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La société des archives affectives, *All the Wild Horses*, documentation of the search for wild horses and the casting of a hoof-print (Virginia Highlands, Nevada), 2011-2016. Framed photograph, 119 x 89 cm. Courtesy of the artists. Photo: La société des archives affectives.

The Society of Affective Archives: *All the Wild Horses*

Edwin Janzen

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The visitor to Occurrence this past spring would have encountered *All the Wild Horses*, a rambling archive-as-exhibition presented by the Society of Affective Archives (Society members include Montreal artists Fiona Annis and Véronique La Perrière M.). The exhibition displayed a complex, evocative array of documents and traces comprising an account of the artists' journey to Death Valley National Park, in 2011, in search of wild horses.

Annis and La Perrière formed the Society in 2010, and have worked collaboratively under its aegis since then. To date, they have produced or are currently working on projects that include artist books, performances and even a public commission. While their early activities included research into secret societies—for example, at Concordia University Library's special collection on Freemasonry—this Society is not, in fact, a secret one. Quite the opposite—this exhibition is decidedly museological, even as it makes juxtapositions and claims, which, given their somewhat slippery truth-value, most museums might avoid.

Slipperiness wends its way throughout this exhibition—beginning with the artists' very motivations. Charting an itinerary from Vancouver that goes south along the West Coast, the artists headed for Death Valley, which straddles California and Nevada, hoping to capture a wild horse's hoof-print. Nothing evokes liberty like wild horses; recalls American singer-songwriter Ray LaMontagne's 2005 song, having the same name as this show. Thus, even while successfully carrying out this reasonably modest, achievable task of casting a hoof-print—evidence of an absence—a certain failure is implicit. Interestingly, these horses, or mustangs, are descendant of horses the Spanish imported; interweaving romantic notions of freedom with histories of colonization and enslavement.

A large, framed map presents the Death Valley terrain and identifies the artists' various stopping points. The map's dark coloration suggests an otherworldly place; indeed, the Valley is remarkable for its mysterious geological features, not to mention being one of the hottest places on Earth.

Throughout, the artists use colour sparingly; of the many photographic images, almost all are black-and-white. Several are the artists' portraits of one another amidst the parched, wooden buildings of Bodie, a California ghost town abandoned in the mid-1900s. Another series of seven images is an experiment in human perception amidst the Valley's singular environments, playing with its remarkable natural features and tricky sense of scale.

The black-and-white imagery initially suggests a historical reading—the Wild West, and all that. Yet the removal of colour also achieves a certain rarefaction, evoking spirituality or otherworldliness, and highlighting the archive's suitability, beyond its other purposes, for mystification.

Certain items—a horse's bridle, some horsehair fly-whisks—appear in the exhibition courtesy of Richard Lévesque, a collector the artists know privately as the "Object Man." A pair of taxidermied black ravens on neatly turned wooden pedestals was on loan from McGill University's Redpath Museum. Beneath a large glass *cloche*, a small animal skull festooned with antlers is attached to a bird's body perched on a small log. The *cloche* recalls an epoch when science and wonderment were nearly synonymous: the little hybrid it shelters salutes the ancient practice of stitching together real bodies to make fanciful monsters—chimeras, hippogriffs and, perhaps closer to the spirit of this exhibition, the jackalope, a fabled jackrabbit-antelope hybrid that appears on tourist paraphernalia throughout rural America.

One recalls video artist Steve Reinke's attraction to documentary materials: in contrast to fiction's tiresome details, documentary materials that purport to be "real" absolve the creator of responsibility (as Reinke notes, "everyone's home movies are basically the same"). This quality, which Reinke calls the "excuse of the real," flips fiction, narrative

storytelling, on its head. In traditional fiction, stories are so believable they seem real—except they aren't. With "slippery" archival or documentary methods, you get the inverse, stories that aren't real—except they are. The objects mentioned above did not come from Death Valley, yet they seem like they could have—maybe even *should* have—and thus complement and advance the archive's affective power.

All the Wild Horses represents a powerful blending of the "excuse of the real" with the merely real. One "merely real" factor is that Annis and La Perrière *really did* find wild horses and *really did* cast a hoof-print. A triptych of black-and-white photos documents this culmination of their quest. Selecting a suitable print, the artists created a plaster cast and subsequently formed it in bronze. The exhibition's most fetishized item, the bronze hoof-print rests atop a plinth upon a little black velvet bed.

As mentioned above, and as the artists readily acknowledge, a certain failure in their journey was implicit. What is a cast hoof-print except the mark of an animal that once chanced by? What is a hoof-print cast in bronze but a monument to absence—besides a potent reminder, to be sure, of our presence in an art gallery? As a marker of equine rampancy—of romantic notions of liberty Americans so treasure, yet so short in supply in real life—this attractive hunk of bronze has little left to offer. How quickly it stepped from negative space into precious metal, how easily it left behind a beautiful dream of liberty to become a fetishized *objet d'art*! This small hoof-print, too, has taken a voyage, one that speaks about the condition of art in a capitalist system, the stripping away of meaning and the assignment of abstract, inflated values. There it lies, practically begging for a buyer.

We are told, though, that the journey isn't about the destination but what happens on the way. It may be a cliché to say this but it doesn't make it untrue. One of the show's finest moments is something in this vein, a single postcard presented together with its bill of sale. The card depicts four horses in a desert setting, its yellow date-stamp of "01/15/2004" struck through with a pen. Timelessness surely cannot admit of things like date-stamps; hence the confident effacement. The receipt, in the amount of $2.00, is from The Peach House, Virginia City, Nevada, the shop where Annis and La Perrière found the card. The buyer's address is scrawled only as "Canada:" Some other magical country, perhaps.

Born in Winnipeg and located in Montreal, artist Edwin Janzen works in digital print, installation, video and artist books. He has exhibited and worked in residence in many places across Canada. Also a contract writer and editor, Edwin has written for numerous publications and dozens of artists and galleries, as well as other individual and institutional clients. Edwin completed an MFA at the University of Ottawa (2010), and holds a BFA from Concordia University (2008) and a BA (Byzantine history) from the University of Manitoba (1993). www.edwinjanzen.com

La société des archives affectives, *All the Wild Horses*, the hoof-print cast in bronze, 2011-2016. Bronze on a pedestal, 102 x 28 x 25 cm. Courtesy of the artists. Photo: La société des archives affectives.