

***Archive/Apparatus* of the Scholar. On the Index Cards of Stanisław Pietraszko**

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Among the archival materials left behind by scholars and artists, mixed in with notes, manuscripts, and letters, we often find index cards. The cards are a curious artifact, for today, as a tool of research, they are largely obsolete. Extensive collections of tiny cards that once belonged to the great minds of the humanities are often displayed in museums (as in the exhibition on Roland Barthes at the Centre Pompidou) or on television programs (in the case of the collections of Niklas Luhmann and Tymoteusz Karpowicz).

Stanisław Pietraszko, founder of the Wrocław school of cultural studies, also had a habit of using index cards in his research. His card collection is part of his estate and is stored at the Library of the Institute of Cultural Studies and Musicology at the University of Wrocław. The materi-

al still awaits attentive study. What is worth mentioning is the artistic and curatorial “usage” of the index cards in the exhibition *Experimental Course (Kierunek eksperymentalny)* organized for the fortieth anniversary of Wrocław cultural studies at the WRO Art Center in October of 2012. It was at this exhibit that I first encountered Pietraszko’s index cards. I felt moved to write about them later, when I was outlining my doctoral thesis exploring connections between forms of knowledge in the humanities and the technological media used to produce that knowledge. In this text, taking my cues from media theory rooted in cultural studies and the philosophy of the humanities, I reconstruct the index cards as an *apparatus*. Existing research on scholars’ collections of index cards tends – while referring to these sources as an “archival” (or “archiving”) “technology”¹ – to analyze the material as an instrument that simultaneously conserves and creates thought. The idea here is to recognize the medium as one that exceeds the archive as a generator of texts, dialogue partner, and creative machine. Their storage capacity, of course, also merits study.

Index cards and “media” alike are both entities often described in the plural. The individual card may well be of value, but its real potential is revealed in sequence, or within its larger system. The cards fulfil their destiny when their units exist in bulk – ideally as abundantly as possible – although this standard is not without its practical inconveniences (storage) and obstacles for “building knowledge” (how to

¹ R. Wilken, *The Card Index as Creativity Machine*, “Culture Machine” 11/2010, p. 9.

organize them, which ones to focus on, how to label them, how to avoid drowning in the flood of information). As Markus Krajewski has noted, the prolific nature of the cards is precisely what makes them a desirable research tool for facilitating the flow of thought.² Krajewski distinguishes the card collection from other media used to aggregate data, like the codex. He identifies three features specific to this medium: its elements are (1) discrete and separable, (2) unified and standardized, and (3) mobile.³ By storing them in boxes, cabinets or binders, we can move the components of a collection, shuffle them and, most importantly, expand on them by incorporating new components in accordance with the logic of the whole. The card index, conceived as a single medium, is in itself not as readily mobile as its constituent parts. This may chafe against the nomadic lifestyle of the academic. Luhmann, for instance, has admitted that the enormous collection he accumulated in Bielefeld makes it difficult for him to travel.

Boxes of index cards can be seen, in their traditional paper format, as a personal archive in the sense that they are a spatially circumscribed site for collecting documents. They are therefore beholden to the typical concerns of the archive: how to conserve materials and protect them from physical degradation. They are also a personal archive in the Foucauldian sense, for they foreground archival gaps, white spaces, and the conditions of what might be conceived/uttered within the archive's scope.

² M. Krajewski, *Paper Machines. About Cards and Catalogs, 1548–1929*, trans. P. Krapp, Cambridge MA 2011, p. 62.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

Pietraszko's index cards were donated to the Wrocław Institute of Cultural Studies by the scholar's heirs following his death in 2010. They occupy four boxes, two of which resemble the standard boxes used in library catalogs (brown and blue, measuring at 39/17/10 cm), while the other two are cardboard shoeboxes once used for men's shoes (the box's label conveys detailed information about the shoes, offering more context than we have for the cards themselves – we know, for instance, that they were produced between 2001 and 2004). Each box contains several hundred envelopes in stacks (amounting to a total of 954). The envelopes are labeled with subject headings or, less frequently, alphabetic and numerical codes (handwritten in even block letters, as if he had used a stencil). The subject keywords are organized alphabetically, although not without deviation. Presumably, the original order changed over time, as the cards have been moved and perused by several people, including for the purposes of the exhibition. The envelopes contain handwritten cards (the Polish word for index cards – *fiszki* – comes from the French word *fiche* that denotes the very same): these are thin cards of A6 format, often cut or torn out of ordinary office paper, either non-ruled or quadrille, and sometimes written on printed matter, the backsides of library cards, or the stationary of the journal "Odra"). The individual notes have not been tallied, but if you consider the fact that most of the envelopes are full (even with a single card) and that the boxes include several packets of loose cards in addition to the contents of the envelopes, then the estimated volume of the cards is immense.

