

## Judith Shakespeare – Undead or Alive?

### On Kajsa Dahlberg's Artist Book *A Room of One's Own / A Thousand Libraries*.

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In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, philosopher Jacques Derrida concerns himself with technologies of inscription in his attempt to sound out an understanding of the archive. Archiving is, Derrida argues, an act that not only records something, it also produces it, because the conditions under which this something is archived fundamentally determine how and what we can know. For example, a book is not simply a record of the author's ideas; it is determined by the act of writing or printing in which graphic marks are impressed upon a surface. That is, archival technology conditions not only the *printing* but also the *printed*: “what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way.”<sup>i</sup> For this reason, Derrida also emphasises the significance of his own “little portable Macintosh”<sup>ii</sup> on which he writes, and he dreams about indulging in a retrospective science fiction as to the meaning of psychoanalysis if Freud and his colleagues had had computers.<sup>iii</sup> Just imagine if Freud and his contemporaries, instead of writing letters, had been able to communicate via e-mail—the psychoanalytic archive would surely have been unrecognisable!

Having computers around in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century might also have transformed an archive urgent to a near-contemporary of Freud, the author Virginia Woolf, namely the archive of women's literature. Her 1928 essay, *A Room of One's Own*, conveys her aspirations to establish both a literal and figurative space for women within a literary tradition dominated by men. Woolf scrutinises the conditions of women in literature both as authors and characters, and she concludes that neither history nor her contemporary society has managed to provide the conditions necessary for women to write fiction. For that to happen, “a woman must have money and a room of her own.”<sup>iv</sup> Woolf's concern is, in other words, not archival technologies but the ability to establish an archive in the first place. The archival earthquake that computers, as imagined by Derrida, would have precipitated in psychoanalysis presupposes that such archiving was possible to begin

with, and few women of Woolf's time enjoyed that privilege. That is to say, had computers been around at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it would not have been Woolf's female contemporaries who had been typing away, but their husbands.

While a turn-of-the-century computer would not have changed the archive of female literature, Woolf—like Derrida—also engages in a little thought experiment, a thought experiment that may prove to be a lot more pertinent to female literature. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf conjures up a woman named Judith Shakespeare, an imaginary sister of William Shakespeare. Judith is just as talented as her brother William but because she is a woman, her talent is neither recognised nor permitted to flourish and she eventually commits suicide. Woolf, however, does not invoke the spectre of this neglected female genius in order to lament what might have been. Instead she envisions a future return of Shakespeare's sister, who, as Woolf relates to her readers, “would come if we worked for her, and that so to work, even in poverty and obscurity, is worth while.”<sup>v</sup> Such a return from the past by way of the future would certainly engender some archival tremors—not least because Woolf's invocation prefigures Derrida's ghostly politics of memory—his hauntology. And, as we know from Derrida, a ghost begins by coming back.<sup>vi</sup>

On the following pages, I will focus my attention on an artist book by Kajsa Dahlberg entitled *A Room of One's Own / A Thousand Libraries* from 2006.<sup>vii</sup> In this work, Dahlberg has compiled all underlinings and marginal notes made by readers of library copies of the Swedish translation of Woolf's essay, *A Room of One's Own*, into a single volume. To me, this work is decidedly and exemplarily archival, not just as a book, but also and especially as an artist book. Dahlberg's rendition of Woolf's book actualises some of the truly obscure work needed to bring back Judith, “who could and should have lived, but hasn't yet,” as Jan Verwoert has noted,<sup>viii</sup> and it does so by relying on a practice that prefigures the potential of digital technology. Woolf's aspiration to bring back Judith can be read as a call for feminist activism to pursue gender equality, and to bring about such a different way of living can, as we know from Derrida, transpire through a different way of archiving. Dahlberg's archival gesture envisions just that.

