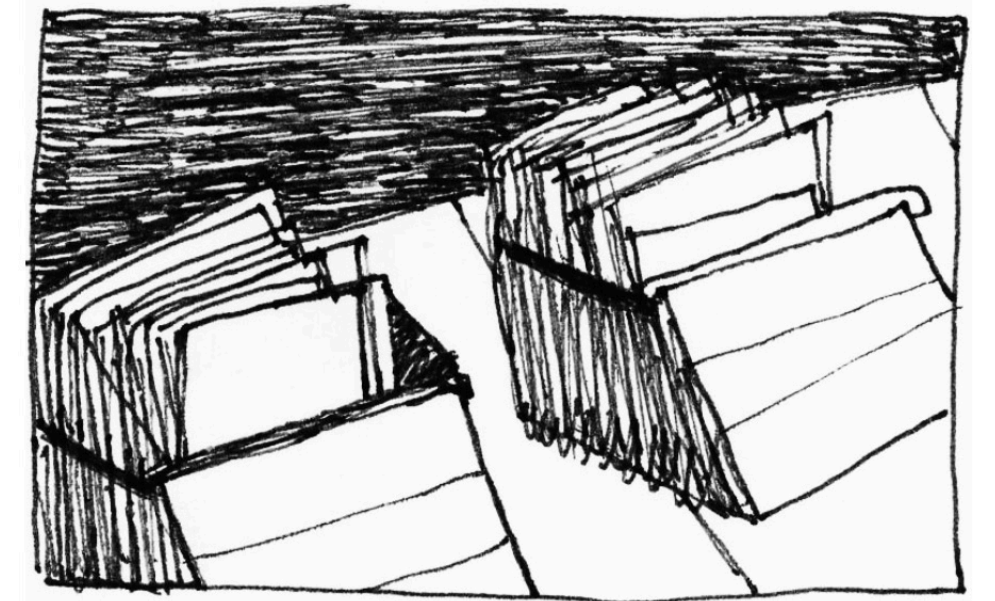




and digitalising the part of the archive that relates to this event.

In the Works and Words Footnotes I'm physically looking and trying to contact the original participants and their rights holders. Sometimes just taking a wild guess and calling a gallery in the mid of Slovakia or Calling a phone number given to me by the University of Ljubljana, or simply sending a postcard – I'm looking for these artists. I will give you a couple of names. Tibor Hajas, Servie Jansen, Raul Marrouquin, Dora Mauer, Teresa Murak, Natalia LL, etc. These names did not mean anything to me, nor they probably mean anything to you, but over time, I've learned to recognize them as the most important, most ground-breaking neo and retro Avantgarde artists of 1970's and 1980's.

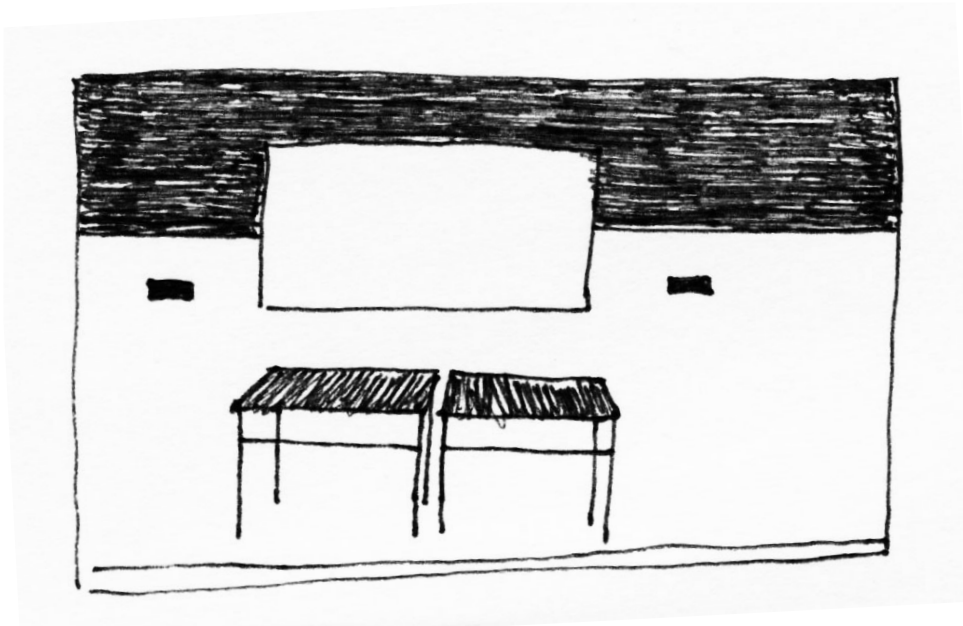
In the archive I'm reading the correspondence between De Appel and the artists, critics, institutions. Reading postcards, workgroup records, financial records, cross-referencing book titles, mentions from one letter to another, looking up information online, looking for publications, searching contact with institutions in Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, Hungary, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovakia, Slovenia, Serbia, US, and others. I'm watching old performance videos, listening to work group recordings, going through pictures, reading press articles, and publications about Works and Words, etc.