As a rule, aside from those prepared as notes or outlines for lectures and seminars, the cards are not dated. The earliest cards likely date back to the 1950s. The most recent “pedagogic” content found in the cards is dated October of 2007. Two boxes hold index cards that appear to be the oldest, judging from the condition of the paper and their traditionally literary subject matter. These cards can be traced to the years when Pietraszko was still a Polonist and was writing his doctoral thesis on Dmochowski and his subsequent post-doctoral project on the doctrine of Polish classicism. The Nobility-brand shoeboxes hold cards pertaining to the courses he taught, “personal” envelopes devoted to faculty members and doctoral and master’s candidates, and notes on the Institute’s administration. The brown library boxes (holding the greatest volume of envelopes) feature notes on cultural studies, including those written at the end of Pietraszko’s career (as the increasingly wobbly handwriting suggests).

The fact that most of the cards are undated (bibliographic cards, reading notes, notes exploring ideas) calls into question how they functioned as tools of the auto-archival process. Perhaps, if we follow Ernst van Alphen and his analysis of Duchamp’s *Green Box*, we might relate to the cards as a kind of archive-collection, or the scholar’s cumulative oeuvre. In the collection, the relationship with the past is secondary to internal coherence. The price of this internal coherence (the product of clear organizational parameters) is a certain ahistorical quality.⁴ From this perspective, the cards are but one of many aspects of

⁴ See: E. van Alphen, *Staging the Archive. Art and Photography in the Age of New Media*, London 2014, pp. 59–60.

his scholarly output. They are elements of a work rather than its original seed, origins, or traces of theory-in-formation. On the other hand, as Jean-Claude Kaufmann has argued, even cards with no useful data at all can convey a record of the history of one's work: "Cards age quickly. What yesterday seemed brilliant may well seem like chicken scratch tomorrow. When I finally organize my cards, a few glances suffice to recall the moment I wrote them."⁵

Cards as Apparatus

Depending on the context, apparatus (we might also use the Polish spelling, 'aparát'), denotes composition, constellation, device, or dispositif. The term references the field of media archeology. Erkki Huhtamo, a representative of this movement, writes:

Screens should not be studied in isolation of the apparatus they are part of. The notion of apparatus comes from cinema studies: it comprises not only the technical system, but also the elements of the viewing situation, including the relationship between the screen and the viewer, which is both physical and imaginary.⁶

This perspective informs a broader conception that integrates multiple aspects (transcending the strict "technicality" of the apparatus as well as a medium's "social contexts"). With this approach, we can discern elements surrounding a medium (machine, device) that may not

⁵ J.-C. Kaufmann, *Wywiad rozumiejący*, trans. A. Kapciak, Warsaw 2010, p. 125.

⁶ E. Huhtamo, "Elements of Screenology," Wro 01 IX International Biennial of Media Arts: http://wro01.wrocenter.pl/erkki/html/erkki_en.html (12.26.2018).

seem related or perhaps merely figure as the chance conditions by which that medium operates. Let us consider the elements of index cards as apparatus.

Cards

To begin, let us turn to cards themselves. As a rule, cards are of a similar, if not uniform, size and handy format – Luhmann has opted for the A5 format, whereas Pietraszko and Barthes preferred the somewhat smaller A6. Pietraszko's card index includes a sheet of A4 paper divided into annotated quarters, but not yet cut. The performance artist Tim Etchells has said the following of the medium's modest scale:

[...] the index cards were robust, easy to handle and shuffle, easy to carry in one hand, and not too bulky. They had a surface area that could accommodate a moderate amount of text, making it easy, in the performance situation, to survey a range of options at a glance; but, at the same time, the cards were not too large either, so as to contain too much text in which the eye might get lost whilst scanning options.⁷

Usually, only one side of the index card is filled with writing. This way, their content can be gleaned in one glance and the cards can be easily assembled in varied and alternating systems and constellations (a point I will return to later). Pietraszko liked to write his notes horizontally, as instruction books often encourage (this format accommodates the maximum volume of information).

