

The Book as Archive

A study of Daniel Spoerri's An Anecdoted Topography of Chance

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Master's Thesis in History of Art

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UNIVERSITY OF OSLO

June 2016

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2016

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<http://www.duo.uio.no>

Print: Grafisk Senter, Oslo.

Abstract

On October 17, 1961, at 3.47 in the afternoon, artist Daniel Spoerri traced all the objects gathered on the blue tabletop of his Parisian hotel room onto a large sheet of paper. Paper clips, wine stoppers, matchboxes, burnt matches, spice jars, cutlery, leftover bread, spilled salt – nothing was left out, nothing was deemed too unimportant. Each outline – 80 in total – was then numbered and annotated in a corresponding note. In a sober, mock-encyclopedic style Spoerri described one object after the other, noting details such as visual appearance, text printed on product packaging, the cost of the item etc. A good deal of the notes were also furnished with additional anecdotal material, such as the circumstance of the objects' acquisition, the use they had been put to, stories relating to Spoerri's friends and acquaintances, short descriptions of how they ended up on the table in the first place, or other tidbits of information. Whenever he felt it necessary, Spoerri added footnotes to the notes for further elaborations, engaging the help of his good friend Robert Filliou to correct his memory or his French. The resulting collection of notes was published, together with the outline of the objects, as a small booklet in February 1962. And by 1968 two more editions of the book had been published, each with new material and footnotes added to the work by Spoerri as well as from his friends Emmett Williams and Dieter Roth.

This thesis is a study of this collaborative work: *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*. It argues that the work should be understood not just as a collection of notes bound together as a book, but as an archive generated from a principle of openness and potentially endless accumulation. It will discuss how the work is underpinned and shaped by media technologies such as photography and sound recording, pointing to the broadening of the book format that accelerated through the proliferation of artists' books in the 1960s. It will also look at some possible implications of the work's archival character, specifically how its proximity to everyday life and the life of its main author can be viewed as symptomatic for a kind of "soft" power that aims at a non-coercive control of life.

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank my supervisor Ina Blom, for all her help in framing my research goals and for all her constructive criticism along the way. I'm also very grateful for the travel grant I was granted from the Department of Philosophy, Classics, History of Art, and Ideas at the University of Oslo, which made it possible for me to visit the Swiss National Library in Bern and the Sohm Archive in Stuttgart as a part of my research. Sandra Gugger at the Swiss National Library was supremely helpful during my visit to this institution and deserves special thanks.

On a personal note I would like to thank to Bastian, for his remarkable performance in the role of supporting husband, and my mother, who gave me my very first lessons in art history.

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1 Introduction

*“The game I suggest is to choose a shape on the map and look up the corresponding numbered paragraph in the text. Notes have been added whenever there were text or other data relating to an object.”*¹

– Daniel Spoerri

On October 17, 1961, at 3.47 in the afternoon, artist Daniel Spoerri traced all the objects gathered on the blue tabletop of his Parisian hotel room onto a large sheet of paper. Paper clips, wine stoppers, matchboxes, burnt matches, spice jars, cutlery, leftover bread, spilled salt – nothing was left out, nothing was deemed too unimportant. Each outline – 80 in total – was then numbered and annotated in a corresponding note. In a sober, mock-encyclopedic style Spoerri described one object after the other, noting details such as visual appearance, text printed on packaging, the cost of the item etc. A good deal of the notes were also furnished with additional anecdotal material, such as the circumstance of the objects’ acquisition, the use they had been put to, stories relating to friends and acquaintances of Spoerri, short descriptions of how the objects ended up on the table in the first place, or other tidbits of information. Whenever he felt it necessary, Spoerri added footnotes to the notes for further elaborations, engaging the help of his good friend, the artist Robert Filliou, to correct his memory or his French. Using the money he was supposed to spend on invitations for an upcoming solo exhibition at Galerie Lawrence in Paris, Spoerri had the tracing of the objects – forming a “map” of his cluttered table – and the corresponding notes printed and presented as a kind of catalogue for the show, which opened in February 1962. The booklet’s title: *Topographie Anecdotee du Hasard* (An Anecdoted Topography of Chance).

On the front page of this first edition of the work was printed a footnote by French art critic Pierre Restany, pointing out that “anecdotee” (anecdoted) isn’t really a word and neither is the verb it presupposes: anecdoting. “[I]t is thus necessary to consider it a neologism of your invention, a rather inharmonious one,” Restany wrote, directly addressing Spoerri.² He was of course right: “Anecdoted” isn’t a real word but rather a pun on the adjective “annotated,” describing works (most often textual) to which comments and notes have been added, and “anecdote” – typically short narratives of amusing incidents or stories relating to other people. By bringing the two terms together, Spoerri merged two seemingly contradictory traditions. To “annotate” connotes an anchoring of a text in a stable set of references, a typical example being the annotated bibliography – that is, a listing of books, articles and other sources, with a paragraph (an annotation) following each citation that

¹ Daniel Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (Done with the help of his very dear friend, Robert

² Ibid. 187.

describes and evaluates the sources, informing the reader of the relevance, accuracy and quality of the source.³ Anecdotes, on the other hand, belong to the entirely different tradition of subjective storytelling. Rather than depending on fact and accuracy, anecdotes are first and foremost meant to be amusing and are typically based on personal experience or hearsay.

