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Elizabeth Price, Fiona Tan, Zimoun: *Assembly.* New Media Gallery, New Westminster, BC. September 18 – December 5, 2021. Curated by Sarah Joyce and Gordon Duggan.

SHYLA SELLER
Vancouver Holocaust Education Centre

Walking into the New Media Gallery, you are greeted by a smell that is more like that of a warehouse than an archives. Zimoun's cardboard boxes are too new, the dust from their manufacturing fresh and pungent. Zimoun, a self-taught artist who lives in Switzerland, has instructed the New Media Gallery to stack 278 cardboard boxes into a circular tower enclosure. Each box has a small DC motor attached to it, and each motor moves a suspended cotton ball to repetitively hit a box (at a unique speed, height, and angle), producing a great, persistent rumble, loudest to the viewer standing in the middle of the enclosure. This sound installation gave me the feeling of walking into the warehouse where I had worked at the turn of the millennium, with its rumbling conveyor belt and its ever-present smell of freshly assembled boxes.

Curated by Sarah Joyce and Gordon Duggan, director-curators of the New Media Gallery, *Assembly* riffs off of the flaws and failures of systems, order, and the desire to collect, name, and organize. The New Media Gallery often shows artworks that critique entrenched institutions; here, the curators focus this interest specifically on works engaging with information and storage systems, institutions, and the people behind them. The exhibition writeup reads, "A collection, a set of instructions, an archive, a regime, a system. This is the Assembly. . . . The will to order is considered one of the essential forces driving human behaviour, leading to such things as laws and institutional systems, rational and scientific thought, educational systems, political and public health orders. . . . war." For *Assembly*, the curators invited viewers to pre-book time in the space,

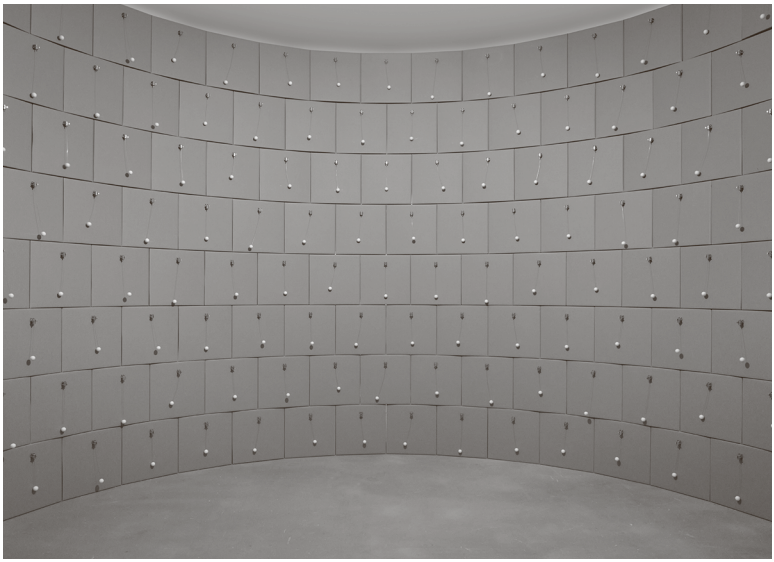

FIGURE 1 *Zimoun, 278 prepared DC motors, cotton balls, cardboard boxes, 2021. Photograph by Rachel Topham. Source: New Media Gallery.*

FIGURE 2 *Detail from Zimoun, 278 prepared DC motors, cotton balls, cardboard boxes, 2021. Photograph by Rachel Topham. Source: New Media Gallery.*

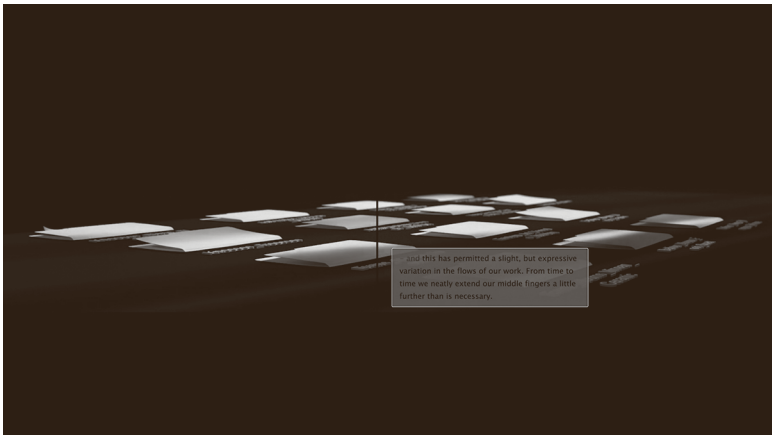

FIGURE 3 *Detail from Elizabeth Price,* A Restoration, *2016, two-channel projected video with sound. Source: New Media Gallery.*

