

# Study in Documents

## The Archival Object: A Memoir of Disintegration



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**RÉSUMÉ** Dans les centres d'archives, les objets sont souvent séparés physiquement et intellectuellement des documents textuels et visuels, même quand ils font partie d'une grande acquisition de documents d'archives. Cependant, les objets, comme les autres documents, ont une valeur de témoignage et peuvent être « lus » dans leur contexte de création. Ce texte se sert d'une collection d'objets spécifique – la *Magic Box* [Boîte magique] de l'artiste-auteur David Wojnarowicz, qui fait partie de ses documents conservés à la New York University Fales Library and Special Collections Downtown Collection – afin d'examiner comment la présence d'objets dans des fonds d'archives complique des concepts archivistiques comme la provenance, le contexte, la description et l'enregistrement. En se servant d'un exemple concret d'une collection d'objets dans un fonds d'archives, ainsi que des textes du créateur de cette collection et des écrits théoriques provenant de l'extérieur de la discipline archivistique, ce texte explore comment un nouvel examen de la place des objets aux archives peut mener à une meilleure connaissance de la double valeur symbolique et matérielle de tout document d'archives.

**ABSTRACT** In archives, objects are often both physically and intellectually separated from textual and visual materials, even when they arrive as part of a larger manuscript or archival collection. But like other documents, objects are inscribed and can be “read” within the context of their creation. This essay uses a particular collection of objects – the artist and writer David Wojnarowicz's *Magic Box*, which is part of his papers housed in the New York University Fales Library and Special Collections Downtown Collection – to examine how archival concepts such as provenance, context, description, and inscription are complicated by the presence of objects in archives. By looking at the case of an actual object collection in archives, along with both the writings of its creator and theoretical writings outside the field of archives, this essay asks how a re-examination of the role of objects in archives can contribute to our understandings of the dual symbolic and material value of all archival documents.

Most archives house three-dimensional objects, and yet the status of these objects is often ambiguous. Frequently, archivists separate objects both physically and intellectually from textual or visual materials, even when they arrive as part of a larger fonds. To arrange and describe objects as something distinct from documents is to implicitly claim that they do not play a role

within the fonds, and do not provide evidence of, or information about, the actions of a creator. But what happens when an archives explicitly welcomes objects as equals in the documentary world of the archival or manuscript collection? At New York University's Fales Library and Special Collections, objects are conceptualized as both autonomous works, and as units within the larger collections on which their value and identity depend. Although objects are not inscribed by creators in the same way textual (and sometimes visual) materials are, Fales staff treat them as carriers of information and evidence like any other document, a practice which poses both practical and theoretical challenges. The collection management of objects at Fales borrows from both the archives and museum fields: objects are described archivally, as part of fonds, and yet each object is also catalogued individually, as an artifact that embodies meaning through its materiality. These practical challenges lead to theoretical questions. Without bearing traditionally conceptualized marks, how can objects perform documentary functions? How are objects inscribed, and how are they read, in an archival context? How does the presence or absence of the object in the archives limit or expand the understanding of what an archives is, and what it should do? In this essay I examine these questions through the process of working with the *Magic Box*,<sup>1</sup> a set of objects collected by David Wojnarowicz and now part of the Fales Library and Special Collections' Downtown Collection.

David Wojnarowicz was an artist, writer, musician, performer, photographer, and activist, a list that fails to represent the depth and diversity of his creative output. Wojnarowicz's biography is anything but straightforward, in part because of his deep antipathy toward categorization and fixed identities. He was born in New Jersey in 1954, and lived in New York City for much of his life. By his own account he spent much of his youth on the streets. In the late 1970s and early 1980s Wojnarowicz made and acted in Super 8 films, performed in the band Three Teens Kill 4 - No Motive, and exhibited artworks in downtown galleries. He was successful as an artist despite his ambivalence toward the art world; he exhibited in the 1983 Whitney Biennial, and works like his *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* series continue to be influential. With the death of many of his friends from AIDS-related illnesses, and his own diagnosis in the late 1980s, Wojnarowicz directed much of his energy at demanding greater awareness and governmental intervention in the AIDS epidemic. His book *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* was published in 1991. He died in 1992.