The pun of the title, suggesting a idiosyncratic twist on a scholarly format, is played out in the book itself. Here, Spoerri's quasi-scientific approach to the objects is humorously undermined by the banality of both the objects in question and the information Spoerri chooses to attach to them. This aspect of the work became even more prominent in the decade that followed the original publication of the *Topographie*. By 1968, two further editions had been published – each of them adding more notes and comments to the work from other “anecdoters,” making *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*,⁴ as it's called in English, even more richly anecdoted.

In his introduction to the book, Spoerri explains the work as the result of an “urge to recreate objects through memory rather than actually displaying them.”⁵ Arguing that the work should be understood as an archive, this thesis will suggest that Spoerri's memory was only one part of the process and that the generative principle and the technical media underpinning the *Topography* are equally, if not more, important aspects to consider. I'll also discuss some possible implications of the work's archival character, specifically whether its engagement with real life and the life of its main author can be viewed as symptomatic for the kind of power formation that aims at a non-coercive control of individuals and populations through strategies of surveillance, confession and the internalization of norms and expectations regarding appropriate behavior.

The reasons for focusing on the archival aspects the *Topography* might not appear obvious, seeing as it arguably is an artist's book – that is, an example of such “books or book-like objects, over the final appearance of which an artist has had a high degree of control: where the book is intended as a work of art in itself,” to borrow Stephen Bury's definition of the term.⁶ At the time the first edition of the *Topography* was published, the trend towards artists publishing their own work was spreading worldwide, with more and more artists finding that books could be artworks in and of themselves. Such books played an important role in the reformulation of artistic forms and the blurring of the boundaries

³ Michael Enge, “How to Prepare an Annotated Bibliography: The Annotated Bibliography,” Cornell University Library, December 8, 2015, <http://guides.library.cornell.edu/annotatedbibliography> (visited May 19, 2016).

⁴ From here on, “the *Topography*” for short.

⁵ Ibid. 23.

⁶ Stephen Bury, *Artists' Books: The book as a work of art*, 1963 – 1995 (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1995), 1.

between different media that gained speed in the 1960s. As Joan Lyons notes, the importance of artists' books "lies in the formulation of a new perceptual literature whose content alters the concept of authorship and challenges the reader to a new discourse with the printed page."⁷ Artists' books could be unique, hand-made items, such as Dieter Roth's *Snow* (1964); they could include material far beyond printed matter, such as the Fluxus edition *Fluxus I* (1964); they could treat language as matter rather than the conveyer of meaning, evident in books of concrete poetry; or they could be rendered unreadable, such as Addi Köpcke's reworking of Walther Pahl's *Wetterzonen der Weltpolitik* from 1962, in which the pages of an open book were glued together and the pages left open painted over and littered with junk.

It is not the intention of this thesis to remove the *Topography* from this context. Rather, it is precisely this kind of disrupting of traditional artistic formats – such as the integration of different media into the book format and the break with a linear narrative structure – that opens up the *Topography* to be considered in archival terms. As I will argue, the *Topography*'s employment of technical media ties in with the development the archive went through after the introduction of the same media in the nineteenth century. Like an archive, the work is structured on a principle that allows for new data to enter from different sources, different from a book that presents itself as a finished product, the intellectual property of a single author. The "topography" of the title hints at the book's ties to a material site – similarly as archives traditionally have been inextricably linked with their specific location (the term "archive" itself developed from the Greek "arkheion," referring to the *home* of the Archon, a civic ruler, where important official documents were stored). Although the *Topography* is mass-produced rather than an unique object, the text itself is turned into a site one can return to an actually change through the procedure of adding footnotes to the text and to let other people re-visit the book to "re-anecdote" it. The topography of Spoerri's table is thus extended to the topography of the text itself, with new layers being added for each new edition.

1.1 Thesis question

This thesis discusses and analyzes the media and the principles underpinning the recording, reproduction and storage of information in Daniel Spoerri's *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*. It argues that the work should be viewed as an archival work, connected with the

⁷ Joan Lyons, "Introduction and Acknowledgements," in Lyons, *Artists' Books: A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook* (Layton: Gibbs M. Smith, 1987), 7.

postwar avant-garde's⁸ dismantling of the barriers between different artistic media as well as the barriers separating art and life. The following set of questions have guided my research:

- How did the *Topography* develop from the relatively simple form of its first edition to a multilayered, multivoiced work over the course of six years? Was the open structure of the work a part of Spoerri's original intention or was it a more organic process? Could it have evolved even further than it did?
- What media technologies does the recording and reproduction of information in the work rely on? What are the effect of these media on the work's form and style?
- How does the *Topography* differ from a traditional book? In what ways does the work's broadening of the book format point to the archive? How does the evoking of technical media in the recording and storing of information in the work tie in with these media's employment in traditional notions of the archive? How does the work relate to other archival artworks of the same period?
- What are the implications of the work's archival character? How does the generating of information connected to Spoerri's life relate to strategies for approaching personal and intimate subject matter evident in other works from this period? In what ways are these strategies indicative of an awareness of modern, "soft" modes of power?

