



NICOLAS DE OLIVEIRA

A Book of Burning Matches

Collecting Installation Art Documents

LONDON METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY
THE SCHOOL OF ART, ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

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Project details

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Figure 2. *A Book of Burning Matches*
Exhibition, Me-Collectors Room, Berlin,
2015. Image: Franziska Nicolaus.

Research content and significance

DESCRIPTION

A Book of Burning Matches: Collecting Installation Art Documents is the result of 30 years of curating and researching Installation art by de Oliveira and his collaborator Nicola Oxley. The exhibition, held at the Me Collectors Room in Berlin, comprises documentation of some 200 past installation projects co-curated by de Oliveira. The display takes the form of maquettes, photographs, videos, texts and books, as well as fragments of larger works and complete small objects.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The project functions as a miniature, compressing several decades of works and their surrounding questions with a focus on three key areas:

- What impact has Installation art had on art in the 21st Century and how has this altered our perception of what art is?
- Can we argue for curation as an artform in its own right?
- Do exhibitions reinforce or weaken authorship?

PROCESS

The phases that mark out this exhibition are the Archive, Document, and Display. The Archive most closely resembles a collection. The Document represents the great number of archives which are all overlaid to form the present-moment of this exhibition. The Display is the configuration of archival components and new works for the occasion of this exhibition.

DISSEMINATION

De Oliveira's curatorial practice engages international artists and audiences. The exhibition in Berlin was attended by some 6,000 visitors and was further disseminated through a mini symposium, a dedicated website, and an eponymous publication.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Central to the significance of the project is the research and production of a sustained programme of exhibitions over three decades that contribute to the development of Installation art from a marginal practice to mainstream recognition as an artform. Moreover, de Oliveira's curatorial practice draws on questions that position installation art as a fluid activity that is inherently ongoing and strongly dependent on the interaction with a particular space, its broader and most saliently its audience.

Introduction

The exhibition *A Book of Burning Matches: Collecting Installation Art Documents* examines the importance of documentation in Installation Art, a form that is both temporary and experiential. It surveys the collection of documents assembled by London-based curators Nicolas de Oliveira and Nicola Oxley, whose gallery spaces and independent exhibitions in Britain, Europe and the Americas initiated over 200 installations spanning three decades.

The material displayed takes the form of analogue and digital photographs, videos, sound-recordings, texts, proposals, models, and objects. It does not seek to replace past installations or to replicate their immersive presence. Instead, the exhibition restages the material, proposing a choreographed movement through the archive. This approach can be likened to the presentation of a Wunderkammer, in which distinct objects, lifted from their original context, converse with one another. The objects displayed are both verifiable documents and triggers for recollection, inviting the viewer to remember, digress, and to imagine.

The title of the exhibition was inspired by Louise Lawler's exhibition *Arrangements of Pictures (matchbooks)* at Metro Pictures, New York, in 1982. It featured a

work in the form of matchbooks whose covers gave information about Lawler's exhibition and the gallery-programme, in the manner of a private view card. The work memorialises and documents the event of the exhibition, but it remains entirely ephemeral and of little value as an object. Accordingly, the documents presented in our exhibition serve as reminders of works no longer present. The exhibition also features a number of newly made interventions by artists already present in the archive including David Edward Allen, Hans Op de Beeck, Stefan Brüggenmann, Ben Cain, Tina Gverović, Barnaby Hosking, and David Price. The sound design for the exhibition is coordinated by the American media curator Alejandro Ball.



Figures 3 & 4. *A Book of Burning Matches*
Exhibition Details, Me-Collectors Room,
Berlin, 2015. Images: Franziska Nicolaus.

Research context

The project is situated in a wider debate around ephemeral artforms with an emphasis on Installation art – its temporary curated experience and its permanent collection. Indeed, the project attempts to bring together these often opposed positions by presenting a collection in an unorthodox and immersive manner.