⁷ T. Etchells, *Index Cards* [in:] G. Palladini and M. Pustianaz, ed. (*Lexicon for an Affective Archive*), Bristol & Chicago 2017, pp. 100-1.

Stipulations for library catalogs recommend the octavo format (roughly corresponding to A5) and thicker paper stock. Pietraszko, like Luhmann, preferred ordinary, flimsy paper often salvaged from recycling. According to Luhmann, this method was a more economical usage of his drawer space. Thin cards may be less durable, but unlike library cards, they were not meant to be handled by several people, so this was likely not a point of concern. The choice of ordinary office paper or pages torn from a quadrille notebook may have been motivated by the material's easy availability (this same logic may have governed Pietraszko's preference).

The standardization of library catalogs has an interesting history that explains why index cards are often associated with the gesture of shuffling. Krajewski and Peter Burke have shown us in their research that one of the first card catalogs appeared in post-revolutionary France in response to the need to inventory the church's holdings that had been seized and nationalized. To come up with a consistent list format, they adapted an earlier idea from 1775 to use a deck of playing cards.⁸

The scholar's catalog needs not conform to such strict stipulations as the library catalog. In lieu of boxes of precise and identical dimensions, the scholar's collection features displaced stacks of paper, scraps, cuttings, and violations of several other rules. In Pietraszko's collection, for instance, we find empty or redundantly labeled envelopes and incongruent elements like blank postcards, letters, conference

⁸ See: M. Krajewski, *Paper Machines*, p. 33; P. Burke, *Spoleczna historia wiedzy*, trans. A. Kunicka, Warsaw 2016, p. 312.

invitations, receipts, a small timetable showing train times from Toulouse to Paris, and a doctor's telephone number.

Before library cards were typed, they were filled out by hand. Even in these circumstances, guidelines and style conventions were observed (only certain library employees were allowed to handle the bibliographical cards).⁹ As Krajewski informs us, the standardization of library catalogs is tied to the fact that the medium must communicate "many-to-many." The researcher's card collection, on the other hand, is a personal and idiosyncratic tool used exclusively by its author and is therefore more adaptable. It may feature abbreviations or names comprehensible only to the scholar, and the handwriting will not necessarily be legible, posing an additional obstacle to outside parties seeking access to the material (fortunately enough for my own research, Pietraszko's handwriting is unusually meticulous, and I even seem to have successfully decrypted some of the symbols appearing on the envelopes and cards).

Also relevant are the writing implements used to fill the cards (perhaps they even constitute a discrete section of the apparatus – and a virtual one, for no trace of them remains in the Institute's holdings). Pietraszko filled out his cards by hand. The most recent ones tend to be written in pen or sometimes in colored Fineliners, while the older cards are in pencil or fountain pen. The catalog includes cards written on the backsides of manuscript pages. Several cards are written on printed paraphernalia, while at least one in-

⁹ See: P. Burke, *Spoleczna historia...*, p. 313.

cidentally and somewhat comically hails the advent of the computer age – or the earliest text editors and printers. According to the scholar's students and colleagues, Pietraszko never actually learned to use a computer on his own. This early "test print" was therefore, in all likelihood, carried out for him by someone else. The artifact stands out as a peculiar clash between "old" and "new" media in one format.

Boxes

In the card collection, boxes (or drawers) are the equivalent of an archive's walls. By carving out a space for the collection, their function is pragmatic – to delineate. By preserving what is worthwhile or potentially of value (after all, not every card scrawled on by a scholar makes its way into these boxes), its function is also symbolic. One of Pietraszko's boxes has a cardboard divider (the envelopes also function as dividers or organizational partitions). The boxes have no lids, so one can freely peer inside and peruse or pull out the envelopes. If we were to translate the box's organization into a two-dimensional shape, we might end up with a table or chart. In this sense, the box is something more than a utilitarian container. Hailing the success (and governmentality-related character) of the modern archive, John Tagg has pointed out that the camera was not the only tool to facilitate the efficient functionality of this machinery, for an indispensable yet overlooked component is the filing cabinet.¹⁰ The card cabinet mounted on the wall

¹⁰ See: J. Tagg, *The Archiving Machine*; or, *The Camera and the Filing Cabinet*, [in:] "Grey Room" 42: 2012, pp. 24-37. Tagg writes about the upright file as a "great nineteenth-century invention" (*ibid.*, p. 33).