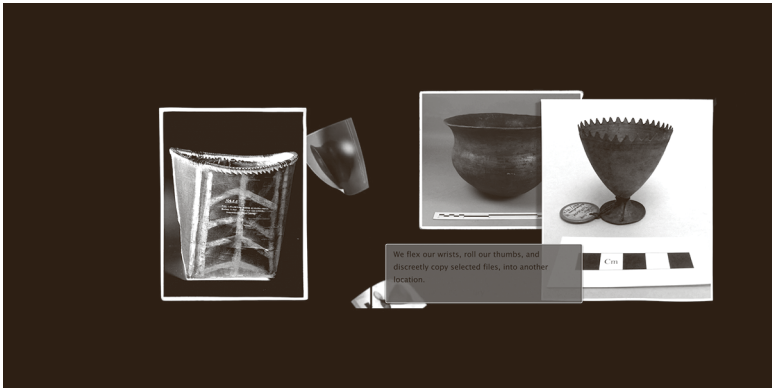

FIGURE 4 *Detail from Elizabeth Price,* A Restoration, *2016, two-channel projected video with sound. Source: New Media Gallery.*

which would be reserved for them and people in their bubbles. For many visitors to the gallery, this was a rare opportunity to leave their homes and enter a cultural space during the pandemic; not having to share the room with strangers or to observe social distancing guidelines made those vulnerable to infection feel particularly safe and welcome, and the curators were able to engage with each group of visitors personally.[1] Because of pandemic-related travel restrictions, none of the participating artists were able to travel to BC to see the exhibition or attend the installation in person.

In 2013, UK-based artist Elizabeth Price won a commission to work with the Sir Arthur Evans and Knossos Archives[2] held at the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology (Britain's first public museum, which cares for anthropology and world archaeology holdings). Price went through photographs and documents created and kept by Sir Arthur Evans in the role he was appointed to in 1894, as keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, and as he undertook a 30-year project excavating Knossos, an ancient palace site on Crete, in 1900.[3] Evans' project veered (not uncontroversially, at the time, or since) from archaeological excavation to restoration and creative intervention, and the line between these activities (vis-à-vis the role of the heritage professional), was fruitful for Price.[4] The commission resulted in a two-channel projected video with sound, entitled *A Restoration*.

A Restoration is narrated by the computerized voices of museum administrators, who, in didactic text accompanying the video, describe "a great collection they are sorting, ordering and interpreting from written, illustrated and photographic records," as images of artifacts and materials from the Sir Arthur Evans Fonds are displayed and animated with colour, drawings, and text. The administrators tell the viewer they come from different places and backgrounds but inhabit the same database, on the same server. They tell us, "This will be our work.

1 Sarah Joyce, Personal correspondence with the author, January 2022.

2 "The Sir Arthur Evans and Knossos Archives: Overview and Structure," The Sir Arthur Evans Archive, Ashmolean Museum, accessed March 2, 2022. https://sirarthurevans.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/archive/index.html.

3 Sir Arthur Evans' life and archaeological and restoration project are described in detail at "Sir Arthur Evans," The Sir Arthur Evans Archive, Ashmolean Museum, accessed March 2, 2022. https://sirarthurevans.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/biography/index.html.

4 For a history of catalogues and approaches to ordering information in the period when Sir Arthur Evans was studying and entering the field, See Heather MacNeil, "Catalogues and the Collecting and Ordering of Knowledge (II): Debates about Cataloguing Practices in the British Museum and the Forebears of the Public Record Office of Great Britain, ca. 1750–1850," *Archivaria* 84 (Fall 2017): 1–35.

. . . We carve great echoing caverns, from which songs and alarms may carry . . . we have built up once more the ancient ruin . . . in satire and with love . . . the fragments have been reassembled and all the lost parts reimagined."[5] The work of the administrators, according to Price, imagines a slightly repressed trauma within the objects referenced in Evans' papers: it asks what happens to the original purpose of an object once it is removed from its original context and ends up in an institution.[6] Evans' work is celebrated for the significant influence it had on art and design at the time, but what impact did it have on these objects and the understanding of their purpose? What was its effect on museum practice and on the employees and researchers who came after him?

Price digitally renders the administrators' work – moving, manipulating, and bringing it to life – and collapsing boundaries: those between the administrators' work on the collection in the digital space and the work of Evans himself, and those between museum artifacts and archives. Unfired clay, the administrators remind us, was once used as a recordkeeping material. It is all set to a playful and richly satisfying soundtrack, which contributes to a mood of thrilling but contained abandon. Out of a conscientious attention to the mundane repetition of the tasks (clicking, copying, pasting) making up their work, these administrators generate a creative approach that becomes increasingly revolutionary and inspired, "championing the rise of a new order from the old," as the didactic text notes. The video documents their vibrant, joyful restoration of purpose and life to fragments separated from a whole, which have been transformed again and again in a restoration that grows increasingly aggressive and violent and personal. Following Evans' archival traces, the administrators are unable to resist replicating his flawed methods, but they are also able to gain purpose and pleasure from their work, while tossing convention, rules, and systems to the wind, breaking things just for the sound – stretching their fingers on their keyboards a little further and longer than necessary.

