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## Alex Ayed "Owls and Promises" at Kunstverein Freiburg by Teresa Retzer

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The fifteen-meter-high first-floor exhibition hall, the former site of the Jugendstil swimming pool, is dominated by two large gray steel shelves filled with boxes of different materials and sizes. Most of them are closed, but some are open, revealing books, fossils, shells, stones, cases, caskets, medical instruments, agricultural equipment, ceramics, and blacksmith's tools, to name just a selection of the many categories. Visitors are allowed to reach into the boxes (although this is not openly communicated)—a pleasant possibility to engage with this unusual display.

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The installation reminds me of the storage room at ZKM | Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe, minus two hundred years. The order of Alex Ayed's “storage” in contrast to ZKM's is aesthetically loaded by the discrepancy between seen and hidden, familiar and obscure. Ayed is not a collector himself, but his grandfather left the family an abundant number of objects. The grandfather lived most of his life in France as a doctor, traveling and amassing machines and tools that preserve historical rural working methods and agronomical knowledge from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which he stashed away over the decades on his estate in Burgundy.

Classically, the collection of an art or ethnographic museum functions as an archive, following restrictive selection principles that determine which objects are included. These are conserved in such a way that their authentic materiality is preserved as much as possible. Information about them is transferred to a dynamic storage system so that the material can be found again at any time and the collected knowledge is not lost. The task of an archive is to represent life outside the archive spaces. In doing so, however, archives do not represent real life, but rather preserve things that are considered important enough that one wants to save them from the fate of transience. The difference between archived and profane lies in the character of the gathered objects, which are chosen to create the content of a person's or collective's memory. But scanning the objects on display at Kunstverein Freiburg, we wonder about their purpose, as they seem to have been assembled rather randomly.

The purpose of this assortment is not yet clear, as the mentioned sources, ambitions, and conditions of a general archive do not seem to stick entirely to this assemblage of things. The selection principles seem quite open toward various items around the broader topic of rural life, and criteria such as the beauty or rarity of an object are only applicable to a certain—or, rather, uncertain—degree. The installation is partly randomly distributed, partly well-ordered, and therefore visualizes the process of bringing to life a forgotten collection. To put it succinctly, it captures the moment when a bunch of stuff is becoming an archive of historical artifacts and precious knowledge. The emphasis is on the fact that this “collection” is in the making.

Most cultural archives are based on an ideological attitude according to which they declare to represent life outside the archive rooms, but in fact they pursue a logic that is exactly the opposite: only by undermining the conditions of mundane life can certain things be elevated to the status of being special. Contrary to the transience of life, works of art and other things in the archive survive many generations, somehow containing the concept of a promise to preserve the past. In this exhibition, however, the many steps *before* the process of displaying and storing an archive are being staged in an almost theatrical matter. Moreover, it is unclear if this installation even intends to become a museum collection or will continue to hover between being a “bunch of stuff” and being an archive in the conventional sense.

It is probably human nature that one wishes to find out more about the owner of all these things, whose spirit inhabits the space in a more pleasant than spooky way. But information about the grandfather in the exhibition texts is scant. Nevertheless, *Owls and Promises* feels like an implicit fulfilment of a promise by a caring grandson paying his last respects.

The gallery space upstairs hosts a wooden shelf—the only piece of furniture that made its way from Burgundy to Freiburg—stuffed with brown stoneware, which appear rather musty and desolate. The curator, Theresa Rößler, explains that one can estimate their time and place of origin from various details of their production. Like the agricultural tools and machines downstairs on the steel shelves, these objects are not older than one to three hundred years, but in the passage of time, many of their production methods and uses have already been forgotten. One wooden harvester on one shelf, we learn, functions similarly to harvesters used in Mesopotamia thousands of years ago.

Existing knowledge continuously competes with new knowledge—supposedly better methods and strategies. Agricultural processes are constantly being optimized, and today's production methods have made the machines on view almost entirely obsolete. But the historically new, current, living, and real cannot be diagnosed in any other way than by comparing it with the archived, the old. If we forget to preserve old methods, we forget our own history, which is the basis of our culture and collective identity. The function of the archive therefore cannot merely be to map history, to represent it—to record the memory of history as it took place in reality. Rather, the archive provides the prerequisite for something like history to take place at all, because only if the archive is always already present can the comparison of the new with the old—and thus the production of history—be carried out.

Many artists have attempted to preserve the knowledge of realities, which are usually left behind, which makes me think of Dieter Roth's folders full of two-dimensional detritus. In 1973, Roth started his long-term project *Flacher Abfall* (Flat Waste), in which he collected food packaging and other found material, preserving the refuse that he and others left behind and putting it in more than six hundred binders, filed away on bookshelves. The work draws attention to the ephemeral nature of existence and addresses Roth's artistic role as collector, cataloguer, and archivist. However—and maybe this is clearer in Roth's example—in the archive, it is not what is important to *people* that is collected, but what is important to the *archive*. It is this interesting process of an archive taking on a life of its own, detached from its owner, that we observe in this show.

Teresa Retzer is a writer and curator based in Munich. She currently works for Haus der Kunst München and Artists at Risk (AR)—a NGO and network organization for human rights and the arts. She previously worked in the curatorial department of the ZKM | Center for Art and Media in Karlsruhe. Her focus lies in media and contemporary art. Amongst others, she has been published by *KUNSTFORUM International*, *springerin*, *Border Crossings* and *Art Review*.

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