How do you approach an archive when you work on a project like this?

In this process I am simultaneously reorganising the artist files, creating a digital trace of the archive, leaving a trace of my own structure on the archive. I quote Derrida from his Archive Fever: "One will never be able to objectivize it [archive] with no remainder. The archivist produces more archive, and that is why the archive is never closed. It opens out to the future." (Derrida, Archive 68). But this process is less about writing history as it is about learning, a process of learning what it means to respond and follow a trace. All these letters, books, pictures, phone calls, research – these all become gestures, or, a still of an image that conjures the original event, like a ghostly entity outside

It started with a box, there were binders with correspondence, postcards, photographs. What I did was that I read a lot of this correspondence between de Appel and the artists. Reading all of this, cross-referencing it, is a practical research. It is not anymore something you learn in books on how you do research. It's tracing, actually a paper trace: there is something I read in one letter with Laszlo Beke which is something that gets mentioned somewhere else, there is a book sent to the archive in the 1970s, is this book still here? Yes it is. How has it been added to it. That's how it goes. The founder of de Appel, Wies Smals, was a trained librarian at the Stedelijk. So from the very



How would you describe your position in the archiving process? Is there any objectivity in there?

time. You cannot preserve the event, but it is possible to archive a pretty good impression of the original event. Therefore, viewed from the past tense these traces carry the promise to the future to come, to be, and therefore allowing 'us' 'now' to attach and decipher the meaning of this event. From the perspective of the present tense – an archive can only point to the absence of the original event, and therefore to the *mise en abyme* of its own absence.

The body of the archive is cut, its borders are drawn upon it, just like scars, like writing that does not allow for all the archives to be the Archive, the one archive, that is – the real archive of time, the remnants. The contacting of institutions, the search for people is actually a search for their archive, for their remnants, for their trace. I am almost tempted to say the moment that one activates the archive, the multiple signifiers are pointing towards other archives that in turn activate other archives allowing for a more and more precise image of the event to form. Small notes on the other side of the paper, a short line in the book – it allows for seeing the image better, the archive is out of bounds.

Archives invite order and re-ordering. It is a possibility of decision, perhaps to decide what and how the trace in the archive can be made accessible, discoverable. In an introduction to our digital archive, our server, Nell Donkers said, and I fully take this to be also something that my work reflects. When working with archives you almost have to take the perspective from a not that distant of a future, and reflect on how you see what is there today. Thinking of 'here and now' from a point of future.

beginning there has always been this passion for archiving, the passion for library. For instance, most of the larger exhibitions in the 70s and 80s had a documentation exhibition. We still have these documents, the Eastern European self produced catalogues, art posters. It's a very specific art. There was almost no awareness about the art in Eastern European back then. Currently it's very interesting to give it a chance, to reorganize it and to make it more accessible for future to come. Because what I think, and this is where my training in theory comes in, this Derridean idea that archive carries in its heart the promise for the future. Whatever you do you have to imagine yourself in a not that far distant future and look back on your today and see if it makes sense. Archives are not ideal, nor are organizations. Whatever you figure out to be the best way to organize everything, is a decision for later. The structure you give an archive is a decision. There are of course many possibilities but there is a lot of responsibility involved. It's not only your work but it's for the future. It's heartfelt I say this, but all the texts about theory I have read, I experience them in a poetic way when actually you see these pictures and you see oh, this has meaning. It's not only me giving meaning to them and by organizing it I think we are "ancestors of the people to come". Over time things get displaced, things get more and more layers of meaning.