David Wojnarowicz fought against all attempts to limit or dictate individual expression, most determinedly when those processes had become invisible and internalized.

1 Wojnarowicz titled the box the *Magic Box*. He inscribed it on the lid.

If government projects the idea that we, as people inhabiting this particular land mass, have freedom, then for the rest of our lives we will go out and find what appear to be the boundaries and smack against them like a heart against the rib cage. If we reveal boundaries in the course of our movements, then we will expose the inherent lie in the use of the word: freedom. I want to keep breathing and moving until I arrive at a place where motion and strength and relief intersect.<sup>2</sup>

Wojnarowicz's papers were acquired by the Fales Library and Special Collections in 1997 and are part of its Downtown Collection. In some ways, to archive his work would seem to go against the intentions of someone whose lifelong goal was to smack against the boundaries. To archive is by definition to categorize and preserve, both acts that easily solidify rather than expand discourse. The archival ethos and the actual contents of the Fales Downtown Collection, however, attempt to work against the limitations imposed by archivization. The collection documents the SoHo and Lower East Side downtown arts scene from the 1970s through the early 1990s, representing the breadth of its "literature, music, theater, performance, film, activism, dance, photography, video, and original art." The materials in the Downtown Collection represent a "full range of artistic practices and outputs, regardless of format," including materials that were created or compiled collaboratively or by single authors.<sup>3</sup> The diverse motivations and manifestos of the loosely related artists of the Downtown scene, and the multiple forms their works take, challenge attempts at classification and institutional preservation. As Fales Director Marvin Taylor has written:

Downtown works undermine the stability of the discourse of the library, which, with its classification schemes, processing rituals, and economic modes for assessing historical or literary value, stands as the cultural system *par excellence* that reifies, legislates, represses, normalizes, and creates the possibility of what can be known, who can know it, and how it will be preserved.<sup>4</sup>

Just as Downtown works themselves are "about understanding how the discourse of institutions construct who we are" and then complicating that discourse,<sup>5</sup> Fales staff attempt to use the processes of preservation, arrangement, and description to multiply rather than confine meanings.

2 David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York, 1991), p. 261.

3 Fales Library and Special Collections, *Collection Development Policy for the Downtown Collection*, <http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/fales/dwntwn.htm> (accessed on 24 April 2008).

4 Marvin Taylor, "'I'll Be Your Mirror, Reflect What You Are': Postmodern Documentation and the Downtown New York Scene from 1975 to the Present," *RBM A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Spring 2002), p. 45.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

The *David Wojnarowicz Papers* is one of the most complicated (and complicating) collections in the Downtown Collection. It is comprised of materials reflecting the prolific nature of Wojnarowicz's personality and creative expression, including journals, correspondence, manuscripts, photography, film, video and audio works, printed ephemera, and three-dimensional objects. The objects include artworks made by Wojnarowicz and others, props he used in his photographs or movies, and collected objects that served a function within his own symbolic language.<sup>6</sup> His *Magic Box* fits into this last category (insofar as anything created by Wojnarowicz can be said to fit into a category). The *Magic Box* is a pine fruit box of 8 x 17 x 13 inches, containing fifty-nine objects or groupings of objects that Wojnarowicz collected and stored in the box. Although he never wrote about the box, and as far as we know he never discussed its function with anyone, we do know from his long-time partner and executor that Wojnarowicz stored the *Magic Box* under his bed, adding objects to it occasionally. The objects include plastic toys, jewelry, stones, feathers, seeds, religious icons and photographs, some of which have been painted or otherwise modified. Most are single items, but some are retained in the groupings they were in when they came to Fales and have been ascribed a single identification number. This confusion about the identity of "an item" is reflected in the *Magic Box* itself; although it is a box containing autonomous objects and groupings of objects, it is at the same time conceived of as an item itself, a contained and autonomous entity.