*A Room of One's Own / A Thousand Libraries* assembles almost 50 years of handwritten annotations between the 1958 publication of the first Swedish translation, *Ett*

*eget rum*, and 2006, when Dahlberg produced her work. As Dahlberg herself has described in an interview, *A Room of One's Own / A Thousand Libraries* came about from practical necessity, and was not initially conceived as an artwork:

A few years back I wanted to give the book to a friend, only to find that all the Swedish editions were sold out. It has been a really important book for me, so I was quite astonished by the fact it was no longer possible to purchase it. Instead, I got hold of the book through a library, had it copied, and bound into a hard cover. I liked the look of it, which indicated copy and original at one and the same time. This particular book that I got hold of through a library contained lots of notes, which contributed to the fact that I wanted to read it again. I started to collect these notes without actually planning it should later become an artwork.<sup>ix</sup>

This did, however, become the starting point of the work, and Dahlberg eventually borrowed all available copies in Swedish libraries, photocopied all the pages, and hand-traced the handwritten notes and underlinings into one self-published artist book in an edition of 1000 copies. These books have, in the style of Swedish library books, hard covers, but are all-white and lack both a title and the author's name. As such, the whiteness suggests an object rather than a book, as does the fact that some passages of Woolf's essay have become almost indecipherable in Dahlberg's work due to the extensive annotations. The whiteness also references pirate copying, as Dahlberg has noted,<sup>x</sup> like a literary equivalent to the music industry's white-label records that contain bootlegged tracks. Dahlberg's version of Woolf's book is, needless to say, exactly that—an unauthorised bootleg. During the initial exhibitions of the work,<sup>xi</sup> visitors could take home a free copy of Dahlberg's artist book, which once again made a Swedish translation of Woolf's essay available—this time for free—thus substantiating Dahlberg's comment about copy and original. Of course, the medium of the book already harbours the negotiation of copy and original, and this relation is rehearsed again by the installation of 1000 free, illegal copies in exhibition spaces that hinge on the notion of the original artwork.

While the one thousand libraries of the title refer to the size of the edition (and not the number of Swedish libraries involved in the project), the work is also an archive twice over—the first archivist being Woolf and the second Dahlberg. In her role as archivist,

Dahlberg has meticulously ensured that every marginal note and every underlining has been put in its right place. As such, the pages, lines and words become the archival system—the technical structure—that determines the categorisation of marginal notes and underlinings. Moreover, these typographical impressions also condition the archivable content, "even in its coming into existence and in its relationship to the future,"<sup>xii</sup> as Derrida would have it. *A Room of One's Own / A Thousand Libraries* effectively negotiates the relationship—the hierarchy even—between author and reader and between text and margin.

While Woolf is critical of the representation of women in literature—often depicted by men—as well as the scarcity of literature written by women throughout previous centuries, earlier literary efforts of women are, however, crucial for the future work of female writers: "For masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice."<sup>xiii</sup> This quote is one of the most underlined passages in Dahlberg's work. It describes not only the inheritance that Woolf and her contemporaries must assume; it also resonates through the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the annotations made to Woolf's essay by her readers. *A Room of One's Own / A Thousand Libraries* connects the book's readers over half a century, creating a community of readers. In Dahlberg's work, reading is no longer something one does alone. Reading, which in most cases is a solitary act, an intimate relationship between reader and book, has become a public matter. Rather than just solitary voices distributed throughout hundreds of library books, the marginal notes and underlinings become "a thinking in common" in Dahlberg's work, effectively gaining a voice, an agency. In this way, *A Room of One's Own / A Thousand Libraries* indeed establishes a room, a room in which women are able to debate freely among those of like mind. But this room is not merely "a room of one's own:" it transcends the notion of one's own room and introduces a new kind of common room,<sup>xiv</sup> where a thinking in common can take place.

What *A Room of One's Own / A Thousand Libraries* ultimately points to is the archive as a productive device through which to induce collective agency, and while Woolf's essay, the first archive, certainly articulates such a need, it is Dahlberg's archival

gesture that seizes this potential. Her archive is not "a tomb of the accidental trace,"<sup>xv</sup> to borrow an expression from anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, but rather, "the product of the anticipation of collective memory."<sup>xvi</sup> What was jotted down by single individuals in the margins of Woolf's essay is aggregated to invoke a collectivity in Dahlberg's work. The imprints may have been made in privacy, in solitude even, but that does not mean that they were solitary impulses.