1.2 Research material

After its original publication in February 1962, what started out as a small, 53-page leaflet written by Spoerri (with some assistance from his friend Robert Filliou) in many ways took on a life of its own – a life that can be briefly summarized as follows: American concrete poet, artist and friend of Spoerri Emmett Williams took on the English translation of the book towards the end of 1964. Along the translation process both Williams and Spoerri added new annotations in the form of further footnotes to the text. New York publisher Something Else Press, under the leadership of Fluxus artist Dick Higgins, published the result in 1966. The new edition – referred to in this thesis as the 1966 edition – also featured a number of added

⁸ The debate surrounding the definition and the critical potential of the avant-garde in the postwar period is beyond the scope of this thesis. My use of the term "postwar avant-garde" corresponds with Hal Foster's designation of the "neo-avant-garde," consisting of two phases: a first one, in the 1950s, that revived the strategies of the historical avant-garde, especially Dada practices, and a second, from the 1960s onward, which was critical of the way the first neo-avant-garde had transformed the avant-garde into an institution. By not using the term "neo-avant-garde," I attempt to distance myself from the theoretical debate Foster engaged in in his essay "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde" (1994), which was written in response to especially Peter Bürger's but also Benjamin Buchloh's earlier dismissal of the neo-avant-garde's critical potential. See Johanne Lamoureux, "A Historiography of a Critical Concept," in *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, ed. by Amelia Jones, Blackwell Companions to Art History (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 203 – 207.

appendices, an expanded index and drawings for each individual entry by Roland Topor. Higgins, acting as editor, reinforced the scholarly, encyclopedic tone of Spoerri's writing by presenting each object on an individual page. Around the same time German artist – and also friend of Spoerri – Dieter Roth⁹ began translating the book into German and once again both the translator and Spoerri himself added new comments and footnotes. *Anekdoten zu einer Topographie des Zufalls* was published by the German publishing house Luchterhand Verlag in 1968. By now the *Topography* had grown into a sprawling network of notes and footnotes, featuring internal debates among the artists, corrections and clarifications, transcripts of conversations, copies of correspondence, exchanges of jokes, puns and quips, quotes from literature as well as comments from people whose opinion the anecdoters had sought out.

In 1990, the Centre Pompidou reprinted the first edition with a new introduction by Roland Topor, and finally, in 1995, the Atlas Press in London gathered all the texts from the previous editions in one book, also featuring a new introduction, new annotations from Spoerri, Williams and Roth and a number of added photographs. Thus, the *Anecdoted Topography of Chance* isn't just one book – it's arguably five, not counting the reprints, deluxe-editions and translations without further alterations.¹⁰

This thesis focuses on the three editions from the 1960s. The 1990 edition is simply a reprint with an added introduction, and as such it doesn't read as a continuation of the artistic project Spoerri initiated in 1961. The 1995 edition is more in keeping with the original project, seeing as it follows the pattern of translation followed by "re-anecdoting" (Spoerri's term for adding new material to the *Topography*). However, this happened on the initiative of a publishing house with no previous ties to Daniel Spoerri or his circle of friends and collaborators, almost 30 years after the previous *Topography* had been published. The time gap alone sets it firmly apart from its predecessors, as does the fact that unlike previous editions, it didn't invite new voices to take part in the project. As such it is more of a re-visiting of the project, albeit in the mode of the original project, than a true continuation of it.

However, the 1995 edition isn't easily discarded. To me there's little doubt that the best way of gaining an understanding of the combined efforts of Spoerri, Williams and Roth

⁹ Roth alternately spelled his name "Dieter Roth," "Dieter Rot" and "Diter Rot." I'll use the first spelling – which is closest to his birthname Karl-Dietrich Roth – throughout this thesis.

¹⁰ In the introduction to the 1995 edition, Williams lists the following additional editions: A Dutch translation with no re-anecdotations from 1964; a 30 page excerpt from the forthcoming 1966 edition in the Paris Review in 1966; the paper-pack edition of the 1966 edition; a reprint of the original French by the Archives of the Centre national d'art contemporaine in France in 1972; and a micro-card edition of the 1966 edition by Wolfgang Hainke in Germany in 1987. In addition, the Atlas Press made a deluxe edition of their *Topography*, also published in 1995 and in 1998 the German publisher Nautilus re-published the 1968 edition in hard-back. Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 14.

is through this edition. For one thing, it brings together all their notes, footnotes and comments in English, while at the same time restoring the orderly layout of the 1966 edition (viewed by Spoerri as the most successful one), featuring one entry per page and including Topor's drawings.¹¹ For this thesis, I will therefore use the 1995 edition as my main reference point – even though I'll mainly base my analysis on the content from the editions from 1962, 1966 and 1968. New reflections voiced by Daniel Spoerri, Emmett Williams and Dieter Roth for the 1995 edition will be taken as further insights into project, just as anything they might have said in interviews etc. about their work on the *Topography* might be brought in as source material. In considering the media technologies of the *Topography*, however, I will not include photographs or other material added for historic interest to the 1995 edition. Also, in order to limit my material, I have chosen to focus my main efforts on the entries for the objects; the appendices added in the end of the book are thus not made the subject of extensive analysis.