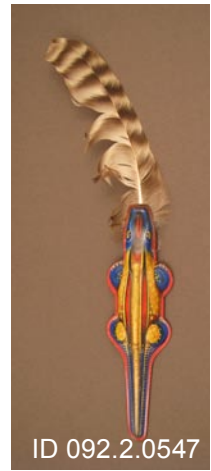
After acquiring the *Magic Box* in 1997 along with the rest of the *David Wojnarowicz Papers*, Fales staff debated about how to physically arrange and preserve the objects within it. The box and its contents presented considerable preservation challenges; the wooden box and the plastic or painted objects within it off-gassed into the enclosed space, speeding the deterioration of all the objects. Other objects, like a chunk of concrete, were rough and chafed the objects around them. Some items were falling apart, and the shared weight of the objects surrounding them was only speeding this process. In addition, those items that were grouped together in non-archival bags or tissue paper needed to be removed from those housings every time they were accessed. The only way to slow the rapid deterioration of these items would have been to individually rehouse them, but to do so would have radically altered the form and meaning of the *Magic Box*. In reference to Jacques Derrida's formulation of The Archive, archivist Brien Brothman writes "... acts of preservation ... implicitly include efforts to set limits."<sup>7</sup> The limits in this case would have been quite literal, exemplified by an early suggestion to

6 This concept of the *Magic Box* as part of Wojnarowicz's "symbolic language" is attributed to Fales Director, Marvin J. Taylor.

7 Brien Brothman, "Declining Derrida: Integrity, Tensegrity, and the Preservation of Archives from Deconstruction," *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999), p. 79.



ID 092.2.0543



ID 092.2.0547



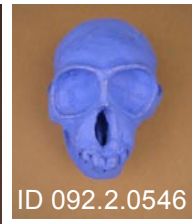
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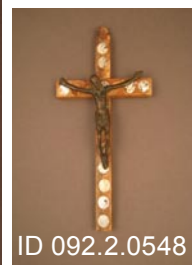
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ID 092.2.0548

The *Magic Box* from the *David Wojnarowicz Papers*, Fales Library, NYU

physically separate the objects in specimen-type trays, as in the storage of natural history objects. But these limitations were also conceptual, as physical separation of the objects would have removed them from their context, effectively presenting them as a set of equivalent autonomous units. Ultimately, Fales staff decided that this contextual, messy information – its *provenance* – was more important to “preserve” than the material form of each individual object; the box has been housed and described in the form and configuration it was when it arrived at the repository, and no preservation or conservation measures will be undertaken.

*Describing Archives: A Content Standard*, the standard American manual for archival description, defines provenance as “the relationships between records and organizations or individuals that created, assembled, accumulated, and/or maintained and used them in the conduct of personal or corporate activity.”<sup>8</sup> In some of the more compelling archival theory, provenance is increasingly understood as both the *imprint* left on a document or collection by its creator, and as a network of relationships between collections and creators that is ongoing. An extension of the traditional idea of provenance is the principle of original order, dictating that “the order of the records that was established by the creator should be retained whenever possible to preserve existing relationships between the documents and the evidential value inherent in their order.”<sup>9</sup> While the individual items in the *Magic Box* have no original order, the box as a collection *assembled by a creator* does. The potential archival treatment of the *Magic Box* represents two fundamental archival principles at odds with one another: to preserve the intellectual or physical arrangement of collections (the fonds), and to preserve the physical objects within collections. Both principles exist to ensure the ability of documents to serve as evidence and as sources of information; but evidence and information arise from both what is inscribed (content) and what that inscription is performed on (form).

At a New York Public Library lecture presented in conjunction with the International Center for Photography’s *Archive Fever: The Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, artist Christian Boltanski described the pathos of decontextualized objects.<sup>10</sup> A jacket at a flea market is like a “dead person,” because it has no story; by buying and wearing that jacket – and thus by “loving it” – Boltanski believes he brings that jacket back to life. In another anecdote, Boltanski posited a similar but different scenario concerning a pair

8 Society of American Archivists [SAA] and Steven L. Hensen, *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* (Chicago, 2004), p. 206.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 205.

10 From the panel discussion “Archive Fever,” *Live from the New York Public Library*, 14 April 2008; transcript can be heard at [http://media.nypl.org/archive\\_fever\\_4\\_14\\_08/archive\\_fever\\_4\\_14\\_08.mp3](http://media.nypl.org/archive_fever_4_14_08/archive_fever_4_14_08.mp3) (accessed 20 February 2009).

of eyeglasses that are placed within a museum vitrine. For Boltanski, the glasses were made to allow people to see, and removing them from use in this way eradicates their function and thus effects their “destruction.” Both of these stories relate to archival practice: the first might be the archivist’s subjective desire to reanimate documents, while the latter relates to the more professionally sanctioned archival practice of retaining the contexts (through description and intellectual arrangement) of a document’s creation. Terry Cook refers to this basic archival responsibility in his article “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift”:

Postmodernism’s concern with the “semiotically constructed contexts” of records creation reflects the long-held archival concern for contextuality, for mapping the provenance interrelationship between the creator and the records, for determining context by reading through and behind text.<sup>11</sup>

Much has been made of these quasi-*ethical* dimensions of this basic archival duty (especially as archivists belatedly came to terms with the legacy of “postmodern” theories). But while no archivist would deny the importance of contextual information, there are dissenting views to this moralizing take on “preserving” archival context; for archivist Brien Brothman, for example, “archival methodology’s focus on context stems from a responsibility to exclude, or to at least minimize the tensional possibility of alternative readings and meanings.”<sup>12</sup> For Brothman, the archival processes that ensure the ongoing contextualization of a document are severely limiting, while for Cook and many others they are potentially expansive and capable of increasing “alternative readings and meanings.” Perhaps more problematic than these contradictory views, is the way we as archivists take the concept of “context” for granted, as if its status as something external to records that needs to be preserved and described by archivists is a given. As philosopher Susan Brison (referencing the work of Jonathan Cullen ) writes:

... context is not fundamentally different from what it contextualizes; context is not given but produced; what belongs to a context is determined by interpretive strategies; contexts are just as much in need of elucidation as events; and the meaning of a context is determined by events.<sup>13</sup>

The archival task of preserving the contextual information of records

11 Terry Cook, “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift,” *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), p. 17.

12 Brothman, p. 80.

13 Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton, NJ, 2002), p. 33.

throughout their life cycles is complex, and becomes only more so when those records challenge the archival understanding of what a document is.

Muller, Feith, and Fruin's 1898 *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, from which much of contemporary archival practice has derived, defines an archival collection as:

The whole of the *written* documents, drawings and printed matter, officially received or produced by an administrative body or one of its officials, in so far [*sic*] as these documents were intended to remain in the custody of that body or official.<sup>14</sup>

Here we return to the idea of the *mark* (though not only the textual mark) as definitive of what archives hold. Similarly, for Sir Hilary Jenkinson writing in 1920s England, an archives is:

The pieces of writing, on whatever material made and in whatever form ... which business offices, public or private, have tended to accumulate and preserve by way of reminder and summary of various aspects of the work of which they formed a part.<sup>15</sup>

Here the archives is more specifically a place that contains writings; the form of the substrate is apparently of little concern, so long as the mark inscribing it is textual.

