

Looking for Elizabeth Pavlik

Documenting Entropy

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Figure 1 — Two views of Tarrak Krajnak, *Shadowings*, Huis Marseille, Museum for Photography, Amsterdam. Photo credit: Eddo Hartmann.

In the corner of a room in Huis Marseille, Museum for Photography in Amsterdam, two vintage-looking TVs stand one on top of the other, each playing a video that documents the juxtaposition of paper-based art and performative bodily intervention (Figure 1). The bottom video (Figure 2) shows a person who uses their long black hair, drenched in a dark liquid, to rub away the pigment that gives form to a copy of a portrait photograph taken by American photographer and environmentalist Ansel Adams. By the end of the arduous process, a white spot takes over half of the face in the photo. A voiceover recites a poem that is revealed to have originated from the performance documented concomitantly on the other TV. In the top video (Figure 3), a pair of hands methodically change the cover of Ansel Adams' *Examples: The Making of 40 Photographs*, and they transform the page that explains the background of the hair-rubbed photograph into a blackout poem.



Figure 2 — Tarrah Krajnak, *Elizabeth Pavlik, Erase/Hair&Coffee*, video still.



Figure 3 — Tarrah Krajnak, *Black Sun, Redaction/Hands* (top) | *Elizabeth Pavlik, Erase/Hair&Coffee* (bottom) Huis Marseille, Museum for Photography, Amsterdam. Photo credit: Eddo Hartmann.

After taking in the videos, I read on the nearby wall label that they are a part of Peruvian artist Tarrah Krajnak's series *Master Rituals I: Ansel Adams* (2018–ongoing). Starting this October, the TVs in Huis Marseille have been playing these videos during visiting hours as part of the artist's first European solo exhibition *Shadowings. A Catalogue of Attitudes for Estranged Daughters*.^[1] The *Elizabeth Pavlik* pair, titled after how Krajnak renamed the woman in Adams' photograph, is the first parallel documentation I saw playing on the TVs, followed by two other recordings that share the same logic. A visit to Krajnak's site shows all the videos from the series displayed in separate boxes, alongside photographs of the post-performance objects (Figure 4). My experience of the exhibition extends as I track how Krajnak's hands and hair have imprinted themselves into the digital realm.

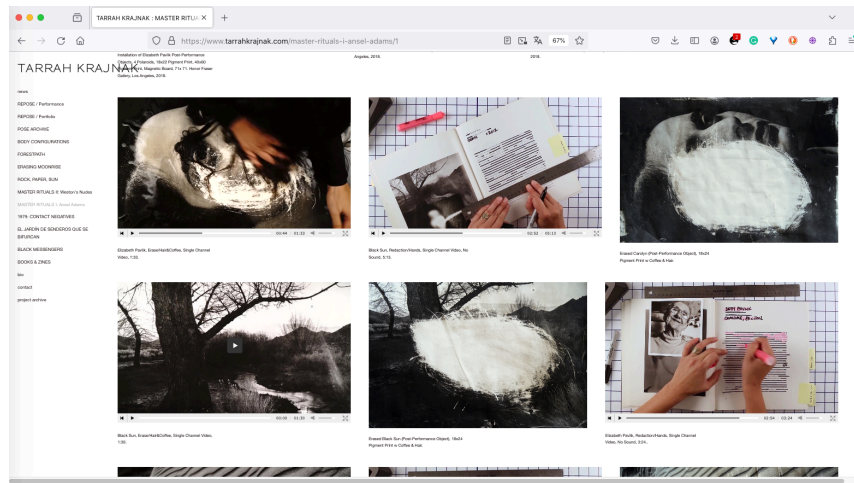


Figure 4 — <https://www.tarrahkrajnak.com/master-rituals-i-ansel-adams/1> Screenshot, accessed January 2024.

I wonder if this—me, the visitor, searching on my phone for additional information on Adams and Krajnak while still within walking distance from the TVs—is part of the exhibition. Being with Krajnak's videos turns into an interaction with art as a never-ending performance that keeps the work unfixable and adds life to the archive. At the outskirts of a discourse^[2] that seeks to desperately hold on to the assumed integrity of artistic objects, Krajnak's work emerges as a rejection of continuity in favor of active transformation. Thinking with the videos opens an avenue that I, as a museum visitor, got curious to enter in search of how preservation might be reframed to include the sustainability of playing with the old and of sometimes letting the old go. With its multiple levels of digital documentation, Krajnak's series also poses interesting questions on how performativity and the audience's engagement with an exhibition get reshaped in the digital age in a way that puts pressure on the silences in the archives. Changing a photograph and the pages of a book to the point of reimagining the material into something else could be read as a revolt and doing away with what gets overwritten, especially given Adams' legacy of "pure", unmanipulated photography [Fagon 2015].