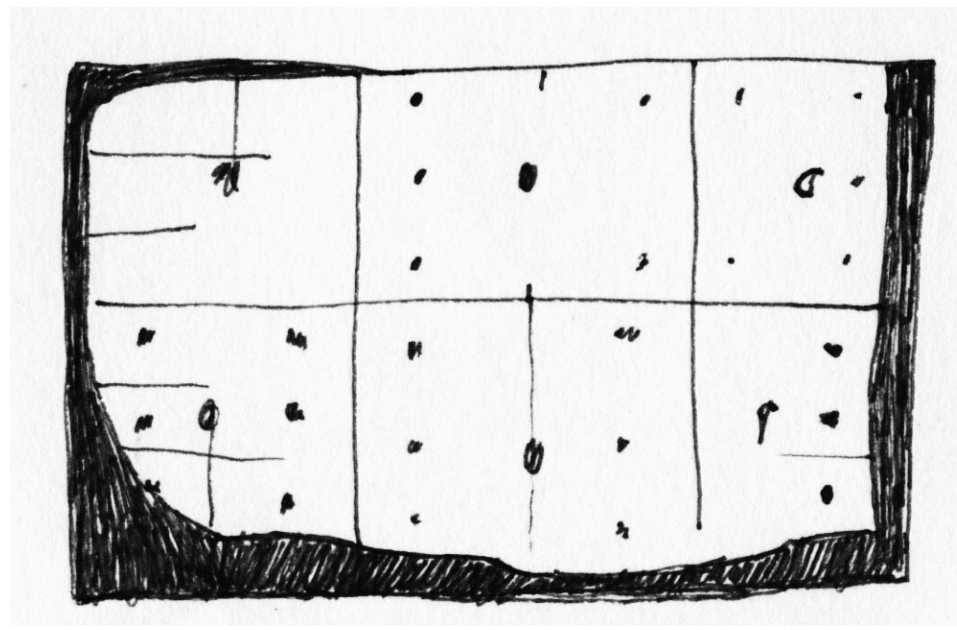
Well, yes I think there is no. The question of objectivity... I don't think I can be objective, but archives invite order and reordering. It's a possibility of a decision perhaps to decide what and how to trace the archive. And how to make it more discoverable. It's a passion. There are indexes and certain rules. But in the process of archiving you can't really figure out where to place this one thing. It's not a book, it's not a catalogue, it's a loose little leaflet that has a meaning on itself but it will never fit into a category. This is what Derrida says, archives consist and resist archiving itself, because there are these non-archivables. You can't archive the event itself,





You describe it as traces you can follow, but you leave traces as well, what do you think about the trace you leave behind in this particular archive?

There might be a footnotes project again in some years and these people will look at this exhibition again. They will not only see the project but also your trace. Do you think they will get it?



I always already write the archive, every email, every opening of it, every extraction of a piece – it is my trace, it is myself leaving a trace onto the archive that I could retrace, thus delving into an endless cycle of tracing and retracing, of marking, having marked and erased. This disjunction of time is something that one can find problematic, especially when working with archive. The archive is a multi-directional phenomenon, mingling of voices, a network. Archive is never one, yet one cannot really say where one archive ends and another starts, an archive is always linked to many other archives. Archives fold upon one another, creating a sort of a ghostly demarcation of the preceding world image.

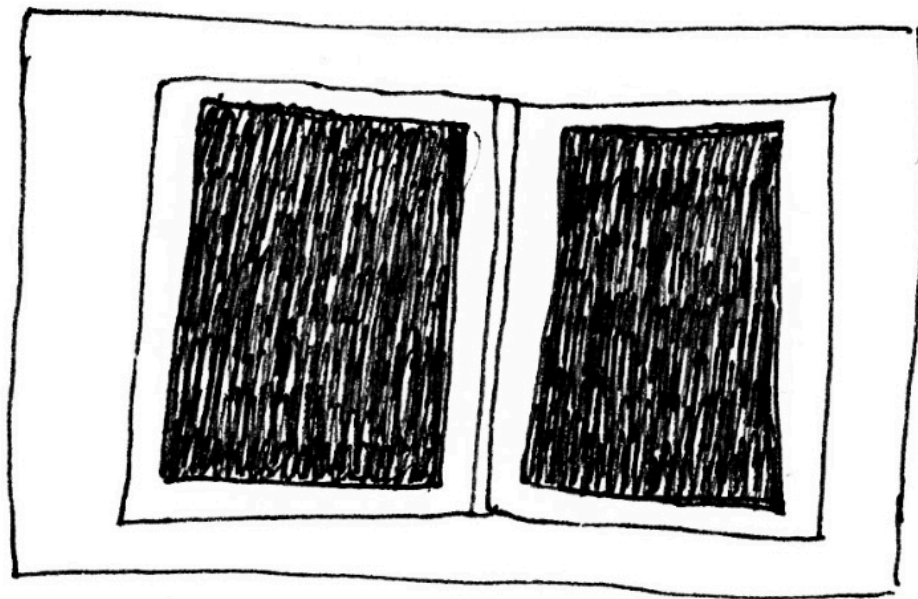
Archive is always a matter of representative and communicative structures, which are left by humans for humans. Archives remain, yet they are fully dependant on people that care about past. They are a shared responsibility of people now and then, no matter when this 'then' will be. Any future is only a hope, a tomorrow can happen only if we believe in what we are doing to be worth doing, archives are dependant on people that run them, people that visit them and use them. A certain passion and understanding and love for the work with artefacts, traces is a pre-requisit. I guess, an open mind allows for the archive to take people that work and encounter it, to go on a journey with a non-defined end goal.

you can only archive the traces left after a performance. You will never be able to capture or transport yourself back in time. But you can capture an image like a still of a movie, and it gets clearer and clearer when you organize it. You start not only cross-reference things, but discover as well.

When you follow a correspondence conversation long enough it gives you an image on how the event happened.

This is that moment where you become aware that everything you write about de Appel will also be archived. And in a way, you can be tracing and retracing your own trace in the archive, and you end up in loops of time. Derrida perfectly reflects on this, that it's the interlocking of present, all the tenses. Is this a past thing? No it is also continuing now in present, and you are therefore responsible for it to be in a future. I will leave my trace on the archive, but I do it with a sense of responsibility in heart, not destroying or harming the information. Sort of a care for the other. What happens into the end: you are written into the archive. The archives will remain even if you are not there anymore.

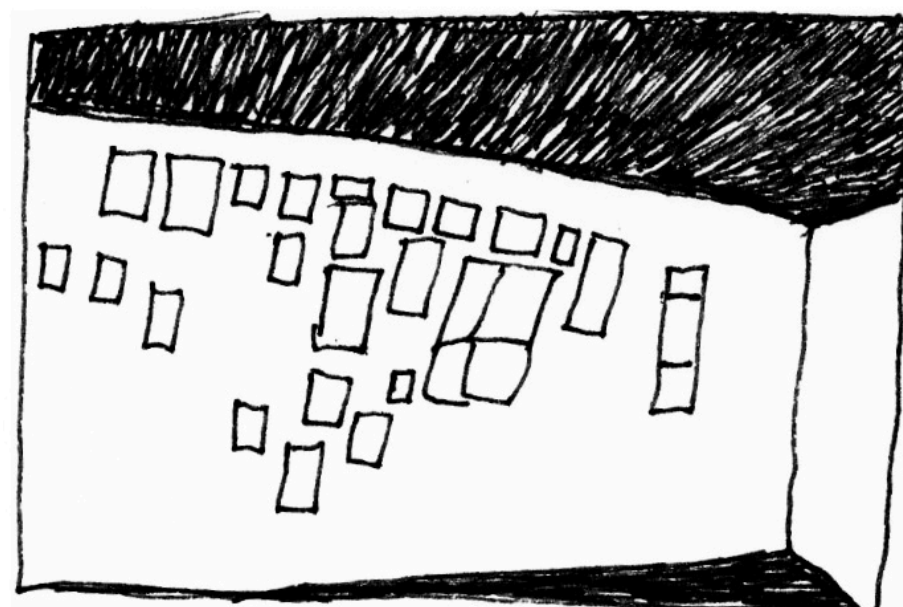
I don't think even I get it. You see, it's much more complicated. I think archives are more independent on humans that are very passionate about them. It needs structures of representation for them to live on. And this is currently the attention towards archives and breaking the stereotype that archives are these sacred places for historians. You can't own history but you can own archives. And that is why archives should be these open spaces that are owned by an organization that keeps the archives open. There is a recent event in Hungary where a new fascist government is taking control of famous Marxist philosophers archives and censor them. And they censor archives, because archives have sensitive information in



Question from audience: What is the difference between an archive and an artwork?



them, they are unforgiving. There is information that is very sensitive and will probably not see the light of day. You have to be careful what you put out there.