Many archivists have, until relatively recently, understood the term "document" to extend only to written texts or "text-like records."<sup>16</sup> One early exception was the European Documentation Movement, whose ideas were most radically expressed by Suzanne Briet's definition of documents as "all concrete or symbolic indexical signs, preserved or recorded toward the ends of representing, of reconstituting, or of proving a physical or intellectual phenomenon."<sup>17</sup> Significantly, Briet's definition avoids attaching the concept of "document" to any particular format; because Briet's definition rests on ideas of context and intent, she was able to argue that even animals in a zoo could be considered documents (though animals in the wild could not). This turn away from medium as definitive prefigures contemporary understandings of the document. Today, because all electronic documents are "materially" identical (merely a variety of binary numbers), any definition based on format is problematic. Thus, *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*

14 S. Muller, J.A. Feith, and T. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (New York, 1968), p. 13 [emphasis added].

15 Jenkinson cited in Roger H. Ellis and Peter Wayne, eds., *Selected Writings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson* (Chicago, 2003), p. 115.

16 Michael K. Buckland, "What is a Document?" *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 48 (Sept. 1997), p. 804.

17 Suzanne Briet cited in Michele M. Tourney, "Caging Virtual Antelopes: Suzanne Briet's Definition of Documents in the Context of the Digital Age," *Archival Science* 3 (2003), p. 297.



defines a document as “recorded information irrespective of medium.”<sup>18</sup> David Levy also turns the focus away from form and onto function, describing a document as “a talking thing, capable of repeatedly delivering up the same story at different points in time and space.”<sup>19</sup> But *recording* still implies a mark, and *talking* still implies a text. How do these concepts of “recorded information” or “talking things” relate to the actual stuff in archives, which increasingly include “non-textual” documents? How broadly can the processes of recording and talking be applied to documents that are still largely not considered archival, such as objects? And what is the role of time in all this: is “recording” something that takes place at a single moment in the past, and do documents really deliver *the same stories* over and over?

The concept of “recording” brings us to Jacques Derrida, the spectre of this essay so far, and to his book *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Archivist and educator Francis X. Blouin Jr. interprets the Derridean concept of inscription as “the processes through which traces of a lived past are ‘archived’ by individuals or societies in ways that make the place of uncovering – the archive – a point of intersection between the actual and the imagined, lived experience and its remembered (or forgotten) images.”<sup>20</sup> But this definition does little to pinpoint what the *act* of inscription is. Derrida himself writes of a “scriptural” or “typographic” inscription “that leaves a mark at the surface or in the thickness of a substrate.”<sup>21</sup> Unsurprisingly, this alludes to the mark of the pen or typewriter on the substrate of paper; but it also refers to the Freudian conception of memory. Derrida believes that Freud’s psychoanalysis “aspires to be a general science of the archive, of everything that can happen to the economy of memory and to its substrates, traces, documents.”<sup>22</sup> While Derrida’s book is fraught with language derived from the study of texts, this to me does not mean that his conception of inscription is limited to textual documents. Rather, I believe that this concept is most interesting when it is seen as a co-operation between the symbolic (which is not limited to language) and the tangible (marks and substrates). Derrida writes that “... there is no archive without consignment in an *external place* which assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression.”<sup>23</sup> Can we imagine that this external place is not a text, and that its consignment is not reliant on *linguistic* signs?

The *Magic Box* has been accepted into the archives because it is under-

18 SAA and Henson, p. 204.

19 David M. Levy, *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age* (New York, 2001), p. 26.

20 Francis X. Blouin Jr. and William G. Rosenberg, eds., *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar* (Ann Arbor, 2006), p. 1.

21 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago, 1996), p. 26.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

23 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

stood as having been inscribed by its creator. This creator is not the manufacturers of the many commercial objects in the *Magic Box*, but Wojnarowicz himself. The Miniature Globe Pencil Sharpener (*Magic Box*, item 092.2.0553), for example, is only worthy of the archives because Wojnarowicz removed it from the endless stream of objects-in-the-world and re-inscribed it within the symbolic realm of his own private language. This process is similar to the concept of “decommoditization” as defined by Igor Kopytoff in his article “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process”:

... to be saleable or widely exchangeable is to be “common” – the opposite of being uncommon, incomparable, unique, singular, and therefore not exchangeable for anything else. The perfect commodity would be one that is exchangeable with anything and everything else, as the perfectly commoditized world would be one in which everything is exchangeable or for sale. By the same token, the perfectly decommoditized world would be one in which everything is singular, unique, and unexchangeable.<sup>24</sup>

One could also say that the perfectly *archival* world is “one in which everything is singular, unique, and unexchangeable,” and the inscription that matters to the archives is the one by which Wojnarowicz made the object singular, symbolically marking it through the process of recontextualization that came from inclusion within his own corpus. The further significance of this for the current discussion is that objects have a biography, and their identities change throughout their lives.

We have established that the *Magic Box* is in the archives because it has been inscribed; but it is further inscribed by the fact of its acceptance into the archives. Working from a concept of the biography of things, Elizabeth Edwards claims that “... a thing ... cannot be fully understood at one single point in its existence ... but must be examined through the processes of its production, exchange, and consumption.”<sup>25</sup> Inscription does not take place in a single moment of “recording” but is ongoing. This diachronic approach to the document not only reshapes the concept of provenance, but it creates challenges for the fundamental archival task of description. How does one name, categorize, describe, and *authenticate* an object when, in Walter Benjamin’s words, “the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its

24 Igor Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge, 1986), p. 69.

25 Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums. Materializing Culture* (Oxford, 2001).

testimony to the history which it has experienced?”<sup>26</sup> For Derrida, archival consignment “aims to coordinate a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration.”<sup>27</sup> This theory of the archive is reminiscent of the archival principle of the fonds, which takes all the production of a single creator (whether an individual or a corporation) to be a “natural” whole whose “organic” integrity the archivist must guard and describe. But the unity of the fonds is largely artificial, having been manipulated by the archivist; for Derrida, the desire for this unity *is* the *mal d’archives*, or the (impossible) search for origins. Practically speaking, can this unity also be expressed as changing over time? Can the archival object be described as moving forward into the future, rather than exclusively in terms of its origins?

Archivists employ description largely in the service of providing access. To describe a collection is to create access points that enable people to locate archival materials and understand them in the context of their creation. Taxonomies convey the relationships between materials and collections, and classification provides an arrangement that can bring order out of chaos. The process of categorization, or naming, takes place on many levels, from the mission statement and collecting policies that designate what is in the archives, to the creation and description of series in a finding aid, to the designation of genre types or formats and the creation of subject access points through which libraries organize records. Naming happens because without it, materials in the archives have the same research value as those which were never accepted in the first place – they are inaccessible to the public. Unnamed records are effectively dead. But while naming expands access, it simultaneously limits meaning and possibility. Naming can alter the meaning of a thing by making it symbolic and referential, or indexical, rather than embodied; as David Wojnarowicz wrote, “the invention of the word ‘nature’ disassociates us from the ground we walk on.”<sup>28</sup> For him, language itself became a layer between the subject and the material world.

Brien Brothman writes: “... meaning owes its existence to something that is absent – to what it lacks – as much as to what is present to it and within it.”<sup>29</sup> This is true of both the *Magic Box* and the legacy of its creator. In the case of the *Magic Box*, there are in fact two places in which the objects’ inscribed power resides: in their presence and physicality; and in their eventual absence, or the impossibility of preserving that physicality. Because Fales archivists have made the decision not to physically preserve the *Magic Box*,

26 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, ed. and with an intro. by Hannah Arendt (New York, 1968), p. 221.

27 Derrida, p. 3.

28 Wojnarowicz, p. 88.

29 Brothman, p. 71.

it is in the process of its disappearance that another kind of evidence arises. This is evidence of loss, which is often the content of Wojnarowicz's work, and now also becomes its form. It is also evidence of the impossibility of the attempt to preserve, which reveals the true pathos of the archives: disappearance. For Derrida, the archives should properly "call into question the coming of the future."<sup>30</sup> The knowledge of the eventual absence of the *Magic Box* orients the archives toward the future, as well as the past. But the most tangible absence in the case of the *Magic Box* is that of the creator himself. Much of Wojnarowicz's work is about loss and death, and his activism was born of rage in the face of disappearances on the scale of an epidemic. In Wojnarowicz there is a strong *mal d'archives* expressed through his search for origins, and sorrow at the impossibility of returning to them. "First there is the world. Then there is the other world ... a place where by virtue of having been born centuries late one is denied access to earth or space, choice or movement. The bought-up world; the owned world."<sup>31</sup> It strikes me that this is in part a nostalgia for the pre- or extra-textual universe. The elemental aspects of his work, the preoccupation with ritual, and the nostalgia for the natural world often remind me of Oscar Wilde's writing in *De Profundis*:

We call ours a utilitarian age, and we do not know the uses of any single thing. We have forgotten that water can cleanse, and fire purify, and the earth is mother to us all. As a consequence our art is of the moon and plays with the shadows.... I feel sure that in elemental forces there is a purification, and I want to go back to them and live in their presence.<sup>32</sup>

The symbolic language of the *Magic Box* is, it seems to me, largely elemental in this sense. Earth, fire, water, and air are all represented, and their synchrony is akin to alchemy. But through the *Magic Box* we feel not only the loss of the person, but also the loss of the organizing principle of the creator. In the end we cannot know why and how David Wojnarowicz assembled these objects, whether some objects had more meaning than others, or even whether he would have wanted them preserved and studied. Although he may have balked at the thought of the creation of a taxonomy of the *Magic Box*, the innate impossibility of the task would probably have amused him. If these objects represent a language, then they will remain forever untranslatable. Perhaps it is in their very indescribability that objects can serve as models to archives.

By accepting objects into the archives, the Fales Library insists that

30 Derrida, p. 34.

31 Wojnarowicz, p. 88.

32 Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* (Mineola, NY, 1996), p. 90.

objects *are* documents. Yet at the same time, because Fales insists on the *artifactual* value of all documents, all the “stuff” of archives can be considered objects. In thinking about documents, we can invoke Michel Foucault’s writings on “the statement” to posit their dual nature as both symbols and objects; just as a statement is “neither entirely linguistic, nor exclusively material,”<sup>33</sup> archival documents express themselves both through their “language” and their form.

Could one speak of a statement if a voice had not articulated it, if a surface did not bear its signs, if it had not become embodied in a sense-perceptible element, and if it had not left some trace – if only for an instant – in someone’s memory or in some space? ... *The statement is always given through some material medium, even if that medium is concealed, even if it is doomed to vanish as soon as it appears.* And the statement not only needs this materiality; its materiality is not given to it, in addition, once all its determinants have been fixed: it is partly made up of this materiality.<sup>34</sup>

What objects remind us is that all archival documents are in fact both symbols and objects. While the primary dictionary definition of an object is “something placed before or presented to the eyes or other senses” and “a material thing that can be seen and touched,”<sup>35</sup> a secondary definition is “a thing which is perceived, thought of, known, etc.; [specifically] a thing which is external to or distinct from the apprehending mind, subject, or self.”<sup>36</sup> Even in the most basic usage, objects are both sensed, tangible material, and perceived, external thought. As Keli Rylance recently wrote in her article “Archives and the Intangible,” “the individual object has been conceived of simultaneously as discrete (autonomous) and as symbolic (referential).”<sup>37</sup> While no object (or document) is truly discrete nor solely symbolic, the existence of objects in archives tells us that these two conceptions can and *should* coexist. And as the autonomous, material presence of documents inevitably becomes an absence, their archivization ensures their continued existence as symbols.

33 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language* (1969; New York, 1972), p. 86.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 100 [emphasis added].

35 See <http://www.oed.com> (accessed on 25 February 2009).

36 *Ibid.*

37 Keli Rylance, “Archives and the Intangible,” *Archivaria* 62 (Fall 2006), p. 114.