Unboxing The Archives: Objects That Speak

Vrunda Pathare
Chief Archivist, Godrej Archives, Mumbai

Introduction

The definition of the Archive has been interpreted in many different ways and is fluid in its meaning today. Yet, it was always seen as a physical space commonly perceived as a well-guarded 'place where documents and artefacts of public or historical interest are preserved'[1] – a strong room with limited access for bonafide researchers quintessentially being an embodiment of secrecy and power. If one must think of Archive as a singular object, visualise a cube shaped storage box perfectly symbolising the notion of Archive as an institute guarding the content inside and thus embodying 'control' over information. Archive was not perceived as an open world, much like the storage box, a familiar site at any archive. It defined boundaries dividing the internal and external world and controlled accessibility while providing comfort and protection to its contents. Thus, traditionally, Archive continued evoking the Orwellian dystopia – the idea of an Archive as a tool to control the past.

Today Archives are slowly moving away from this dystopic approach of monopolising the 'truth'. They are becoming more inclusive by peeling the protective exterior walls of the box by encouraging multiple interactions with the content from different perspectives. Archives now represent an 'objective culture' that acknowledges and assimilates multiple subjectivities of various sources. By providing accessibility to varied sources, it is easier to bridge the gap between the projected histories and multiple histories being revealed through documents, photographs, objects, oral memoirs etc. This process of 'opening, unfolding, unravelling and extending'[2] was emphasized by Ricardo Brey, a Cuban artist, for experiencing his 14 cube-shaped artworks exhibited at the 56th Venice Biennale in 2015, which were initially part of the exhibition titled 'inside-out' in 2013. As his boxes 'cannot simply be opened, but must be unfolded: 'fold by fold, petal by petal', they demanded close personal attention, time and direct contact of the viewer 'so that the work reveals its chemistry'[3]. This concept of a viewer's participation in unravelling what is inside the box is what I think is needed to transform an archive from a closed space to an accessible and inclusive space in modern times. Archives too are to be experienced, from inside out. Through new technologies that are now available, Archives can become a more collaborative space where the archivist and the users are co-creators of knowledge that Archives try to uncover.

Randall Jimerson in his 69th Presidential Address at the Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting in New Orleans in 2005 titled 'Embracing the Power of Archives', brought out a though-provoking analogy for the changing role of Archives - from being temples of power to a restaurant that allows mediation and interpretation. Even at Godrej Archives, such a continuous dialogue with every kind of visitor has helped in 'unboxing' the archives and curating new experiences with finding new meanings in our records. This is illustrated through three examples showing three different ways in which we interact with an object and its histories at the Godrej Archives.

The Ballot Box: Recreating the experience of what the object represents

The history of any object does not end with it coming to life but it continues with its usage and the way people engage with it. When we found the Ballot Box that Godrej made in 1951 for the very first election of Independent India, in the old factory premises of Godrej at Lalbaug (Mumbai), it was indeed a moment of excitement. We realised that when we showcase it for the first time to our audience, the employees of the company, it cannot be displayed in 'singularity'. Constant brainstorming helped us go beyond the physicality of the object and add life to this otherwise inanimate object.

The challenge was to accentuate the experience of the object even while displaying it traditionally in a case. Using a transparent acrylic box for casing, we decided to recreate the experience of casting a vote the way it would have been in the 1950s, with ballot paper which was just a forgotten memory especially with the introduction of electronic voting machines. The story of this object thus became "the story of a changed relation to the human subject."[4] While putting together this seemingly 'dead' object and its 'alive' memories, we started gathering the stories and archival records that would together unfold the story of manufacturing of the ballot box for the first election of Independent India. We exhibited this archival material on the walls of the voting-booth-like structure that we created to display the ballot box and this space helped to contextualise the object within the larger experiment with democracy that India was set to experience. However, the next question was how do we make the ballot box relevant to our current employee audience as well as the management.

For this, we designed a set of questions about their corporate work life and asked about the choices they would make when posed with questions such as `Do you expect people working under your supervision to put in longer hours than you yourself do?'. Every day, a new question was sent via email and employees were encouraged to come to the voting booth to cast their vote about the same. This experiment turned out to be a great success as employees turned up at the voting booth and queued up to cast their ballot. They seemed engrossed with the whole process of stamping on the paper, folding it and then putting it in the case just as it used to be done in the past. For everyone who voted, a stamp on their hand replaced the ink on the finger. Using the object from the past, connecting it and making it relevant for the present proved to be far more engaging than the traditional display where the cased object on a pedestal discourages any kind of interaction with it. Here although the object wasn't directly engaging with the audience but the idea that it represented was experienced by the audience turning up to see this little exhibit.