Fiona Tam's video work, entitled *Archive*, is a single-channel video with sound, created in 2019 and based on the work of Paul Otlet. Otlet, with Henri La Fontaine, founded the Institut international de bibliographie in Brussels in

5 Quoted from Elizabeth Price, *A Restoration*, 2016, two-channel projected video with sound.

6 Charlotte Higgins, "Night at the Museum: Turner Winner Elizabeth Price on Breaking the Glass Cabinet," *Guardian*, March 21, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/mar/21/elizabeth-price-sir-arthur-evans-knossos-crete-video-art.

FIGURE 5 *Fiona Tan,* Archive *(New Westminster, BC: New Media Gallery, 2019), single-channel HD projected video with sound. Photograph by Rachel Topham. Source: New Media Gallery.*

1895, with the goal (in the words of *Archivaria* contributor Eric Ketelaar) of "putting together a universal bibliographic repository: an enormous card index of abstracts (ultimately fifteen million cards!) of all books and all journal articles published all over the world since the invention of the printing press."[7] Otlet and La Fontaine expanded the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) system as part of their work, and they intended the code (in contrast to the principles outlined by Jenkinson in the *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*) to guide subject cataloguing for a central global repository – not only for library materials but also for the classification of files. Their project was short-lived, as the building housing Otlet's collection and cards (called the Mundaneum) was commandeered during the Second World War by the Nazis, who destroyed much of its contents. Otlet died shortly after this, but his theories and approaches to information management and universality left a lasting impact.[8]

7 Eric Ketelaar, "'Control through Communication' in a Comparative Perspective," *Archivaria* 60 (Fall 2005): 85, https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/12515/13644.

8 For more about Otlet and his influence on information science, see Scott Hamilton Dewey, "The Continuing Relevance of Paul Otlet, the International Institute of Bibliography/International Federation for Documentation, and the Documentation Movement for Information Science and Studies," *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 10, no. 2 (2014), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5pq3v1cp.

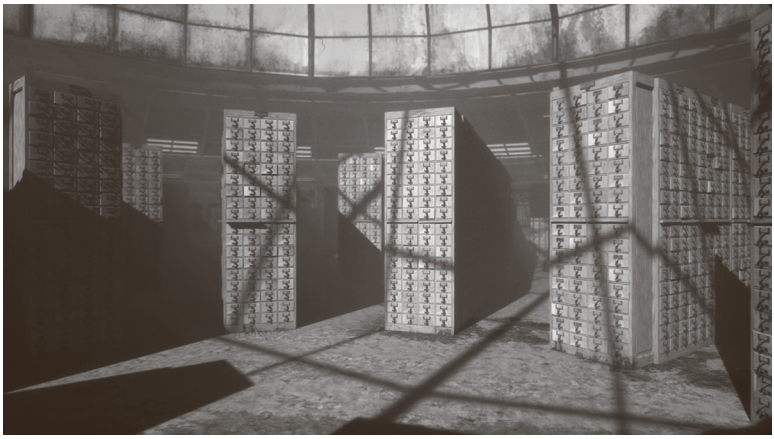

FIGURE 6 *Detail from Fiona Tan,* Archive *(New Westminster, BC: New Media Gallery, 2019), single-channel HD projected video with sound. Source: New Media Gallery.*

FIGURE 7 *Detail from Fiona Tan,* Archive *(New Westminster, BC: New Media Gallery, 2019), single-channel HD projected video with sound. Source: New Media Gallery.*

Based on her research into Otlet and his Mundaneum, and working from his notes and sketches, Tan digitally reconstructed a three-dimensional, CGI model of the building housing Otlet's millions of cards and his library and documents. In *Archive*, she takes viewers on a slow tour through this reconstructed space, with its endless card catalogues and reading room, the windows letting in an ominous moonlight. Tan's Mundaneum is circular, like Zimoun's structure, but abandoned and decaying. Dust floats through the air, water pools on the floor, books and papers are scattered; typing can be heard at one point, but there is no sign of the typewriter or its operator. The sound of a growing storm and the feeling of an earthquake haunt the space as the video tour progresses, moving faster and faster. Tan creates an eerie, analog feeling in her reconstruction, using the familiar sights and textures of an old library – albeit one with the tallest card catalogue cabinets you have ever seen, and the most potential for natural light. According to the curators' didactic text, her "haunting tour of [Otlet's] archive captures a moment between the fall of one order and the rise of another." Tam's work hints at the folly and terror of systems of order but avoids feeling completely desolate. The video is on a loop, so this moment of the destruction of Otlet's dream hangs suspended in time, leaving the viewer with a feeling not unlike that of living through a pandemic.

In *Assembly*, grand and flawed examples of gathering, managing, and presenting information work together to invite viewers to reimagine the matter and order of their own (increasingly destabilized) world(s). If the pandemic is a portal, a chance to break old habits and ideas and reimagine how the world can be,[9] how can archives and museums take advantage of this moment? What might lie in our collections and databases to inspire us to imagine new or past orders? What is the relationship between our work and the world around us? And, perhaps more challenging to consider, how are we failing those who will come after us, in our work, our assemblies, our world? *Assembly* brings up these questions, which can feel daunting and scary, in an exciting, wondrous, and generative way.

9 Paraphrased from Arundhati Roy, "The Pandemic Is a Portal," *Financial Times*, April 3, 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca.