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Review of

Iris Häussler, *Archivio Milano 1991*

April 10-July 31, 2021

Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto



Figure 1
Installation view of Iris Häussler, *Archivio Milano, 1991, 2021*. Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto. Image source: <https://danielfariagallery.com/exhibitions/archivio-milano-1991?id=04> *Archivio-Milano-1991-at-Daniel-Faria-Gallery-crop-3* (accessed May 25, 2021).

It takes a few moments to realize that what seem like rows of neatly arranged books are, in fact, newspaper clippings encased in square slabs of wax (figure 1). The viewer's resulting disorientation is compounded by the fact that the current

COVID-19 pandemic has confined Iris Häussler's *Archivio Milano 1991* exhibition at Daniel Faria Gallery to an entirely online existence. The slightest cracks and textured imprints on the surface of some of the pieces, the air bubbles or bits of debris, trapped like dead insects—all of

these details have been muted in the photographic documentation, the only way to experience Häussler's work for the time being. Yet while this reliance on digital mediation might initially simply seem necessary only for the purpose of bringing the exhibition to viewers, it plays an

arguably more important role by underscoring Häussler's interest in documentation as a highly personal, in an idiosyncratic sense, act that is also fundamental to her art practice.

Häussler's archive is both eminently material and materially inaccessible, obscured through layers of wax and the viewer's physical removal from it. Some scholars regard "the archive" as a body of historical data that is to be engaged through interrogation and curation, waiting for a framework to be imposed onto it (Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever*, Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge*). Häussler has already subverted the more familiar definition of the archive by blurring the boundary between fact and fiction in her past works. In *He Named Her Amber* (Art Gallery of Ontario, November 2008-May 2010), the Grange mansion adjacent to the gallery was transformed into a quasi-archaeological site that contained documents and personal belongings of a young Irish maid named Amber. Neither Häussler nor the AGO immediately revealed that the exhibition was actually a commissioned work of art rather than a genuine historical find. Similarly, the numerous iterations of the *Sophie La Rosière Project* (Art Gallery of York University, 2016; Scrap Metal Gallery 2016; Daniel Faria Gallery 2017; PSM Berlin, 2019) construct the identity of the (fictional) French artist Sophie (1867-1948), whose corpus of paintings was discovered after purportedly laying abandoned for over ninety years. What makes *Sophie La Rosière Project* arguable more unnerving than *He Named Her Amber* is the series "Blood Cloths"—nine pieces of fabric soaked in blood—which gives Sophie a sense of corporeality that Amber seemed to lack. *Archivio Milano 1991* may be a more literal archive in that it is a work that

has been preserved and brought out thirty years later. When talking about how the exhibition came into being during an artist talk with art critic Sky Gooden on June 16, 2021, Häussler notes the element of serendipitous discovery when she unearthed the boxes with the wax slabs in her studio with Faria, describing him as the "final editor" (Häussler and Sky Gooden 2021).

The "archival" in *Archivio* serves as an entry point, moving away from the equation of the archive with stagnation. Hal Foster puts it differently, distinguishing between archival art as "construction site" instead of as "excavation site," a "utopian ambition" that "suggests a shift away from a melancholic culture that views the historical as little more than the traumatic" (2004: 22). The original manifestation of *Archivio Milano* coincided with the "archival turn" of the 1990s and early 2000s, in which "visual materials from extra-artistic contexts [were moved] into the field of art" as part of "a late-stage manifestation of post-modernist appropriational practices," according to Cheryl Simon (2002: 102). Yet neither iteration of *Archivio Milano* seems to be characterized by the anxiety over the transition from physical to digital documentation that was also prevalent during this period. The wax preserves the newspaper clippings, as well as the objects and the dead bodies depicted on them, recalling the medium's role as an embalming agent in many cultures. At the same time, the wax also preserves the memory of tactility — Häussler collecting wax church candles and melting them, the turning of newspaper pages and the tearing or cutting when a fitting example was chosen, dropping the clipping into the wax and watching the transition between states as the wax's solidification also crystalizes the present

for posterity. *Archivio Milano 1991* is a living document to a past that is still being added to, a conceptual work in which “the concept is not a template for execution but rather [a way] to silence too much thinking,” the artist states in the accompanying video on the gallery website (Häussler 2021). Similarly, the archival nature of the exhibition heightens the visitor’s awareness of that fact that their experience of the work is subjective and temporary, replaced the moment someone else engages with it.

