Evocative Objects

Things We Think With

edited by Sherry Turkle

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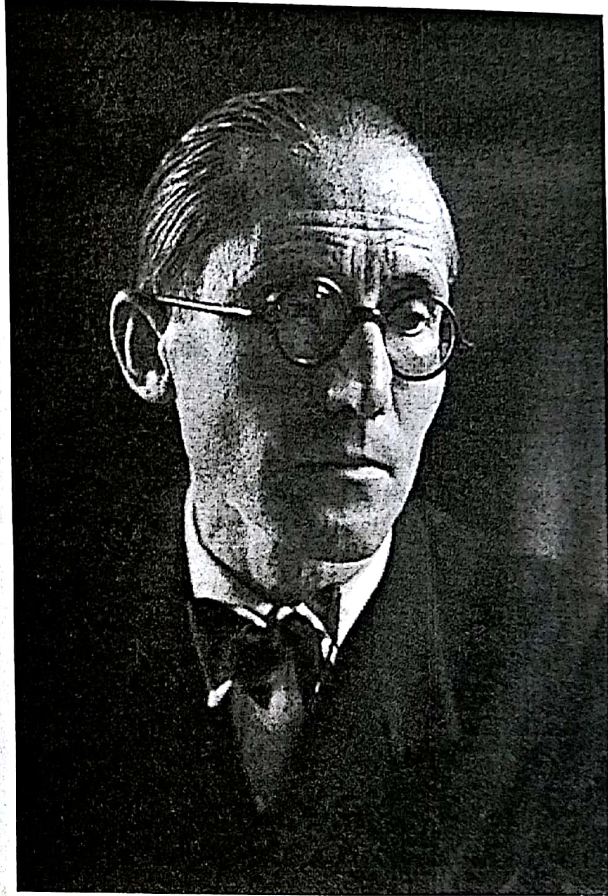
[Electronic communication] . . . is on the way to transforming the entire public and private space of humanity, and first of all the limit between the private, the secret (private or public), and the public or the phenomenal. It is not only a technique, in the ordinary and limited sense of the term: at an unprecedented rhythm, in a quasi-instantaneous fashion, this instrumental possibility of production, of printing, of conservation, and of destruction of the archive must inevitably be accompanied by juridical and thus political transformations. . . . [Because of] these radical and interminable turbulances, we must take stock today of the [archived] classical works. . . . [C]lassical and extraordinary works move away from us at great speed, in a continually accelerated fashion. They burrow into the past at a distance more and more comparable to that which separates us from archaeological digs.

—Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*

THE ARCHIVE

Susan Yee



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***La Fondation Le Corbusier** in Paris archives the work* of the world-renowned architect, Le Corbusier. His work is studied by every student of architecture, and in the mid-1990s my task was to closely examine his sketches, drawings, notebooks, models, anything I could find that might help to construct a virtual model of one of his famed unbuilt projects, the Palace of the Soviets. The archives were located in Le Corbusier–designed buildings, Villa La Roche and Villa Jeanneret; the idea of sifting though the master architect's original drawings in a space that was conceived by the master himself thrilled me. The materials were rich: fluid sketches, detailed drawings, study models, and notes. I read his letters. I browsed through his datebook and imagined his days full of meetings. I examined his hand-scrawled calculations in the margins of sketches and did the math along with him. There were newspaper clippings. I remember finding one where his design was critiqued. Right on the clipping he had written "Idiote" in a vigorous and powerful hand. I could trace the precision and force of the incision into the newsprint. I felt his frustration, his spirit.

One day, I asked to see the overall plan drawing for his unbuilt design. I was escorted to a special room where Le Corbusier's largest drawings were viewed and waited for the curator to bring up the large rolled drawing. I waited in silence as the curator opened the scroll. It was so large that it spilled over the edge of the table. I had to walk around the drawing in order to see it. I expected to be given gloves, but I was not. I felt awkward. I stood there more than timid, almost paralyzed. I didn't know if I could or should touch it. And then the curator touched it, so I went ahead and touched it too with my

bare hands. All I could think about was that this was Le Corbusier's original drawing. It was meticulously hand-drawn, but the drawing was dirty. There were marks on it, smudges, fingerprints, the marks of other hands, and now I added mine. I felt close to Le Corbusier as I walked around and around the drawing, looking at the parts that I wanted to replicate to bring home with me, touching the drawing as I walked. The paper was very thin.