Top Image: Ballot Box Photo Courtesy Godrej Archive

Below Image: Queuing uo to vote

The Typewriter: Making the object speak and be experienced through a book

Top Image: Typewriter-10_Image Courtesy_hanno.in

Below Image: Typewriter-13_Image Courtesy_hanno.in

In 2009, when Godrej announced the closure of the typewriter manufacturing plant, Godrej Archives team set out to document not just the fifty-year-long journey of the first Indian typewriter made by Godrej but also the socio-cultural history of a period from the perspective of the typewriter, its manufacturers and its users. From 2010 to 2015, we travelled extensively for collecting material on this object and documenting the final traces of this product, interviewing typists, collectors, mechanics across India. All these efforts resulted in the release of the book in 2016 titled 'With Great Truth & Regard: A Story of Typewriter in India'. It brought together different facets of typewriter through essays written by historians, journalists, writers, interviews with individuals whose life had been impacted by this machine, and public histories of typewriter. We wanted this book to be like a portable archive on typewriters in India so that our readers could sift through archival documents sprinkled across the book which otherwise were only accessible at the archives. But we didn't want to stop at presenting a story with images and text only. What we wanted was to keep the memory of this object alive and make our readers experience the typewriter beyond reading this book. Making the book an interactive experience was the next step which required design expertise. Sarita Sundar, Founder, Hanno came on board to make this book more appealing to our readers through her design intervention.

While talking about this process, Sarita mentions,

"We dipped into the many aspects of material and visual culture associated with the machine: "Piiiiing" – the stretched-out tinkle at the end of each line, drawing itself in preparation for the next; a quirky illustration of a pangram showing a brown fox jumping over a lazy dog; a smudgy fingerprint from carbon paper making readers do a double check of their own fingers; crossed out 'x's and proof-reader marks hidden in the text; all these and more…".[5]

All these features that could be discovered in this book, made it an immersive experience for the reader.

The Navganis: Telling a story through the objects they used

The story of Navganis, a migrant community from Phadalewadi, a village near Pune, was largely undocumented due to the nature of their work. Navganis specialise in moving and lifting heavy objects such as safes, using very simple tools like blocks of wood and thick ropes. Godrej Archives had been actively seeking records that could throw some light on the long association of Navganis with Godrej since the early 20th century. When Godrej India Culture Lab announced their Migration Museum, we could see an opportunity to curate the story though an installation, which we later named 'On the Move'.

In the absence of records on Navganis at the archives, we started our journey in search of their stories and documenting their lives. Our search led us to Phadalewadi, their hometown near Pune, where we interviewed the third and fourth generation trusting us with their stories. They gave us the photo of the first batch of Navganis that had joined Godrej! Capturing their lives through oral histories, photos, videos, tools they used for moving heavy products, provided us an insight into the everyday lives of the Navganis – the experience of migration as well as of their working life. But how this could this be translated into an installation? The one object that could represent their story turned out to be the 'brown corrugated packaging box' in which they had 'moved' all the products for years. The box was at once symbolic of their movement in search of work decades ago. Thus, these boxes became our canvas on which we were to present their tale that had never been told before. While creating this installation, these brown boxes and a photograph of a tree bearing the name of the village 'Phadalewadi' were placed in such a manner to create a sense of a space from the rural areas of India - a simple raised platform around a large tree, usually used as a place to sit and share stories, discuss problems, celebrate etc. Some of these boxes were turned into cases displaying photographs, their tools etc. and other boxes were used to mount the text panels and the video capturing the oral histories recorded with Navganis. Ropes that they used for moving the heavy objects were placed around this installation in such a way to create a sense of them holding the narrative together. Navganis were aware about the existence of archives since the beginning of the archives as they were the ones who would lift and move an old donated safe or a product from the donor's place to the repository. But the relationship with the archives was always a distant one. As we were curating this exhibit, the Navganis got deeply involved in the creation as they were excited to be included in the company's narrative. The most rewarding part of this exercise was the way they interacted with the installation when they first visited it after its completion.

Conclusion

Even though objects trigger memories, they are often assigned to spaces like a museum while archives are regarded more as the repository of memories preserved in the form of paper records. Memories preserved in storage boxes are not easily accessible unless a bonafide request is made from the outside community. However, today the archive cannot be confined within the walls of these storage containers as the content is as fluid as the memory. It needs to be embraced with openness to be viewed from different/ multiple perspectives unlike the old-order Orwellian confinement or a control regime. As the archives start opening their doors to accommodate more than just paper records, the content achieves a new dynamism especially when juxtaposed with other records such as photographs, memorabilia, audio visual as well as digital content. This opens possibilities of multiple interventions, multiple narratives and multiple meanings. The new fluid nature of archives helps in erasing the distinction between the controlled environment of repositories and the more public-facing spaces such as museums. Breaking these walls to include the audience and allowing them to interact with the content including objects can pave the way for making archive a collaborative space and bringing together the exoteric and the esoteric.

Notes

[1] 1999: 70. Random House Webster's college dictionary. New York: Random House.

[2] John C. Welchman. "An Original Arpocryphum". Ricardo Brey: Qué le importa al tigre una raya más (the futility of intentions). 2014. Belgium: MER Paper Kunsthalle.

[3] Ricardo Brey. "Wisdom, madness and folly – paraphrasing R. D. Laing". statement. January 2013. http://www.ricardobrey.com/reflections.html Accessed August 15, 2020

[4] Bill Brown. 2001. Thing Theory. Critical Inquiry, 28(1), 1-22. Retrieved September 26, 2020, from http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344258

[5] Sarita Sundar, Founder Hanno. http://hanno.in/work/narratives-for-print-digital-and-physical-spaces/with-great-truth-and-regard/ Accessed August 15, 2020