The 1995 edition of the *Topography* is currently out of print, but available from the National Museum's library and archives in Oslo. The 1966 and 1968 editions I read while visiting archives in Germany and Switzerland. I also had the opportunity to study Henie Onstad Art Centre's copy of the 1966 edition. When referring to "the *Topography*" in this thesis, I refer to the three editions taken as a whole, unless otherwise stated.

My research material includes information and documents from two archives: the Daniel Spoerri Archives, located in the Prints and Drawings Department of the Swiss National Library in Bern, and the Sohm Archive, domiciled at the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart. The former contains the artist's personal archive, donated to the institution in 1996, including his correspondence, a photographic documentation of his entire artistic production, publications, films and audio documents. The latter is home to the world's most extensive Fluxus documentation, build upon the archive of collector Hanns Sohm. Due to the extensiveness of this material, as well as my limited time in the archives, I decided to focus most of my efforts on material directly linked with the *Topography*. This limitation allowed me both to keep an eye open for unexpected findings and to search specifically for answers to my questions of interest. Prior to my visit to Bern, I was sent an inventory of the content of the Daniel Spoerri Archive. The material in this archive is still in the process of being catalogued, but with the

¹¹ The German 1968 edition is viewed as less successful visually than its predecessor: the layout is cramped and somewhat disorderly and the illustrations are missing. Spoerri himself has expressed that this version to a lesser extent made a good vehicle for the spirit of the work, partly due its cluttered lay-out. This he stated in an interview staged by the Swiss National Library in 2004. Conversation between Daniel Spoerri and Silvia Lorenz, August 21, 2004, audio recording available at the Daniel Spoerri Archives, Prints and Drawings Department, Swiss National Library, Bern.

help of the archivist in charge I was able to locate all material relating to *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, which includes: The original blueprint of the *Topography*; hand- and typewritten manuscripts of the different editions of the *Topography* (with notes and corrections of Spoerri and his friends); blueprints of Topor's illustrations; correspondence between Spoerri, Robert Filliou, André Thomkins, Meret Oppenheim and the contributors of the different editions; flyers with the announcement of the edition; as well as newspaper clippings and reviews of the *Topography*.

The Sohm Archive does not have a ready inventory of its material relating to Daniel Spoerri, but once at the archive the relevant boxes were clearly marked and easy to locate. Much of the material marked "Daniel Spoerri" consisted of invitations to openings, catalogues, newspaper clippings etc., which to a lesser extent provided me with new information about the work. However, I also read the entire preserved correspondence between Dick Higgins, the editor of the 1966 edition of the *Topography*, and Daniel Spoerri, which was of great value.

1.3 Structure of analysis, method and applied theory

This thesis is a critical analysis of Daniel Spoerri's *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, including Emmett Williams and Dieter Roth's contributions to the project.¹² It argues that the work should be understood not just as a book but as an archive, underpinned by technical media and a specific structure generated by a technical principle. The implications of the work's archival character will be discussed in terms of modern modes of "soft" power and the integration of art and life in 1960s art production.

In the first chapter following the introduction, I'll take a closer look at the development of the *Topography*, from its original publication as a companion to Spoerri's so-called snare-pictures to the multi-voiced, multilayered work of the final editions. The chapter serves to properly present the work before further analysis, while at the same time uncovering information about the work that will be referenced throughout the rest of the thesis. Much of what will be reviewed and discussed in this chapter stems from my archival research, calling for a brief account of my working method.

¹² Although the fact that Spoerri handed over the *Topography* to be re-anecdoted by Williams and Roth is a crucial part of my argument concerning the archival character of the *Topography*, I agree with Williams' assessment, voiced in the 1995 edition of the work, that "despite all the anecdoting and re-anecdoting, it remains DANIEL'S book." That is, I consider Spoerri to be the main architect behind the project. Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 13.

Going to the archives, my aim was on the one hand to gain a deeper understanding of the development of the book in general: who initiated what; what parts of the development could be ascribed to intention and what parts could be ascribed to chance; how did the collaboration between Spoerri and the other artists practically proceed etc. Secondly, I had a set of specific questions I hoped to find the answers to. Did the call for contributions from the readers, printed as an introduction to the 1966 edition promising further additions to the *Topography*, yield any results? If so, why were no new editions published? Were the translations initiated by Spoerri or by the translators? Could the *Topography* have gone on “indefinitely,” or at least beyond the editions that were in fact published? The days in the archives were spent combing through all relevant files, transcribing or photographing as I went along all material presenting me with information I had not previously come across. The majority of the material was written in German, English and French – the two former of which I read fluently. Material in French was transcribed for future translation. I spent the evenings organizing and analyzing the material gathered during the day. The perhaps most important source for information I hadn’t seen mentioned or discussed before quickly turned out to be correspondence between the artists involved in the making of the *Topography*. Due to the collaborative nature of the work, and seeing as the authors often found themselves in different countries, in a time prior to electronic communication, there’s no lack of written correspondence between the affiliated artists. However, no understanding based on written correspondence can be complete – certain letters are bound to be missing, things were agreed upon via phone calls, and so on. I have therefore tried whenever possible to locate how information found via this source fits in to, and ideally is supported by, other sources.