The next day I came back to the archive and that same scroll was rolled out again. The ritual began again. I spent all day walking, touching, looking, thinking. On other days the ritual would be different. I looked at Le Corbusier's personal, handwritten letters. And one day, and this was the most miraculous of all, I found a little parchment bag full of paper squares of different colors and different sizes. I was there with a team of other MIT architects, and we all gravitated toward these playful cut-outs. Delighted with the discovery, we all immediately came to the same idea at once: that these were the elements Le Corbusier used when he was designing the Palace of the Soviets. These were the little squares he used to program the large project. He figured out the arrangement with little colored papers. One color was for meeting rooms, another was for public areas. Each function of the project had a designated color. And I imagined how he fiddled with these little bits of paper until he found a programmatic configuration that pleased him; I fiddled with them too.

On my last day at the archives, the curator approached me with pride, "Oh, you'll love what we're doing now. You won't ever have to come here! You won't ever have to look at these drawings anymore! We're putting

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them all in a digital database!" She brought me to an adjacent room and showed me the exact drawing I had been looking at, the drawing around which I had been circling for days. It appeared on her computer as a small icon. If you clicked on it, it became larger. If I had accessed this drawing from home, I would never have grasped its dimensions, I would never have known that it was stored separately, carefully rolled, that it was dirty with smudges and fingerprints. The scans for the Web site gave me nothing to touch. I felt no awe about the scale of the drawings. Looking at the curator's scans made me think respectfully about mass consumption, about allowing everybody to have access, about the technical problems of how to use a cursor to move around the drawing on the screen, and about how differently I understood the digital image and the designer behind it.

Looking at the scans in the computer room made me miss the quiet of the physical archive, the ritual of bringing out the precious original drawings, the long minutes of unwinding. Sitting at the curator's computer in Paris, I followed her instructions and linked once again to the drawing. A moment later, some bit of business crossed my mind and I linked to MIT. Feeling like a saddened citizen of the information world, I felt transported to MIT through the link. I had a moment of shame.

That day with the curator was the first time I began to think about the transition from physical to digital. The evocative object, the Le Corbusier drawing in both its physical and digital form, made me wonder how automatic it had been for the curator to put the emotion of the archive out of mind, how easy it was to trade the value of touch and physicality for the powers of digitization.

I think of Turkle's distinction between instrumental and subjective technology, between what technology does for us and what it does to us as people.[1] The new Le Corbusier digital database did things for me. It allowed me to do things that I could not do before. I could search it, manipulate it, copy it, save it, share it. But what did it do to me? It made the drawings feel anonymous and it made me feel anonymous. I felt no connection to the digital drawings on the screen, no sense of the architect who drew it.

As I came to terms with my anonymity, my lack of connection, and the loss of my former rituals in the physical archive, I felt fortunate to be in a generation of designers that straddles both physical and digital worlds, a generation that creates, values, and understands handmade drawings and models as well as digital ones.

In my work designing technology-enhanced studios at MIT, I often think about Le Corbusier's drawings and the drawings that designers make today. Today's drawings and models are constructed on the computer. They have never been physical. They are born digital. They will never be touched. I think about how a new generation will be trained to favor computational techniques and algorithmic methods of design. Instrumentally, these technologies offer opportunities for innovation in design development and construction. Subjectively, however, what will these technologies do to us? How will they affect the way we feel, see ourselves, and see design? How will future students of architecture come to experience the designs of a master from the pre-digital era? And what of the "old masters" of our first digital era? Will future students be satisfied to simply understand the algorithms that generated their designs? Will we still crave some pilgrimage such as the one I took to Paris? But there will be no place to go; it will all be on a collection of servers. What will this do to our emotional understanding of the human process of design? What rituals might we invent to recover the body's intimate involvement with these new traces of human imagination? Will we be able to feel the human connection through digital archives? Will we care?

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Susan Yee earned a PhD in architecture from MIT and studies the implications of integrating new technologies into design learning environments.

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