

A fold in time

On Arefeh Riahi's *Un/folding Interventions*, De Appel Archive, 2019

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For years I kept a notebook. I wouldn't call it a journal; I wrote in it every now and then, about everything and nothing. My observations weren't necessarily self-revelatory in nature, nor did I ever go back to re-read them. Still, this notebook was indispensable to me. I filled its pages with all kinds of plans and intuitions, always carried it with me and noticed how over time my collection evolved into a slowly expanding archive, a repository where every full stop turned into a comma.

Although my notebook and Arefeh Riahi's blue, folded object could hardly be more different in terms of form and content, I couldn't help but think of my old mini-archive when I attended one of her very first *Un/folding Interventions*. On a table in a room full of art-historical material sits a dark blue, box-like object, consisting of 14 surfaces and unfoldable in countless impossible ways. Along with a handful of assembled visitors, I shuffle around the room while listening to Riahi talking about the object in relation to her recent explorations. Here, in De Appel's archive, the Iranian-born artist has spent the past few months parsing questions about the archiving and an archiving of artistic materials. The object, a 'box' or a 'container' that Riahi herself also describes as 'a space that is archiving [in] itself', was her instrument for analysing the specific archiving practice in De Appel. In October, November and December 2019 she shared her explorations with the public, organising an exhibition¹ and four performative presentations in which she unfolded her project.

But as you unfold the object in relation to your body and the space you are my archivist. The object provides a potential to be read differently every time, and being composed differently through new movements. We enter a conversation where simultaneously we read and we are being read. Together with the thing, we connect different archival entities to each other making a narrative of un/folding and being un/folded.

During her first performance on 17 October, Riahi moves her object through the archival space during a nearly one hour-long session. She folds and unfolds her object with small, discrete movements that grow increasingly dramatic. The dark-blue contraption moves slowly, wraps itself around shelves, cabinets and books and changes shape continuously. Riahi, who is joined by archivist Nell Donkers in a later stage of the performance, lets the object lead her and, in the proximity of her audience, creates connections that seemed impossible thus far. Books become cabinets, cabinets become pillars and pillars become pedestals, suddenly displaying the range of unfolded content they contain.

While Riahi almost physically felt her away around the archive in her first performance, on 7 November she aimed for a more linguistic exploration of the space. In collaboration with artists Maartje Fliervoet and Martin La Roche, she prepared a performance in which she associatively as well as self-reflexively responded to the act of anarchiving itself. Walking through the space, the three artists recite a text in which interpretations of fairly complex theories are alternated with personal stories and intuitions. All around them materials have been laid out, and huddled visitors roam about cautiously. Riahi involves us in her anarchival attempts while La Roche unfolds a book and wonders if a brain that drains itself of surplus liquid can be compared to an archivist who dumps superfluous materials in the bin.

*There is always an archivist. There is always a selecting force and a force of leaving aside.
Even in our head. So how to find out about what one shouldn't find out about? How to see
what one is supposed not to?*

Unlike the first, Riahi's second performance has a pretty overwhelming premise. The archive appears, not unlike the recited text, somewhat of a knocked-over bookcase where everything you see forms a fragment that points towards other fragments. Ambling through the unfolded books, posters, magazines and collages, I am invited to experience all kinds of inputs which, especially when combined, cause a sense of inadequacy, as if the artists want to point out that we'll never be able to process such a glut of thought in the archives we are ourselves.

On 28 November as well as 12 December, the limits of this theorem were stretched even further. For her third gathering, Riahi invited choreographer Setareh Fatehi to join her in a collaborative performance where the choreographer, together with the folded object, moved through the room like a snake and used her body to point at new types of connections. Whereas this performance focused on a physical exploration of the archive, in her last session on 12 December Riahi appealed to the associative abilities of her audience. Collaborating with writer and artist Hannah Dawn Henderson, Riahi prepared a workshop where she challenged her now loyal group of attendees to respond to quotes selected from a number of texts written for the project. The quotes, each of which touched upon the theme of (an)archiving in its own way, had been written on loose leaves and shoved between 14 selected books, allowing all participants to add their own thoughts, memories and associations. After a silent half hour, everyone came together and all the texts were read out loud in a somewhat uncomfortable circle.

As with Fliervoet and La Roche's performance, the combination of speaking and freely associating created a lively mix of intuitions. Some participants seemed to have plumbed the very depths of their being while they wrote; others responded more literally or rather playfully and instinctively. Henderson and Riahi, who both participated, took photos of every piece of paper² and noted the amount of external triggers that had been activated by the given quotations. While the treasures of De Appel are normally displayed within the context of an exhibition (or consulted by people with a specific interest),

during the workshop the selected materials were linked to considerations which, together with all the voices, gestures and different pronunciations of the English language, indeed brought an 'activating echo' to life.

I suppose an archive gives you a kind of valley in which your thoughts can bounce back to you, transformed. You whisper intuitions and thoughts into the emptiness, hoping to hear something back. And sometimes, just sometimes, an echo does indeed return, a real reverberation of something, bouncing back with clarity when you've finally hit the right pitch and found the right surface.

What stood out to me most during this last gathering was the way in which writing down an association makes it possible for a new association to occur. While I used my notebook not merely to remember my thoughts but also, or mainly, to 'pin them down' so as to be able to move on —writing as a way to empty your mind and create space for new, as-yet-unthought thoughts—Henderson and Riahi created an environment where people could make their intuitions palpable and thus shareable. During the workshop, I came across a book in which Australian philosopher Andrew Murphie pleads for this approach to archiving. He explains that an archive is not merely a place where we store materials from the past, but also a space that should be seen as a communal environment where it's important to find ways to connect thoughts, voices, intuitions and ideas.

Over the past few months, Arefeh Riahi has managed to transform De Appel's Archive into a place where such connections could be made. By turning existing structures inside out and actively involving others, she showed which shapes an archive can take and how materials, which often remain hidden, can be brought to life. Staring into the space, she decides to end the final presentation by saying that her project, like her object, can be seen as a model of thought that will continue to unfold in time. A slowly expanding idea that is waiting to be re-activated.

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During this exhibition, which could be visited for the duration of Riahi's residence, the object lay in the archival space, giving visitors the freedom to interact with it.

Footnote 2

While the archival material unfolded by Arefeh has been marked in De Appel's database (and can be found online using the search term *Un/folding Interventions* and/or Riahi's name), the quotes, along with the date of the performance and the participant's contribution, have been permanently incorporated in the books where they were inserted by Henderson and Riahi.