Chapter 3 will present the theoretical framework necessary to understand the *Topography*’s employment of media technologies and how this relates to archives, archive theory and archival art. The first section will identify the media technologies underpinning the work as well as these media’s impact on its style and format. Starting with the way photography both formed the basis for Spoerri’s work previous to the *Topography* and is referenced in the indexical map of Spoerri’s table, I’ll briefly approach Siegfried Kracauer and his writing on photography versus memory, comparing this with media archaeologist Wolfgang Ernst’s notion of the “cold gaze” of technical media – that is, technical media’s ability to neutrally record reality. Ernst traces the effect of technical recording devices in the nineteenth on a wider way of thinking – specifically its effect on historiography. “With the emergence of photography,” Ernst writes, “the idea of the theatrical gaze literally staging the past is displaced by the cold mechanical eye, a technologically neutral code rather than a

subjective discourse.”¹³ The differences between Kracauer and Ernst with regards to the value of photography will serve as an entry-point to a discussion of the writing in the *Topography*. The claim underpinning this section of the thesis is that rather than presenting the reader with vivid “memory-images,” Spoerri’s mode of writing comes closer to the disinterested registering of information that characterizes technical media. With the help of media theorist Kittler, I’ll argue that the writing of the *Topography* is directly influenced by media technologies such as the typewriter and sound recording.

Kittler, like Ernst, is a proponent of a materialist approach to media theory. The two don’t belong to the “first generation” of modern media theorists rising to prominence in the 1960s, but their affinity with scholars such as Marshall McLuhan is clear. Like McLuhan, Kittler emphasizes media’s deciding impact on the content of what is being communicated – that the knowledge and information conveyed by media essentially are an effect of the technicality of the media. According to Kittler, media have a direct effect on what can be perceived as meaning, thus extending Michel Foucault’s discourse analysis to account for the effect of media.¹⁴ This means that the introduction of each new medium means the introduction of a new system of knowledge with profound epistemological effects.¹⁵ His 1986 book *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* is a study of the effects of the introduction of the three technical storage media of the title. According to Kittler, phonography, film and typewriting were transformative media technologies in that they differentiated acoustics, optics and writing into three distinct media. In effect, this shattered the monopoly of writing as the only medium for recording and transmission of data, which up had been complete in European culture since Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press. The effects this had on writing and on literature were profound and, I’ll argue, still visible in the writing of the *Topography*.

The broadening of the book format implied in Spoerri’s employing of technical media in the *Topography* is one of several characteristics of the work that point to the archive. In the second section of the third chapter I’ll qualify my claim that the work should be considered an archival work. Here, Wolfgang Ernst’s point about the “mechanisms that regulate entry into the discourse of history of exclusion from cultural memory” will be of importance.

¹³ Wolfgang Ernst, “Let There Be Irony: Cultural History and Media Archaeology in Parallel Lines,” in *Digital Memory and the Archive*, ed. by Jussi Parikka (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 46.

¹⁴ Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, calls Kittler’s media theory “media discourse analysis,” both to distinguish it from other brands of media theory and to underline his affinity with Foucault. Winthrop-Young and Wutz, introduction to Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), xvi.

¹⁵ Knut Ove Eliassen, “Estetikens teknologiske substrat: Friedrich Kittlers medial materialisme,” in *Norsk Medietidsskrift*, Vol. 11, No 1 (2004), 51.

Rather than being a depot for memory, Ernst asserts that the archive is defined by, and generated from, the mechanisms and technical principles that stipulate what kind of data and information will enter or be excluded from the archive.¹⁶ This clearly resonates with the *Topography*, which is the product of a specific set of rules through which the work is generated: the principle of anecdoting and re-anecdoting. The *Topography*, then, is not only shaped by the media technologies underpinning it; like an archive it is generated from a technical principle that regulate the entry of information into the archive.

To further support my claim that the *Topography* should be viewed as an archival work, I'll look at its similarities with nineteenth-century archives – guided, among others, by Sven Spieker and his study *The Big Archive*. Looking at the archive as both a bureaucratic institution and as a format and methodology made use of in twentieth-century art, Spieker argues that the use of archives in contemporary art is a response to the historical avant-garde's attack on the authority and truth-claims of the nineteenth-century archive. He considers the development of the archive in art in relation to changing media technologies, making *The Big Archive* highly relevant for my perspective on the *Topography*. His discussion of how artists from the 1960s onward went about in subverting the principles of the official, bureaucratic archive will also be helpful when I go on to look at how the *Topography* also differs from the nineteenth-century archive, situating it in relation with other archival works of its own time. Here, works defined by open structures of information gathering and accumulation will be of special interest.