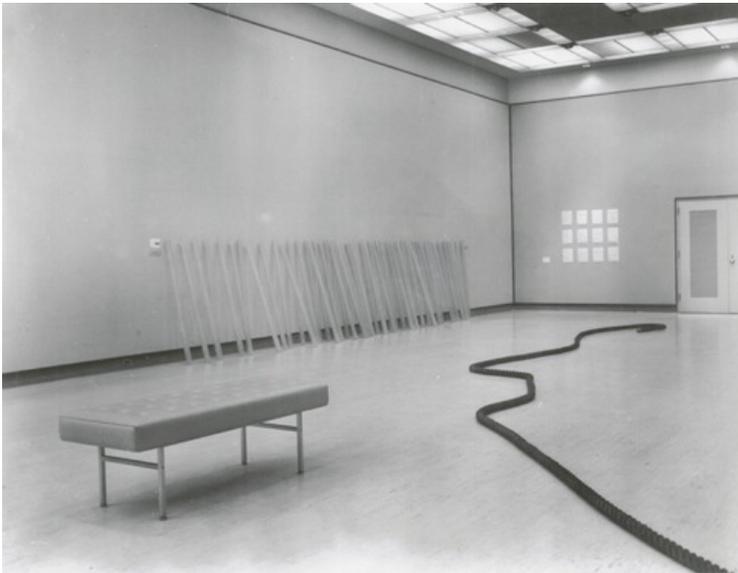
There are numerous historical and recent exhibitions that use the experiential qualities of Installation. Dorothea von Hantelmann's seminal text *The experiential Turn* deems that artworks and exhibitions can function like performative 'acts', bestowing transformative qualities upon them, comparable to J.L. Austin's theories of language. (Hantelmann, 2014) The shaping of experience has become increasingly central to the artwork's conception, and indeed its reception by an audience. In this way, immersive artworks and exhibitions create new realities that are shared by the spectator, rather than relying on metaphysics.

Installation art's influence over curatorial practice can be seen in exhibitions as early as the 1960s organised by celebrated curators such as Harald Szeemann (*When Attitudes become Form*, 1969) or Lucy Lippard (*Numbers Shows* 1969-74). These highlight an enhanced spatial fluidity between

different temporary artists works, while underscoring the curator's rise as a certain kind of author. (Butler, 2011 & Rattemeyer, 2010)

In *A Book of Burning Matches* the curators exert a degree of authorship over the documentary display in order to provoke new readings of works that are materially absent. The curator becomes a narrator of a story that can be physically experienced in the actual exhibition space (driven entirely through images) and read in the accompanying book; while this approach discloses a vast amount of information, the project challenges viewers/readers to give shape to their own experience.

Moreover, the project underscores the central aspect of the collection, albeit one made of documents and fragments, rather than a large body of discrete works. The ethos echoes museums made by artists in particular such as Marcel Broodthaers's *Musée des Aigles*, Claes Oldenburg's *Mouse Museum*, Daniel Spoerri's *Musée Sentimentale*, as well as seminal exhibitions such as Ingrid Schaffner's *Deep Storage* or Douglas Blau's *Picture Shows*.



Figures 5 & 6. Historical Curatorial Practice.
Top: Lucy Lippard, Numbers Shows 2, 1969-74. *Bottom:* Harold Szeemann, When Attitudes Become Form Exhibition, 1969.

Research process

A Book of Burning Matches: Collecting Installation Art Documents is the result of a collaboration over some 30 years with the curator and writer Nicola Oxley. De Oliveira and Oxley jointly devised Unit 7 Gallery, Museum of Installation, Notice and SE8 Gallery as exhibition spaces that focused on close collaborations with artists in the production and dissemination of new projects with an emphasis on Installation art, Sound, and Performance. This experimental approach is chronicled and underpinned by numerous publications on Installation art and individual artists' monographs.