Like the soft wax that can easily retain the form of objects that have been pressed into it, *Archivio Milano 1991* participates in the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic. That the exhibition existed largely in an online format is reflective of Häussler’s initial intention to preserve “reports of natural disasters, political strife, and local news items likely not important enough to be remembered” (Daniel Faria Gallery 2021). Unlike Gerhard Richter’s *Atlas* (1962–2013) and Aby Warburg’s *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* (1927–1929), which the online exhibition text names as artistic precedents of *Archivio Milano 1991*, Häussler’s work is less concerned with trying to interrogate social and political memory or charting visual themes and patterns across time. Instead, the monumentality of history gives way to something smaller and more intimate, an element of emotional connection that is facilitated by the fact that newspapers are themselves part of a community, one rooted in a preoccupation with informing and sharing, of ensuring that readers remain “in the loop.” The days of clipping newspaper ads and pasting them in a scrapbook are largely behind us, yet there is still a touch of the personal that comes to mind when seeing the newspaper fragments, even if through a screen. The

close-up photographs of some of Häussler’s pieces bring to mind a variety of affects: the satisfying crinkling of newspaper as it is being cut; the smell of the ink and the stained fingertips that darken the more one fumbles with the newsprint; the soft *snip* of the scissors as they glide through paper. The physical process of art making may be part of the past, but *Archivio Milano 1991* is by no means a passive exhibition, its ability to speak volumes manifesting instead through the spectrum of affect that the work invokes.

The conceptual subversion of the archive continues in the curatorial side of *Archivio Milano 1991*. In the original 1991 exhibition, visitors were invited to reach out and rearrange the tablets to their liking until eventually, the tablets were “organized by human interaction — past dates jumping ahead of later ones according to the whims of hands” (Daniel Faria Gallery 2021). This was not the case in the 2021 exhibition, where the artwork was placed out in the open yet there was no explicit invitation for a similar sort of visitor engagement. This willing surrender to illegibility is inherent, given that the newspaper articles encased in the wax are themselves largely illegible, “opaque,” as Häussler describes it (Iris Häussler 2021). If the purpose of the archival material is two-fold—to serve as a document by nature of its very existence while also holding historical value by virtue of the information it could impart to viewers—then *Archivio Milano 1991* subverts the archive on a level of materiality. There is little factual information to be gained from the wax slabs — the faces of people are largely obscured, text smaller than headline-size is difficult to make out, at least through the computer screen (figure 2, 3).

This only adds to the works' role as facilitators of personal inquiry and speculation while simultaneously reminding viewers that as easily as history is constructed, it is just as easily lost or forgotten, rewritten as it is recalled and lost once more.



Figure 2
 Untitled piece from Iris Häussler, *Archivio Milano*, 1991, 2021. Installation view. Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto. Image source: <https://danielfariagallery.com/exhibitions/archivio-milano-1991?id=04> *Archivio-Milano-1991-at-Daniel-Faria-Gallery-crop-3* (accessed May 25, 2021).

Tactility—or rather, the absence thereof in light of COVID-19—plays a prominent role in this “active” form of archiving, recalling curator Xiaoyu Weng’s argument that the “curatorial grammar” of an “active archive” is one where “the exhibition themes and the meanings of artworks [are] not delivered through didactic statements; instead, interactions between archive materials and artworks turn[...] the process of interpretation into one that [is] constantly evolving” (Weng 2013: 87). There are no wall labels to be seen. There is no label ascribed to

each individual square in a way that typically roots a work of art to a specific location and orientation within an art gallery, suggesting that it belongs here until another curator comes by and decides otherwise. Hearing Häussler describe the casting process, “pushing them [the newspapers]” out and watching them “emerge” (Iris Häussler 2021), makes it sound like she birthed the work from her own body no differently than her own human child, whom she also briefly speaks to in the video. Like a child, the wax slabs become beyond Häussler’s reach the moment they appear in the world, left to grow in meaning and significance in the eyes of the visitor, who creates meaning without permanently grafting it onto the individual pieces. After all, this honorary role was already given to the wax, in which the slivers of newspaper were suspended thirty years ago.



Figure 3
 Untitled piece from Iris Häussler, *Archivio Milano*, 1991, 2021. Installation view. Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto. Image source: <https://danielfariagallery.com/exhibitions/archivio-milano-1991?id=04> *Archivio-Milano-*

[1991-at-Daniel-Faria-Gallery-crop-3](#)
(accessed May 25, 2021).

Originally scheduled to close May 22, the exhibition was extended to July 31, 2021, with the gallery reopening its doors on June 11. *Archivio Milano 1991* thus spent the majority of its duration in the form of an online exhibition. Even in its digital manifestation, Häussler's work does not fail to snare the imagination, making the mind participate in the construction of narrative either through recollection or fictional fabrication, as is characteristic of Häussler. To me, the sight of the six long horizontal shelves recalls the satisfying intimacy elicited from viewing or engaging in various forms of collecting, from

the *Kunstkammer* to modern-day scrap-booking, long before I even begin to consider the construction of memory or the themes of visibility and concealment. I am reminded of Edmund De Waal's fascination with materiality in his memoir *The Hare with Amber Eyes*, of the way he "remember[s] if something invited touch with the whole hand or just the finders, or was an object that asked you to stay away" (2010: 16). I assume that Häussler's *Archivio Milano 1991* would be the former sort, try to imagine the texture and weight of picking a square off one shelf and moving it to another, and hope that circumstances allow me to discover this information for myself.

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