Krajnak only works with copies of the photographs and the book was printed in enough numbers to elude the status of rarity, yet her work still presents itself as a transformation and contamination of canonical cultural objects. The transformation of the canon, with its sedimented power structures and embedded violences of exclusion, attaches itself to a discourse that moves against the historical process of dispersing value judgements and the perpetuation of artistic hierarchies [Holtorf 2020: 309n1]. However, when reading Krajnak's work, the amount of physical effort she pours into rubbing away the pigment displaces the possibility of the audience rejecting the criticisms leveled against canon-making out of the belief that, then, a facile break with the canon is where it is all going and that all affective attachments must be severed. Nothing in Krajnak's work is clear-cut, there are no easy ruptures or affective certainties. For Krajnak, distorting Adams' art seems to be an act of appreciation as much as it is an act of questioning the process of archiving and preserving his art. In an interview with Fiona Rogers, Krajnak mentions how up till college, an Ansel Adams poster was her only exposure to photography, other than an album of family photos [Rogers 2022]. In manually erasing and writing over Adams' art with her body, Krajnak acknowledges her ties to his art and its impact, while also interrogating why his art got preserved and circulated to the point where, as a young Indigenous woman living in the house of her white adoptive family, that was the only 'canonical' photograph she saw [Rogers 2022].

Preserving art, especially when it comes to new media, raises challenges that open the opportunity for a genuine reckoning with the pursuit of maintaining a canonical integrity. In the face of rethinking the *how* of preservation, the *why* of it also haunts the conversation. In the introduction to his and Richard Rinehart's book *Re-collection: art, new media, and social memory*, Jon Ippolito signals that the prevalent tactics employed for preserving new media art do not suffice in the face of material deterioration and software obsolescence. Adams' photos and book might not seem as in need of conservation as the new media objects Ippolito engages with, but paper decays too, and often photos and texts rely on digital storage's myth of guaranteed posterity [Corrado and Moulaison 2017: 8] and possibility for endless reproduction [Rubio and Wharton 2020: 228].

Ippolito uses the example of Sol LeWitt's wall drawings to argue that objects that remain more variable and have an open relationship to their medium will fare better

down the road. He assesses that storage is a limited form of preservation since it cannot account for the rapid changes in hardware and software. He states that “no flavor of storage—regular, redundant, or refreshed—can overcome software obsolescence. Beyond these variations on storage, new media preservationists can avail themselves of three less well-known but highly flexible strategies: emulation, migration, and reinterpretation” [Ippolito and Rinehart 2014: 9]. While partaking in a practice that leads to a reinterpretation of Adams’ work and its transposition to a new medium, from static paper to moving pixels, Krajnak does not follow the path described by Ippolito. Her key departure from it occurs in the intention behind the *Master Rituals*: Krajnak does not seek “to retain the original spirit” [Ippolito and Rinehart 2014: 10]. The pink highlighting the words of Krajnak’s poem disturbs Adams’ established black-and-white aesthetic; the fabulist collage of juxtaposed photos, names, and empty spots displaces Adams’ realism, while allowing for hidden narratives to surface out of the smell of coffee. Krajnak’s series challenges the very idea of an essential, immutable spirit that belongs to an artwork, opting instead to document how interacting with art dissolves the possibility of its fixed condition and involves an act of co-making.

Within Krajnak’s work, objects fluctuate as part of a constant renegotiation of authorship, medium, and need to be preserved. This process does not annihilate Adams’ authorial charge from the objects but rather acts as an alternative form of incomplete storage or of what Caitlin DeSilvey calls ‘postpreservation’. DeSilvey acknowledges the prevalent inclination to strive for physical preservation and its ties to the cultural shift of “disciplining knowledge and expertise” [DeSilvey 2017: 4] emerging around the 19th century. Challenging the often-implicit assumption that preserving material forms is the only way to access memory, DeSilvey explores generative approaches to materiality, which see entropy and decay as sources of possibility instead of annihilation. Similarly to Ippolito and Rinehart, DeSilvey pays attention to the medium and its material flows. She acknowledges the anxieties that flood in with the notion of allowing change to run its course, since a ‘postpreservation’ take requires a rethinking of the self and its fixed identity, and of how many institutions value materials outside ownership and accumulation. However, given how current dominant frameworks led to unsustainable relationalities and ongoing environmental crisis, staying with these anxieties might be what is necessary for developing sustainable approaches to materiality that remain humble to transience and humans’ lack of control.

Krajnak moves with the force of entropy, and her honest conversation with change unnerves the accumulated structures of colonial materiality, generating her archive from the midst of the canonized work of Adams. *Elizabeth Pavlik, Redaction/Hands* starts with a destabilization of authorship, as Krajnak sticks a piece of paper with her name over Adams’ name on the cover. The circulation of art allows her to re-make a copy of it into something of her own. She plasters her own black-and-white photo of an elder person over Adams’ photographs, and Adams’ Carolyn is replaced by sweet “Betty” Pavlik. The town of Cordale, where Krajnak was raised and photographed the person—perhaps a neighbor or family member—replaces the foreign San Francisco where Adams took his photo. A different affect pervades the object as Krajnak draws out hidden histories through her intimate changing of Adams’ material forms, and yet the replacement is not complete. Replacement is not the theme of Krajnak’s project; the replacing is. Being a live documentation of the change rather than of the end result, the videos act as an ongoing conversation and a space of historical transparency where none of the stages of alteration can be obfuscated by narratives plastered retrospectively over them. Sharing with the audience the object as a documentation of the moments compiling Krajnak’s act of (re)creation renders public the history of the change generated by the artist. Moreover, Adams’ initial objects persevere in some form within the emerging artworks they inspired, with layers and textures of the old being visible in the new. Most of the face of Adams’ model remains visible, and the blackout poem does not erase Adams’ description but rather shapes it into a new form. The work does not get lost but reworked into something that carries it further while opening the space for stories that have remained unnoticed.

