

Introduction

Greg Cohen¹ e Jane de Almeida²

On the occasion of her nomination for the 2014 AIMIA/AGO Photography Prize, the artist Lisa Oppenheim described her practice in terms that evoke a strategic duty: in a world awash with images, she explained, the objective of art is “to edit, process, and distill” rather than simply “add to the noise” (ADAMS, 2014).

Oppenheim is referring to the art of *appropriation*, a term that, in itself, does little to illuminate either the diversity of media and practices it implies today, or their far reaching consequences for our current, media-saturated moment. What is revealing are the multiple equivalencies conjured up by Oppenheim’s formulation: to appropriate is to *edit, assemble, or abridge*; to *process, sort, or translate*; to *distill, filter, or refine*.... If the world is indeed a commotion of images, objects, and data churned out in ever-vaster quantities by a ceaseless cultural machine, it is here amidst the clamor that the artist must begin to derive her art.

To summon the words of an appropriation artist born in 1975 is also to acknowledge the epochal shift and altered contexts in which such artists currently operate, so divergent from the conditions that gave rise to movements like the Pictures Generation of the 1970s and 1980s. For those earlier artists, the act of appropriating was a matter mainly of disavowal (*the artist is dead; there is no originality*) and demystification (*the artwork is but a commodity, the viewer of art but a consumer*). Even while today’s most avid and innovative appropriation artists have internalized those obsessions, their work must contend with entirely new sets of questions and contingencies: what is the status of *evidence* in the era of political polarization and *post-truth*? What is the nature of *authenticity* and *authentication* in a presumably *post-*

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historical world? Where do the laws, discourses, and aesthetics of *property* converge with those of *art* in the matrix of *appropriation* and *expropriation*? Has the *aura* of the work of art resurfaced, phoenix-like, from the embers of mechanical reproduction in the age of social media and digital manipulation? Has the *archive fever* of recent decades evolved into an *epidemic* of recycled knowledge and speculative excess? Or do recycling and speculation point the way to a radical line of flight from the information morass? From diverse perspectives and with regard to a panoply of media, the articles in this dossier proffer responses to precisely such questions.

To set the stage, we begin with two important theoretical inquiries into the nature of appropriation. Though certainly not the first to examine the current state of the practice, Jaimie Baron's seminal 2012 essay, "The Archive Effect: Archival Footage as an Experience of Reception"—presented here in the first authorized Portuguese translation—is pioneering in its phenomenological approach. By shifting attention from the problem of the *archive* to the question of spectatorial *experience*, Baron leads the way out of familiar theoretical cul-de-sacs, recalibrates the concept of the archive itself, and offers novel theoretical foundations on which to build future studies of appropriation. In a different vein, Cicero Inacio da Silva engages American *remix* scholar, Eduardo Navas, in a conversation that illuminates the nuances of appropriation as a conceptual category on the one hand and, on the other, the important affinities and differences between appropriation and remix as aesthetic practices. An heir to the ideas of Lev Manovich, Navas furnishes a useful bridge between appropriation specifically and the broader field of Media Archaeology.

As Baron, Navas, and Oppenheim would surely concede, to reframe the concept of the archive is by no means to evade it altogether. Even as practices and contexts of appropriation evolve, the convolutions of the archive—together with attendant questions of collective and historical memory—persist for appropriation artists and theorists alike. In this regard, the essays by Silvana Seabra and André Vasconcelos offer fruitful avenues of analysis. In "Cinema, história, memória e verdade: *footages* e apropriação em Wajda," Seabra draws directly on Baron's concept of the "archive effect" to examine the use of found footage in three films by renowned Polish director, Andrzej Wajda. In the blending of archival and fictional footage in Wajda's films, Seabra detects certain "meta-historical" strategies that aim to mobilize particular interpretations of national history and *experiences* of cultural memory in his viewers. For Vasconcelos, these kinds of *visual* strategies of appropriation cannot be divorced from their *sonic* dimensions, especially when it comes to the genre of the essay film. Indeed, the element of *found sound* is largely absent not only from scholarship on

appropriation generally, but also from prevailing studies of film sound and the essay film alike. Vasconcelos pioneers new and fecund terrain here, first by articulating these hitherto disparate fields of analysis, then by illuminating the crucial role that sound plays in the resignification of archival imagery and, therefore, in the critical reconfiguration of historical discourse and collective memory that so closely distinguishes the essay film itself.

Just as with the concept of the archive, issues of representation, subject-formation, *the real*, and *truth* also call for radical reassessment in the age of digital technology and hyper-mediation. Two essays in the present dossier tackle these matters in novel and timely ways. In “Arte-jornalismo: representação, subjetividade, contaminação,” Fabiana Moraes and Moacir dos Anjos excavate the affinities between journalistic discourse and contemporary art in the practices of four leading Latin American artists. Known for their appropriation of both journalistic methods and materials in the creation of their work, these artists (some of whom are also trained journalists) borrow from practices that commonly signal *transparency* and *objectivity* and deploy them in a discursive domain (the gallery; the museum) generally perceived as ambiguous by nature. Such practices, the authors argue, serve not only to underscore the discourse of journalism as a locus of “symbolic production,” but also to mobilize critical reflection among the art-going public on the nature of truth in the age of “post-truth.” Such are precisely the means by which appropriation art can subvert our culturally entrenched prejudices and, perhaps, counteract an ever more globalized tendency towards bigotry and xenophobia, particularly against people of African descent. This is the argument advanced by Ana Carolina Lima Santos and Gonçalves Ferreira in their analysis of the work of artist Marina Amaral. In her project, *In Color: Slavery in Brazil, 1869*, Amaral appropriates Alberto Henschel’s nineteenth-century photographic typologies of Brazilian slaves, renders them in realistic color, then remounts them for contemporary audiences. According to Lima Santos and Ferreira, this displacement of the patently racist, “typifying logic” of Henschel’s original photos effectively opens up an “anti-racist” space in which spectators’ *haptic* sensibilities are engaged, impelling them to behold black subjectivities in their wholeness and humanity.

Regardless of their political force, Amaral’s appropriations of historical photographs are wholly *legible* as such. In the case of literary giant, Jorge Luis Borges, the status of the *original* and *the copy* is a far more labyrinthine matter. Indeed, the nebulous boundary between fact and fiction, dream and reality, the *verifiable* and the *verisimilar*, are the hallmarks of Borges’s work; in the inventive hands of writer

João Anzanello Carrascoza, such features assume a renewed dynamism. In effect, “O consumido e o consumado: Apropriações antológicas e inéditas de Borges” recasts the Argentine master’s work as a crucible of “cut-and-paste” aesthetics, a laboratory of “non-creative” poetics. Yet, what distinguishes Carrascoza’s essay in equal measure is what appears to be its *own* status as a work of appropriation: do the “translations” of hitherto unpublished stories by Borges belong to Borges himself, or are they in fact the creations of Carrascoza? We leave the answer to this riddle up to the reader of the present dossier.

What is certain of Borges, in any event, is the *essential* indeterminacy of authorial identity at the heart of his literary project. His writings practically beg to be read as treatises on appropriation as a *foundational* if always inherently problematic *poetics*, particularly as it pertains to questions of authorship, originality, intellectual property, and privacy. The respective interventions by Luis Felipe Silveira de Abreu and Sabrina Tenório Luna attest to the complex ethical and legal aspects of those questions, each in illuminating ways. In specific relation to Borges, Silveira addresses the case of two contemporary writers whose deliberate recycling (read: copying) of the Argentine writer’s stories in their own works landed them in legal battles with the Borges Foundation over intellectual property and author’s rights. To Silveira, however, the *legalities* of property are of far less interest than the “performance of property” carried out by the putative plagiarists and self-proclaimed disciples of Borges. Contemporary “Borgesian” projects such as these, Silveira suggests, are capable of nudging our conceptions of *appropriation* beyond conventional, overly moralistic notions of title and ownership of the artistic text.

As for Tenório Luna, what most animates her analysis of the experimental science-fiction film, *Faceless*—a 2007 work by Austrian artist Manu Luksch comprised entirely of CCTV footage acquired in the city of London—is Luksch’s own admission that he approached the CCTV images as “legal *readymades*.” In accordance with the UK Data Protection Act of 1998, Luksch was obliged to digitally obscure the faces of the people who appear in the images, a limitation he surmounted by integrating these digital “masks” into the fictional narrative of his film. Implicit in this strategy, Tenório Luna argues (much in the same spirit as Silveira), is a nuanced sense of appropriation as both political and philosophical act, one that necessarily transcends the narrow juridical questions of authorship and intellectual property in which litigations against appropriation artists are increasingly framed.

We conclude this dossier on appropriation, expropriation, and inappropriation with a judicious review of the work of Marcos Bertoni, a paragon of Super-8 filmmaking

in Brazil. Film scholar Alfredo Suppia homes in on Bertoni's project, *Dogma 2002*, a parody of the vaunted Danish independent film movement, *Dogme 95*. Characterized by a sardonic affinity with kitsch and the low-brow, the films Bertoni created under the *Dogma 2002* rubric all subscribed to a simple mandate: "Tudo é permitido, menos filmar." The works, in other words, were made entirely from orphaned 8mm films found at flea markets or scrounged from trash bins, a practice that places Bertoni in the company of other luminaries of remix like Craig Baldwin. As Suppia sees it, Bertoni's idiosyncratic practice echoes the ideas of Lisa Oppenheim cited at the outset of this introduction: certainly, his films aim to "edit, process, and distill" rather than "add to the noise". Yet they also quite gleefully "swallow, digest, and regurgitate" the "technical defects" inherent to the cinematic medium.

If confusion is what ultimately results, it is perhaps because *appropriation*, in essence, has always functioned as a check upon the certainties that would otherwise too readily turn into dogma.

Lastly, this dossier is the result of Greg Cohen's visit as a professor in the Graduate Studies in Education, Art and History of Culture at Mackenzie University in 2019, with grants from Fapesp and Mackpesquisa. Cohen, in addition to sharing classes on Culture of Visualization with Jane de Almeida, presented his curatorial works for the Festival of (IN)Appropriation that has been held at the Los Angeles Filmforum since 2009, for students at Mackenzie, PUC-SP, Unicamp and Unifesp.

References

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