In his essay, "Archive and Aspiration," Appadurai addresses the precarious state of belonging and remembering particular to the migrant, and the ensuing urgency of constructing archives and identities by way of digital media. The aspiration articulated by Woolf is not entirely unlike that described by Appadurai, because women of Woolf's time also struggled to construct identities and archives of their own. With *A Room of One's Own / A Thousand Libraries*, Dahlberg transforms Woolf's essay into such an archive of aspiration. Already spelled out by Woolf,<sup>xvii</sup> the capacity to aspire is inscribed by every annotation, and augmented by Dahlberg's repetition. All these readers-cum-writers of Woolf's essay constitute a virtual collectivity, just like the ones Appadurai speaks about, and they too build memories out of connectivity<sup>xviii</sup>—it just takes a little longer without an Internet connection. However, what the practice of adding marginal notes and underlinings by hand may lack in immediacy, it makes up for in its abundance and temporal range. Think of the Kindle tablet, for example, which in recent years has given readers the ability to share thoughts and comments—much like Dahlberg's work. It will, however, be a while before such digital devices can showcase a similar temporal range of metadata. In this sense, *A Room of One's Own / A Thousand Libraries* also anticipates the future of digital annotation—or metadata, to be exact—and its potential as a generator of aspiration. In the digital future of everyday archives, the experience of the mass will decidedly and increasingly encourage the aspiration of the single voice.

Rather than dreaming about altering the landscape of an existing archive, Woolf aspires to establish a sustainable archive in the first place, and Dahlberg's artist book does just that. *A Room of One's Own / A Thousand Libraries* produces an analogue glimpse of a digital future that may just induce Judith to come back—not just as a haunting presence of Woolf's archive, but alive, in the flesh of a much larger archive.

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- <sup>i</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 18.
- <sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.
- <sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.
- <sup>iv</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 6.
- <sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.
- <sup>vi</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. (New York, London: Routledge, 1994) 11.
- <sup>vii</sup> My analysis of Dahlberg's artist book, *A Room of One's Own / A Thousand Libraries*, is in part based on a section of my PhD thesis, *We Can (Not) Work It Out: A Curatorial Inquiry into the Danish Radio Archive*, which I submitted to the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, University of Copenhagen in January 2015.
- <sup>viii</sup> Jan Verwoert, "Personal Support: How to Care?" in *Support Structures*, ed. Céline Condorelli (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009) 176.
- <sup>ix</sup> Kajsa Dahlberg, *Kajsa Dahlberg. In a conversation with Niklas Östholm*, interview by Niklas Östholm, 2007, [http://www.indexfoundation.se/upload/pdf\\_AconversationwithKajsaDahlberg.pdf](http://www.indexfoundation.se/upload/pdf_AconversationwithKajsaDahlberg.pdf), 3.
- <sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.
- <sup>xi</sup> The work was shown as part of the Momentum Biennial in Moss, Norway and subsequently at Index in Stockholm, Sweden, both in 2006. When the work was shown as part of Dahlberg's solo exhibition, *This Time It's Political*, at The Museum of Contemporary Art in Roskilde in 2013, Dahlberg, however, had to refrain from giving away books due to the limited number of remaining books.
- <sup>xii</sup> Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 17.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 66.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Woolf describes the common sitting room as the only place in which a woman of the early nineteenth century was able to write. In this room, however, women would never have half an hour that they could call their own because of constant disturbances. *Ibid.*, 67.
- <sup>xv</sup> Arjun Appadurai, "Archive and Aspiration," in *Information Is Alive*, ed. Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder (Rotterdam: V2\_Publishing/NAI Publishers, 2003), 16.
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xvii</sup> Woolf anticipates that women, a hundred years later, "will have ceased to be the protected sex." Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 41.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Appadurai, "Archive and Aspiration," 17.

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