Within a postpreservation framework, Krajnak’s documentation of how she archived Elizabeth Pavlik is caught in the tension between reaching out to stop the collapse of the material and finding meaning in the transition. Appreciating the multiplicity of narratives that emerge under entropy and acting to ensure the preservation of objects co-exist in Krajnak’s work as she shares and saves it through multiple venues. In line with what Ippolito says, the CDs used to play the videos in the museum will delaminate in time. The link leading to the series will stop working once the fee for her site’s domain is not paid. The post she made on Instagram with the videos will be gone with the app. Perhaps sharing her art in multiple ways and working with the digital medium in the various forms it affords is an investment toward continuity. Not necessarily because *Elizabeth Pavlik* has a better chance of remaining the same over time, but because its circulation increases the chance of audience members forming attachments and dis-attachments to the work that will lead to them co-creating with/against it. The videos’ multiple hosting spaces articulate the fleetingness of even the documentation of a performance.

The dissemination of the digital documentation also presses on the understanding of *performance* and the boundaries of audience engagement. Addressing concerns that performance ends where documentation begins [Phelan 1993], scholars such as Rebecca Schneider challenge concepts that encourage an engagement with performance and documentation as separate dimensions—for example, the understanding of *duration* and the binary of disappearing/remaining [Schneider 2014]. Looking at Krajnak's videos, it is difficult to confidently distinguish the temporal confinements within which the object unfolds, as I've suggested earlier through my own experience with it. Drawing a line between what remains and what disappears is under question as well, since the videos record the transformations of materials no longer existing in their initial form outside the digital documentation and yet remaining legible at the start of the videos as what they were. Also troubling the opposition, Philip Auslander argues that documentation is in its own sense a performance. Auslander claims that the relation between the documented performance and its audience "derives not from treating the document as an indexical access point to past events but from perceiving the document itself as a performance that directly relates to an artist's aesthetic project or sensibility and for which we are the present audience." [Auslander 2006: 20] Krajnak also performed the changes to Adams' photographs to a live audience, but, as Auslander argues, the videos are themselves a performance—multiple distinct performances based on who engages with them and where. On the site, for example, I could stop the videos, play them individually, adjust the volume, or read the blackout poem instead of hearing it. The names of the work also vary and adapt based on the medium, with *Erase/Hair&Coffee* being shortened to *Hair&Coffee* on Instagram, maybe to satisfy the casual tone and speed of social media consumption[3]. Just like Krajnak's process of performing change upon Adams' work destabilized it as a self-contained carrier of cultural memory, the videos destabilize documentation as a window into the past and hint toward how preservation has instability built into it.

The boundaries within which Tarrah Krajnak's series unfolds are hard to distinguish. The videos play with the idea that artworks have set identities and takes the danger of coffee stains on paper to the level of intentional degradation. Put in circulation, her art cannot remain static. Especially in the digital realm, objects travel fast and far, which, in some ways, makes it easier to contest canonical archives and participate actively in the performance of documentation as a present event soaked in coffee and subjectivity instead of a preserver of the past. *Elizabeth Pavlik* might ultimately turn into decayed matter feeding the ground from which art keeps on emerging. Krajnak's work actively engages with this permeability and transience, and moves with the anxieties of disappearance toward a form of preservation that sustains multiplicity. The videos are the result of the choice to keep on creating and illuminating blank spots in the archives, both despite and thanks to how all that is material changes. Sustainability in Krajnak's work emerges from the ability to sustain potentiality.

[1] Tarrah Krajnak, *Shadowings. A Catalogue of Attitudes for Estranged Daughters*, solo exhibition at Huis Marseille, Museum for Photography in Amsterdam, from 28 October 2023 to 25 February 2024. <https://huismarseille.nl/en/exhibitions/tarrah-krajnak/#:~:text=A%20Catalogue%20of%20Attitudes%20for%20Estranged%20Daughters&text=On%2028%20October%202024>. Accessed January 2024.

[2] See, for instance, *Critical Perspectives on Cultural Memory and Heritage Construction, Transformation and Destruction*, which provides an overview of the dominant narratives that have historically informed Heritage Studies and their recent shifts [Apaydin 2020].

[3] Krajnak, Tarrah [tarrahkrajnak_studio]. "Elizabeth Pavlik (Erased Carolyn/ Coffee & Hair)." *Instagram*, 27 August 2021, https://www.instagram.com/p/CTFStellFLt/?next=%2Fsapfir585%2Ftagged%2F&hl=hi&img_index=1. Accessed January 2024.

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