(shelves partitioned into smaller compartments resembling pigeonholes) was also described by Claude Lévi-Strauss:

But I get by when I work by accumulating notes - a bit about everything, ideas captured on the fly, summaries of what I have read, references, quotations... And when I want to start a project, I pull a packet of notes out of their pigeonhole and deal them out like a deck of cards. This kind of operation, where chance plays a role, helps me revive my failing memory..¹¹

Scholars' cards are often stored in furniture that has not been designed for this purpose (although textbooks on methods of academic work caution against this), nor are they always stored in boxes designed for library catalogs. Sometimes, for instance, we find them in shoeboxes. Pietraszko was no exception in this regard. His packages call to mind those of Timofey Pnin, the protagonist of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin*.¹²

Envelopes

In Pietraszko's collection, white (or now rather yellowed) envelopes function as subdivisions and sort the collection into subgroups. On the envelopes' upper edge, we find keywords indicating subject and theme, often in abbreviations and/or symbols. Tymoteusz Karpowicz has also noted the "sleeves" containing packets of cards. Karpowicz tried to "discern common semantic or substantive denominators": "when the cards in the sleeves add up to a greater whole,

¹¹ C. Lévi-Strauss, D. Eribon. *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss*, transl. P. Wissing, Chicago-London 1991, p. viii.

¹² V. Nabokov, *Pnin*, trans. A. Kolyszko, Warsaw 1987, p. 122.

they are relocated to envelopes of various sizes. The ultimate stage consists of giant envelopes where – to speak poetically – ‘I might not fit.’¹³ For Karpowicz, the most creative aspect of working with cards involved organizing them into groups, coming up with titles, and establishing categories. One essential convenience of the card index is the ability to rearrange their elements, systematize them, identify links and incongruities, and cluster them together.

Fingers

Indicating the scholar’s fingers as distinct components of the card apparatus may seem a nonhuman reduction of corporality of the knowing subject. Instead, this is simply a synecdoche akin to Heidegger’s oft-repeated reminder that thinking is a handi-work, or Latour’s notion that we think with eyes and hands. When we speak of the card as index (card index, index card), we are also alluding (if we follow the word’s Latin roots) to the index finger, as Nina Lager Vestberg has pointed out in a text where she interrogates the bodily dimension of archival work and the usage of index cards and other implements.¹⁴ Perusing the card catalog requires a specific gesture carried out by fingers, ideally with the use of both hands to hold and file through cards (or, in the case of Pietraszko’s catalog, envelopes). “The fingers moved busily, tidying [the cards]”¹⁵, we read in A.S. Byatt’s novel. The “owner” of these fingers is one of the novel’s protagonists – literary scholar Maud Bailey.

¹³ M. Spychalski, J. Szoda, *Mówi Karpowicz*, Wrocław 2005, p. 53.

¹⁴ See: N. Lager Vestberg, *Wskaźnik i palec. Archiwa, medium, materialność*, trans. W. Szczawińska, [in:] K. Pijarski (ed.), *Archiwum jako projekt*, Warsaw 2011.

¹⁵ A. S. Byatt, *Possession*, New York 1990, p. 48.

Fingertips leave oily traces on the cards. Cards are easily crushed under the finger's pressure; notes are smeared. These indexical signs of human touch (indicating, for instance, a spike of interest in a certain section of the catalog) will disappear as catalogs are digitized. They are particularly cherished by some (such as the American writer Nicholson Baker) and are often described with a tinge of nostalgia. Krajewski writes that cards are an interface that activates through touch (and to a lesser degree through sight).¹⁶ The format of the WRO Art Center's exhibition of Pietraszko's catalog proves that cards are not merely meant to be observed (from afar) but should be perused, reorganized, sorted and extracted. The curators displayed the original cards (two boxes in a glass case placed, significantly, on a desk) but also made copies that visitors could handle freely. The haptic cognitive mode, activated by the cards, is of paramount importance here.

Table / Desk

The final indispensable component of the index card apparatus is the table or desk. This furniture is a critical element of the spatial system. In modern offices (as we read in Benjamin)¹⁷ paper card catalogs can often be found on desktops. The table is seen as a (physical) workshop for research. To use an analogy from the world of computers, cards are closer in kind to the desktop computer than the laptop. They require space: a flat lectern and free sur-

¹⁶ M. Krajewski, *Paper Machines*, p. 66.