In the final chapter I'll discuss possible implications of considering the *Topography* as an archive. A close reading of one section of the *Topography* – specifically the entry for object no. 36 – will be undertaken to illustrate how the *Topography*'s detached, matter-of-fact mode of relating information, including information of a highly intimate character, is consistent with a wider tendency among the postwar avant-garde to approach sexual and personal subject matter in a depersonalized way. I'll suggest that this approach can be viewed in conjunction with the kind of power formation that aims at the managing of the sexual habits and personal conduct of its subjects. Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, which he elaborates on in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, will be central to this discussion. The term biopower refers to a non-coercive regime of power – dominant in Western capitalist societies – that is defined by its power to control populations and the human body rather than by its right to forcefully punish or kill its subjects. On the one hand, it is built upon the need

¹⁶ Wolfgang Ernst, "Let There Be Irony," 42; Ernst, *Sorlet från arkivet: Ordning ur oordning*, trans. by Tommy Andersson (Gothenburg: Glänta produktion, 2008), 29.

to control populations, through the managements of births, deaths, health, illness etc.¹⁷ On the other hand, it incorporates aspects of what Foucault calls disciplines: the regulation of behavior of individuals through confinement, isolation and regimenting within disciplinary institutions. Enforced through a system of surveillance, the subjects gradually inscribes the knowledge of being watched into him- or herself and adjusts his or hers behavior accordingly, thereby more useful or “docile” bodies for society in general – that is, more easily integrated into systems of efficient and economic controls.¹⁸ In a society regulated through biopower, however, the literal confinement or isolation is no longer necessary elements: the behavior-regulating norms are internalized in the human subject as it becomes used to the subtle expectations and regulations.¹⁹ I’ll consider how this ties with the *Topography*’s handling of sexual content. According to Foucault, sex is at the pivot of biopower, seeing as sex is both a “means of access to both the life of the body and the life of the species.”²⁰ Therefore, in a society ruled by biopower, it is crucial for institutions of power (such as the state) to gain access to the sexual habits of the individual – giving rise to “infinitesimal surveillances, permanent controls, extremely meticulous orderings of space, indeterminate medical psychological determinations, to an entire micro-power concerned with the body.”²¹ One mode of extracting information about sex is through confession. For three centuries, Foucault claims, Western man has been encouraged to tell everything concerning about his sex – a development that is inextricable from that of biopower: One had to speak of sex in order for it to be managed, for it to be “inserted into a system of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made into a function according to an optimum. Sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered.”²² Considering the information about his own life offered up by Spoerri through a format with strong connotations to official power – the archive – as well as his unwillingness to part with intimate details, I’ll suggest that the *Topography* could be considered both symptomatic for this mode of power as well as an evasion of it.

The way the *Topography* deals with sexual content is one aspect of the work’s integration of art and life. In the final part of chapter 4, I’ll look at how the *Topography*’s

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 139.

¹⁸ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. by Alan Sheridan, second edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 202 - 203.

¹⁹ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1999), 73.

²⁰ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 146.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 145 – 146.

²² *Ibid.*, 24.

employment of different media technologies and its invitation to the reader to join in on the “completing” of the work corresponds with Dick Higgins writing on intermedia art – that is, art that “fall between media.”²³ Higgins first elaborated on this term in an essay published as a newsletter for Something Else Press in 1966, expressing his failing interest in art that “belong unnecessarily rigidly to one or another form.”²⁴ Yet “intermedia” doesn’t simply designate art that mix different media – rather it is precisely the artworks that exist in the area *between* different media that fall into the category. Equally important are the works that explore the space between art and life. By looking how the different elements of media work together in the *Topography*, I’ll show how this is a part of Spoerri’s strategy to involve the reader in the work beyond merely reading or looking at it – an essential feature of intermedia art. This undermining of visuality will then be viewed in conjunction with Jonathan Crary’s extended perspective on biopower. In his book *Suspensions of Perception*, Crary examines how, in the late nineteenth century, ideas about perception and attention were transformed alongside the emergence of new technological forms of spectacle, display, projection, attraction, and recording.²⁵ The managing of attention and the securing of attentive subject, according to Crary, became vital elements for an emerging capitalism that demanded adaptability in its work force while at the same time depending on and vying for the attention of consumers. I’ll consider how this idea of attention as a crucial element of biopower is – like the need to extract sexual and personal information – simultaneously reflected and undercut in the *Topography*.

1.4 Existing research and literature

The most comprehensive critical study of the *Topography* that I have come across is Jill Carrick’s analysis of the work in her book *Nouveau Réalisme, 1960s France, and the Neo-avant-garde* (2010). To her the *Topography* points to alternative ways of framing New Realism – a movement with which Spoerri was affiliated in the early 1960s – beyond the vision of the movement’s founder Pierre Restany, which is often considered as a rather naïve affirmation of the emerging consumer society in postwar France. According to Carrick, Spoerri’s excavation of hidden memories and histories embedded in each missing object opens up for a reading of New Realism as a site of layered and occasionally conflicted

²³ Dick Higgins, “Intermedia,” in *Something Else Newsletter* Vol. 1, No. 1 (February, 1966), u.p. http://www.primaryinformation.org/oldsite/SEP/Something-Else-Press_Newsletter_V1N1.pdf.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 2.

memories and trauma.²⁶ However interesting this perspective may be, I find that a reading of the *Topography* in terms of Freudian trauma and suppression overemphasizes small portions of the *Topography*, and undermines its playful take on the quotidian.

