A Role for Digital Artists as Shadow Archivists

MARGOT HERSTER

Abstract: As noted by Allan Sekula in the “Body and the Archive,” there exists both a “generalized” inclusive archive and a “shadow archive that encompasses an entire social terrain while positioning individuals within that terrain.” [16] As generalized archives organically propagate on the Internet, points of departure for shadow archives grow at a corresponding rate.

I will present my research "Soup & Yogurt: A Guantánamo Archive (2005 – 2012),” which originated as an artist-created shadow archive in the context of the expanding role of artists as archivists in the information age.

Created with the sensibility and training of an artist, Soup & Yogurt explores how photography shapes our reaction to emotionally and politically charged environments—focusing on the complex relationships between detainees in the “war on terror,” their attorneys, government policy-makers, and the news-reading public. Created by artist and archivist Margot Herster, the project presents the artist’s digital collection of over 2000 photographs, videos, texts, and audio documents. Herster sourced these materials from attorneys who represent suspected terrorists held at the U.S. Naval Station Guantánamo Bay, Cuba. Soup & Yogurt presents Guantánamo through the lens of amateur attorney-photographers who, by circumstance, developed personal relationships with the men behind the prison’s closed doors. While images such as those from terrorist attacks, insurgent videos, and protest violence document inhumanity and serve to propagate divisiveness, After You’ve Been Burned by Hot Soup You Blow in Your Yogurt highlights the power of photography to build trust and facilitate relationships in extreme circumstances of anxiety and isolation.

More information is available here. An exhibition of this work will also be on display at Contemporary Art Center New Orleans during ARCHIVES 2013.