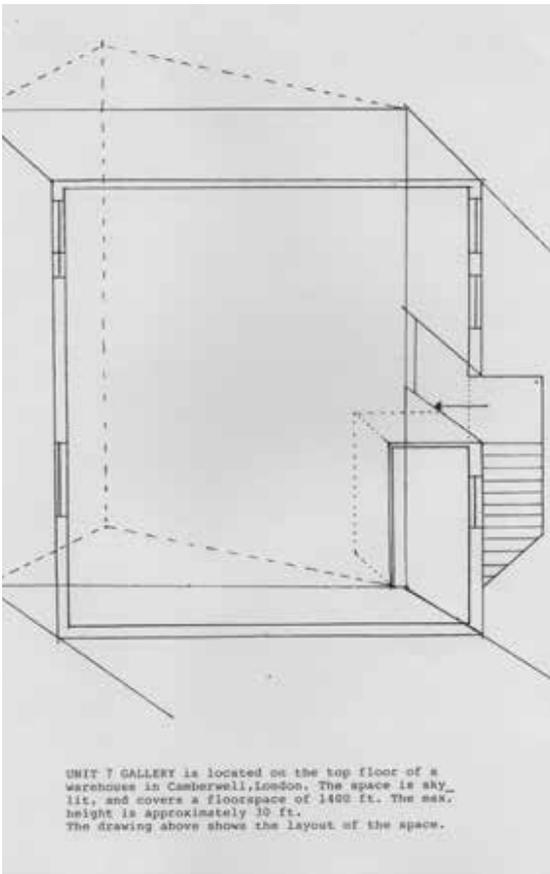
A Book of Burning Matches: Collecting Installation Art Documents highlights the challenges of collecting a large-scale temporary artform by bringing together and restaging a large number of historical and current documents and exhibition fragments from the curatorial practice of de Oliveira/Oxley. This results in an immersive exhibition which operates as a choreographed 'atmosphere' for the visitor; thus, each of the over 1,000 elements of the exhibition retains its singularity and material integrity, whilst simultaneously being integrated into a larger audience 'experience'.

Though each item is known and identified in an archive in London, the exhibition in Berlin boasts a complete

absence of labels, hinting at a curatorial methodology that privileges sensation, fiction, and engagement over taxonomy or classification.

The exhibition was preceded by an interactive website that allowed readers to scroll over the chapters of a hypothetical publication, an action that revealed further comments by other authors. The website eventually became the publication bearing the name of the exhibition. It is a collaboration between de Oliveira/Oxley and the novelist, critic and artist David Price. The texts were written individually by each of the three authors and then passed on to be extensively annotated by the others. The resulting writings are credited to all three authors whose comments, ripostes, footnotes and disagreements seek to unmoor the linear historical narrative, while extending the argument exponentially and inviting the reader to become an explicit interpreter.

Though Installation art is perceived as an innovative and challenging practice or medium, historians and curators have sought to subsume it into the broader canon of art. This linear approach is rejected by de Oliveira/Oxley in favour of a partial narrative in which the story meanders and frays. The lack of labels asks visitors to see rather than to read



Figures 7 & 8. *Top*: Unit 7 Gallery, 1986. Image: Edward Woodman. *Bottom*: Axonometric Drawing. Image: Nicolas de Oliveira.



Figure 9. Archive detail, Museum of Installation, 1994. Image: Nicola Oxley.

the display, a direction that is further underscored by the curators' production of a soundtrack – in collaboration with sound engineer Alejandro Ball - made from numerous recorded documents from their exhibition archive; the sound is played through a number of sound-showers that punctuate the space, thus localising audible content and offering a choreographic sense of movement or progression through the show.

The *In the Play of Shadow*, lecture-performance given at the Naturally Hypernatural Conference, Karl Franzens University Graz, Institute for Art History and School of Visual Arts, New York (2014), essays the approach to an open-ended curatorial practice in which the visitor becomes the focal point of sensory experience, a tendency strongly associated with Installation art. The lecture appeared as a specially commissioned text in the refereed book, *Naturally Hypernatural: Concepts of Nature* edited by Sabine Flach.

A previous exhibition curated by de Oliveira that examined methods of display was entitled *Mulberry Tree Press: Partial Fictions* (SE8 Gallery, 2011) and brought together 40 artists over a period of three months. The project functioned as a palimpsest as artists added works and information to the display on a

weekly basis, partially obliterating what went before.

Perhaps the earliest iteration of the curation of an archive in exhibition-form was the *Archive Show* (Museum of Installation, 1995) in which de Oliveira invited artists who had produced major shows over the previous five years at the institution to revisit their no longer materially present or intact installations.



Figure 10. Mulberry Tree Press Exhibition Part I, SE8 Gallery, Nicolas de Oliveira Eleanor Vonne Brown, Jeremy Millar, Round Table, 2010. Image: Christian Hagen



Figure 11. Archival Documents, SE8 Gallery, 2014. Image: Nicola Oxley.



Figures 12 - 15. *Left to Right:* Museum of Installation Archive, Niemis, Haselden, Kessler. Images: Edward Woodman.



Figure 16. Kratochvil Installation from the archive. Image: Edward Woodman.

Research insights

The project argues that the understanding of Installation art as both practice and medium remains partial. By breaking down the boundaries between space, object and experience, this exhibition made a strong case for the centrality of the spectator – not simply as a final recipient of a certain epistemological truth delivered by the artist or curator, but as a partner in an activity whose destination is yet to be determined. The project embraces the apparent contradiction between a transitory artform – which typically relies on a unique, immersive encounter with a viewer - and the idea of the collection; it examines the question of what a collection in the 21st Century might be, a period in history when the questions of origin and originality are brought into question by the proliferation of the digital realm. It is not that this project set out to document every aspect of the creation of individual installations made by artists – rendering the map larger than the territory, or the representation superior to the real – but rather it argues for the persistence of these artworks not through a static memory but through often minor, fragile documents, recordings and fragments that ‘keep the pieces in play’ and extend their resonance and actuality into the present.

Accordingly, this project may be seen as

emblematic of de Oliveira’s (and Oxley’s) oeuvre which argues for Installation art (and indeed curatorial practice) as an ephemeral artform where the material presence of a single work ceases at the end of an exhibition but admits that the process behind Installation art produces significant documentation in its many forms. This material can persist in the form of a collection or archive long after the demise of the actual work, extending the latter’s life and reach towards new audiences.

The founding of a *Museum of Installation* (1990-2003) served as a provocation to the art establishment, as well as a serious enquiry into the relationship between temporary art practices and remembrance, also underlined in two major surveys of the practice of Installation art (1994 and 2003).

Further, de Oliveira’s approach is built upon the collective ethos of Installation art; given the scale, complexity and cost of many of these works they require artists to work with a larger team, usually based in larger art institutions who share the expertise of their staff, the scale of the premises and so on. Independent organisations such as those run by de Oliveira are largely dependent on a core team of volunteers and competencies become much less clear-cut. Accordingly,

this project seeks to reflect this dynamic, and challenges the hierarchy and division of labour performed by discrete individuals or contributions – artists, curators, writers, spectators – by rendering their boundaries porous, allowing knowledge to flow in different directions, tainting the different subject positions.



Figure 17. *A Book of Burning Matches* Exhibition, Me-Collectors Room, Berlin, 2015. Image: Franziska Nicolaus.

Dissemination

De Oliveira's curatorial practice is based in London but features a strong showing of international artists; further, he aims to engage international audiences through exhibition displays in Europe and beyond. This project was especially commissioned by the Thomas Olbricht Foundation in Berlin with the aim of presenting a significant collection of works that chimed with the institution's wider programme of contemporary art exhibitions, whilst supplying a contemporary response to its renowned and permanently installed *Wunderkammer* – a Cabinet of Curiosities – which showcases ancient and historical marvels. The output thus plays with the arcane taxonomy (ie, natural, artificial etc) of the cabinet by devising a series of exhibition 'zones' that divide the artifacts into different areas. The visitor navigates the spaces seeking clues of boundaries, which are subtly inflected through sound, changes in colours/textures, the use of vitrines and other display supports.

EXHIBITION

According to the Thomas Olbricht Foundation there were 6815 tracked viewers to the exhibition which was extended by a further week to the 31st May 2015 due to its success.

A Book of Burning Matches: Collecting Installation Art Documents. (2015) [Exhibition] me Collectors Room, Berlin. 14 March 2015 - 31 May 2015.

EVENTS PROGRAMME

The Thomas Olbricht foundation organised guided tours of the exhibition, as well as a series of workshops for primary and secondary school children. Accompanying the exhibition there was also a mini-symposium moderated by de Oliveira that explored key themes such as staging, immersion, location and the archive, with presentations by Professor Dr.Hans Dickel (Institute of Art History, Erlangen, Germany), Dr.Nayia Yiakoumaki (Head of Archive, Whitechapel Gallery) and David Price (writer and artist).

Curators-Tour. The Thomas Olbricht foundation, Berlin. 21 March 2015.

Expert-Tour / Symposium. The Thomas Olbricht foundation, Berlin. 14 March 2015.

Family Workshops. The Thomas Olbricht foundation, Berlin. 20 January 2015.

BOOK

The exhibition was preceded by a dedicated website and publication. The eponymous publication – jointly written with Oxley, and the novelist David Price - chronicles aspects of exhibitions and events curated by de Oliveira, linking them to salient aspects of Installation art as a practice in general that underwent important alterations over this period.

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SELECTED PRESS

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Wolff, M. (2015). Collected the past. Manfred Wolff mittendrin. *Manfred Wolff mittendrin*. Available at: <<https://bunteseite.wordpress.com/2015/03/31/vergangenes-gesammelt/>> (Accessed: 12.17.20).





Figure 18. *A Book of Burning Matches*
Exhibition, Me-Collectors Room, Berlin,
2015. Image: Franziska Nicolaus.

Impact

The project was the outcome of three decades dedicated to the study and presentation of installation art, and its impact ought to be seen in the context of an ongoing curatorial and theoretical practice by de Oliveira.

The small teams gathered by de Oliveira for his collaborative projects form part of a strategy of training and empowerment, a process which impacts the individuals taking part in shaping the projects, as was the case with *A Book of Burning Matches*. Alejandro Ball was an American/Peruvian graduating student on the MA Curating the Contemporary at London Metropolitan University and was instrumental in co-curating the sonic design for the exhibition; the experience led him to undertake a PhD at University of Dundee and in his development of AGORAMA, a virtual space for the development and exhibition of Network Art projects. Franziska Nicolaus worked as a curatorial assistant on the project and graduated in Fine Art from London Metropolitan University. Working on the project between London and Berlin led her to become a producer, events, and project manager. Cristina Ramos Gonzalez who worked on project research with a remit for archival processes graduated to become a writer and curator with an emphasis on interactivity and installation art.

Over 6000 people visited the exhibition, many repeat visits were made as audiences were fascinated with the amount of material on exhibition. Some of this impact has been recounted first-hand by visitors at the time to the curators, passed on by gallery staff or detailed in comment books. Equally press reviews were very favourable; event berlin selected it as event of the week (10/3/15), *Vivre Berlin* (8/4/15) calls it 'out of the ordinary, playful and strange', while *Widewalls Magazine* calls it 'truly amazing' and having 'a very clear statement and concept that will probably influence many conceptual artists in the future' (19/2/15).

Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo (founder of Sandretto Re Rebaudengo Foundation Turin + Madrid) called the exhibition 'extraordinary' – a major collector of installation art. The founder, Thomas Olbricht and his director Julia Rust of the Me-Collector's Room led the team to devise a number of talks and workshops for the exhibition that highlighted its innovative stance in regard to a collection, which was also tested in the foundation's own cabinet of curiosities displays.

So, finally, it is the curator/writer, who is changed by the project. This can be a more internalised process that feeds

research and practice over time, and it can also impact a career. As a result of the exhibition, de Oliveira was appointed to the international Jury of the Nam June Paik Prize, and shortlisted for the Busan Biennale Curator Competition, as well as invited to present the exhibition *You've eaten Roses, now you'll drink the Moon* at Forum Braga/Leal Rios Foundation, Portugal – an exhibition based on another collection that further extended the sonic and spatial ideas developed for *A Book of Burning Matches*. The publication accompanying the exhibition led directly to de Oliveira being headhunted by art agency Montabonel & Partners as a research director.

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