¹⁷ W. Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. E. Jephcott and K. Shorter, London 1979,

face. Jacek Abramowicz, a cultural theorist, colleague of Pietraszko's and one of the Institute's earliest hires, told me that in the 1960s, Pietraszko and his family lived for some time in a cramped apartment in the neighborhood of Sępolno. Apparently, he might have written his post-doctoral thesis in the kitchen, on a tiny table. Where could he have placed his cards? How was he able to use them? Abramowicz and I mused over this together.¹⁸ Today, it is easier to imagine a small desktop sufficing (or an ordinary laptop stand, if that) to hold a small, sleek computer. Earlier workplaces were more dense with objects, gadgets, and tools, as we learn from the online visualization that went viral in 2015 called *Evolution of the Desk*.¹⁹ In an animation that runs less than a minute, the authors trace how the personal computer, with the development of new software, gradually absorbed the functions of other "desk-adjacent" tools, rendering them extraneous and freeing up table space. There may be no index cards on the animation's earliest desk, but perhaps in 1982 (the visualization's starting point) cards had already gone out of fashion, at least in the United States (according to Peter Burke, this was the precise endpoint of the golden age of index cards).

I have already mentioned that ideally, cards will be physically leafed through. In this sense, they resemble the atlas. The atlas' medium, and even the conditions of its existence, is the table, as Georges Didi-Huberman has pointed out:

¹⁸ Conversation with Jacek Abramowicz at the Institute of Cultural Studies, University of Wrocław, 21.10.2016.

¹⁹ Best Reviews, *Evolution of the Desk*, <http://bestreviews.com/ln/#reviews> (25.04.2017).

The table itself is but a necessary accessory of the work we must constantly pursue, change, and even begin again from scratch. It is only the surface of encounters and interim systems: here, we place things and get rid of them, and the 'work surface' assimilates these materials without hierarchy. [...] Here, what is important is the table's definition as buttress of meaning and source of beauty or new knowledge – analytical knowledge acquired by cutting, cropping, or 'dissecting.'²⁰

The table facilitates arranging (one-sided) index cards on a surface and studying them in one glance or from a distance, as a camera might zoom out. One can arrange cards into dense stacks. On the table, one can string them together in rows – visual representations of logical trajectories or associative threads. As a framework for the card system (its content, ideas, issues, questions), the two-dimensional surface imparts a sense of tangibility and will likely facilitate the translation of this system to the text.

If we consider the notion of the analog humanities vis-à-vis the digital turn,²¹ index cards, as a technology, are no longer so straight-forward. They stand out as a peculiar and bespoke medium – a homemade computer, to cite

²⁰ G. Didi-Huberman, *Atlas. How to Carry the World on One's Back?*, Madrid 2010.

²¹ J. Sterne has defined the analog humanities – a phrase only possible after the digital humanities have been recognized – as a “*rhetorical before*.” For Sterne, the term is a tool to describe “the cultural and material infrastructures on which humanists depended and still depend.” – see: J. Sterne, *The Example: Some Historical Considerations*, [in:] P. Svensson, D.T. Goldberg (ed.), *Between Humanities and the Digital*, Cambridge 2015, p. 19.

card-scholar Tymoteusz Karpowicz.²² Paper cards have also been referred to as a database (*avant la lettre*). This suggestion foregrounds cards' proximity to digital methods for aggregating information oriented less toward objects (as in traditional archives) and more so toward process – operations carried out in tandem and constituted by the relations between constituent parts. Nonlinearity (anti-narrativity) as an essential trademark of databases (as Lev Manovich has shown us) is also a property of index cards.

The archival status of index cards is evident on several levels – cards form a component of the scholar's estate that is then managed and protected by an institution. For a media archaeologist, they figure as a more metaphorical archive (and as Jussi Parikka reminds us, all media archaeologies begin in the archive).²³ Finally, for the scholar, index cards – as a complex apparatus – are a medium for recording the self. They document (consciously or otherwise) much more than the research process.

Translated by Eliza Cushman Rose

²² M. Spychalski, J. Szoda, *Mówi Karpowicz*, p. 53.

²³ J. Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?*, Cambridge MA 2012, p. 113.