In such a general category I would not be able to compare these two, but let me say an archive of artworks. When we follow Derrida, everything has a trace, something that is written is something that remains and is there. Holding information that we cannot say is objective or not but it's factual. It's a *Dinge an sich*. If we follow Heideggerian paradigm. But an artwork can be an archive on its own. The painting by Rembrandt contains a lot of information, the gesture of a hand. It uncovers a certain image of time. If put in certain perspectives there are no differences between archives and artworks. But there are. And I think this is that beautiful paradox or suspension, that yes an artwork we attribute meaning to but archives are exceeding, it will never be as rich as an artwork.

You can't make this clear cut between the two. It is much more complicated than that. De Appel archive is not a simple history archive where you have the birth dates and the registration documents, it also holds artworks. So these lines become more and more blurred. I think, I would not be willing to say this is an archive and this is an artwork. A person's life could also be seen as an archive.



Question from audience: can you tell the difference between documentation and archiving?



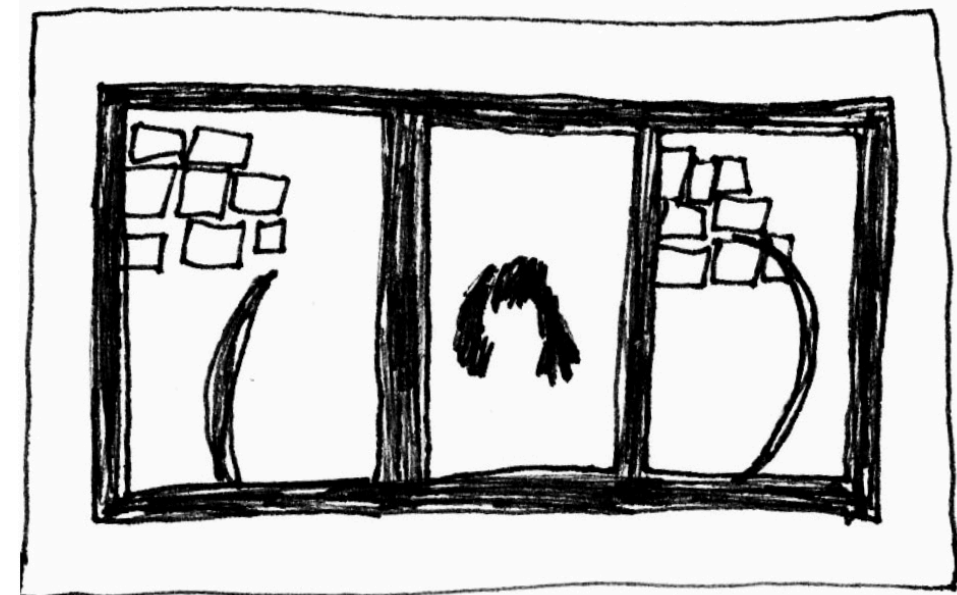
For example, look at performance art. You cannot preserve the performance, it's an ephemeral medium. The same with theatre. But you can do this in the way that more and more traces are left behind, voice recordings, images. They all point as one towards the absence of the work. Not to the work itself.

Question from the audience: How can you archive the events that are happening right now in de Appel?



Well, in an ideal archive world you would archive as you go. Also the e-mail exchanges and everything would be archived. Yes you give it a number, you assign it to a certain place, you put it in acid free paper. Some things find their place on the server. The system is the same. But in the real world there is always delays. There are always other things that are more pressing and it's a matter of manpower. In the ideal world an exhibition ends and the material is brought to the archive.

Question from the audience: You talk about the aesthetical meaning of archiving, but this is the archiving of an art museum. I would say the main reason for archiving is political. I don't get the talk about your traces because the most important thing about archiving is a political one, right?



Yes, to set the ground clear it depends on from what perspective you look at it. Yes from the perspective of funding, museums are state or private institutions they follow policies. They reorganize the archives and create histories, they create stories they tell. But they also leave things outside these stories, things that get censored. It depends on what museums you mean. I come from a poststructuralist theory point of view, I look at archives in a structural way, which means; what is a trace, it's a paper, a writing. It's anything that remains. And these things can be archived. I don't obsess myself so much about the museumification or the politics of power in archives. I am fully aware of that, but I





am more interested in the structures and possibilities of what an artistic intervention can do. More than fighting for funding or counting numbers of visitors. I think it humiliates creativity that is at heart of performance art or anything that people have spent time on creating.