Other interesting surveys of the *Topography* include Craig Dworkin's essay "Textual Prosthesis" (2005). Dworkin focuses on the genre of "the note" and places the *Topography* in a context of literature reliant on paratextual apparatuses. Peter Schwenger, in his essay "Still Life: A User's Manual" (2002) explores the way Spoerri breathes "life" into his still life through narration. Although their framings of the work is somewhat different from mine, both Carrick, Dworkin and Schwenger offers perspectives that have proven valuable to my work.

Regarding literature about Daniel Spoerri in general, Otto Hahn (1990) and Heidi Violand-Hobi (1998) have written biographies about the artist. A range of catalogues for past solo exhibitions are also available, including *Daniel Spoerri: Assemblagen und Skulpturen*, accompanying his 2007 exhibition at Galerie Willy Schoots, and *Daniel Spoerri: Prillwitzer Idole. Kunst nach Kunst nach Kunst*, from his 2006 exhibition at Staatliches Museum Schwerin.

I have yet to come across an archival framing of the *Topography* or a detailed discussion of its media specific underpinnings. Nor have I seen the archival material concerning the process of re-anecdoting the book as the subject of in-depth analysis or discussion. The plans for further editions and supplements to the book, discussed in chapter 2 and 3, are particularly relevant for any discussion concerning the *Topography*'s inherent potential for infinite growth. I therefore believe this thesis brings both important new information and interesting new perspectives on the *Topography* to the table.

1.5 Background information

Daniel Spoerri was born March 27, 1930 in Romania, to a Jewish father who converted to Protestantism and became a missionary. After the death of his father at the hands of German Nazi soldiers in 1941 he moved to Switzerland, where he was adopted by his uncle. The young Spoerri didn't end up going to university and only made brief attempts at other careers. He did, however, start to dance. In 1952 he moved to Paris to study classical dance

²⁶ Jill Carrick, *Nouveau Réalisme, 1960s France, and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 4-5.

and two years later he became the principal dancer at the Bern opera. Whilst in Bern he also worked as a stager and producer of experimental theatre and, eventually, as an artist.²⁷

On October 27, 1960, whilst living in Paris, Spoerri signed the “Nouveaux Réalistes Declaration of Intention” together with its author, the art critic Pierre Restany, and fellow artists Yves Klein, Arman, Martial Raysse, Jean Tinguely, François Dufrêne, Raymond Hains and Jacques de la Villeglé. The manifesto proposed an art of direct appropriation of objects from everyday life — “[t]he thrilling adventure of the real perceived in itself and not through the prism of conceptual or imaginative transcription”²⁸ In another manifesto published the following year, the group situated itself at “forty degrees above dada.” Also penned by Restany, the manifesto announced the supplanting of the negative Dadaist anti-art gesture with positivity, claiming that the New Realist were all about welcoming progress and embracing the new.²⁹ Downplaying much of the actual differences between the associated artists – between, for instance, Yves Klein’s monochromes and Arman’s accumulations of discarded objects – Restany highlighted these artists “positive” appropriation of modern nature.³⁰ During the first few years of the 1960s, 13 artists participated in New Realist exhibitions, including Niki Saint-Phalle and Christo, who joined the group after the signing of the first manifesto. The last of the collective activities of the group was held as early as in 1963 at the San Marino Biennale, before a series of events is put on in Milan to celebrate the tenth anniversary of New Realism in 1970. Here, Daniel Spoerri hosted a funeral banquet for the movement, for which he had made for each member an edible version of their art.³¹

Yet the editors of the 1995 editions of the *Topography* saw the work as a “perfect embodiment” not of Restany’s positive appropriation of the real, but of the *Fluxus* spirit.³² Consisting as it did of a vast international network of artists whose worked ranged from Events (minimal performances), graphics, multiples, paintings and so much more, Fluxus has been notoriously difficult to define. George Maciunas, self-appointed chairman of Fluxus, coined the term in his 1963 Fluxus manifesto, proclaiming that Fluxus wanted to “promote a revolutionary flood and tide in art,” and to “promote living art, anti-art, promote non-art

²⁷ A more detailed account of Spoerri’s early artistic career is to be found in chapter 2.

²⁸ Pierre Restany, “The Nouveaux Réalistes Declaration of Intention,” in Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (ed.), *Theories and Documents of Contemporary art: A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings*, (Berkley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1996), 306.

²⁹ Pierre Restany, “Forty Degrees Above Dada,” in Stiles and Selz (ed.), *Theories and Documents of Contemporary art*, 308.

³⁰ Carrick, *Nouveau Réalisme, 1960s France, and the Neo-Avant-Garde*, 4-5.

³¹ Centre Pompidou, “New Realism: Chronology,”

<http://mediation.centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-newrea-EN/ENS-newrea-EN.htm#chronology> (visited April 2, 2016).

³² Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 11.

reality.”³³ However, Maciunas’ definition is far from-uncontested (nor were his self-appointed leadership of the loosely organized group). In his 1982 essay “Fluxus: Theory and Reception” Dick Higgins suggests that Fluxus shouldn’t be understood as a movement in Maciunas’s sense, but rather as a category of works that share all or some of nine characteristics – these being internationalism, experimentalism and iconoclasm, intermedia, minimalism or concentration, an attempted resolution of the art/life dichotomy, implicitativeness, play or games, ephemerality and specificity.³⁴

Whatever the definition, Spoerri did indeed become involved with Fluxus after the publication of the first edition of the *Topography*, not least through the publication of the second edition of the *Topography* and a continued collaboration with Higgins’ Something Else Press.³⁵ His involvement also included the organization of *The Festival of Misfits* in London in 1962 – an art festival with key Fluxus artists such as Allison Knowles, Ben Vautier, Robert Filliou and Addi Kørpcke participating.³⁶ Also, the artist’s book *L’Optique Moderne*, which Spoerri co-wrote with Francois Dufrêne, was published by George Maciunas in 1963, so was a later edition of snare-pictures and the series of Flux Post Cards *Monsters Are Inoffensive* (1967), made in collaboration with Robert Filliou and Roland Topor.

Asked by the editors of the 1995 edition of the *Topography* about how the work relates to Fluxus, however, Spoerri simply answers that it doesn’t relate at all.³⁷ This thesis does not aim at an explicit positioning of the *Topography* in relation to New Realism or Fluxus, nor does it discuss whether or not Spoerri was “more” of a Fluxus artist or a New Realist. Still, the approach I have chosen undoubtedly emphasizes the *Topography*’s affinity with Fluxus strategies more than it considers its position in relation to New Realism. This is particularly evident in my use of Dick Higgins’ as a theorist of intermedia art and the centrality of Fluxus artworks that utilizes collaboration, networks and chance as artistic strategies in my attempts to place the *Topography* in an art historical context.

³³ George Maciunas, “Fluxus Manifesto,” in Stiles and Selz (ed.), *Theories and Documents of Contemporary art*, 727.

³⁴ Dick Higgins, “Fluxus: Theory and Reception,” in Ken Friedman (ed.), *The Fluxus Reader* (West Sussex: Academy Editions, 1998), 224.

³⁵ In 1970 Something Else Press published Spoerri’s modestly titled *The Mythological Travels of a Modern Sir John Mandeville, being an account of the Magic, Meatballs and other Monkey Business Peculiar to the Sojourn of Daniel Spoerri on the Isle of Symi, together with diverse speculations thereon*.

³⁶ Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 135.

³⁷ Spoerri’s main reasoning is that the first edition of the *Topography* predates Maciunas coining of the term Fluxus. Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 15.

2 Development of the *Topography*

“As Joe Miller said about the telephone directory, there’s not much plot, but what a cast!”
- Emmett Williams.³⁸

In this chapter I’ll trace the development of *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, from the project’s initial purpose of being an accompaniment to Spoerri’s snare-pictures, via the translation and re-anecdoting processes to the failed attempts at publishing yet more additions to the book. I will try to answer the following questions: What triggered the *Topography*’s conception? Who initiated the translation- and re-anecdoting process? What was the significance of the style of Spoerri’s and his collaborators’ prose? To what extent was the *Topography* meant to keep on growing? Towards the end of the chapter, I’ll discuss some of the implications of Spoerri’s and his contemporaries’ vision of the *Topography* – a discussion that will be elaborated in the following chapters, where I will study the *Topography* in terms of media technologies and archival strategies.

2.1 From snare-picture to topography

By 1962, the year the first edition of the *Topography* was published, Daniel Spoerri had started making a name for himself as the creator of so-called snare-pictures.³⁹ Even though he himself wasn’t trained as an artist, he had moved in circles of artists for years: In 1957 he founded *material*, a review for concrete poetry that featured the work of Dieter Roth, Emmett Williams, Josef Albers and Claus Bremer, among others.⁴⁰ Four editions were published, the last one in 1957. The following couple of years he worked with the Edition *MAT* (short for *Multiplication d’Art Transformable*): a series of multiplied, original artworks that either moved or could be changed, by artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray and Jean Tinguely.⁴¹ Then, in 1960, whilst living in Paris, he co-organized the first international exhibition of kinetic art together with Pontus Hulten and Jean Tinguely. «Bewogen Bewegung» opened at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1961 and later travelled to Moderna Museet in Stockholm and Louisiana Museum in Copenhagen. It was during this process, working with art in motion, that Spoerri started making art himself. In a later interview he explained:

³⁸ *Something Else Newscard* #9, Folder AFr 54H, Archiv Daniel Spoerri, Swiss National Library, Bern.

³⁹ In French: Tableaux-pieges. In German, Fallenbilder.

⁴⁰ Heidi E. Violand-Hobi, *Daniel Spoerri: Biographie und Werk* (München: Prestel-Verlag, 1998), 17.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

In thinking about movement I said to myself that the opposite of movement is the complete stop. I thought therefore about fixedness, which through the contrast would evoke movement in the spectator. The contradiction of movement is stability: the halting of movement signifies movement. There was a whole group of people who were working with this meaning.⁴²

Thus Spoerri started “fixating” the remnants of situations, notably meals. The first ever snare-picture, *Lieu de Repos de la Famille Dellbeck* (The resting place of the Delbeck family) from 1960, consists of two dirty plates, cutlery, a small frying pan, three empty yoghurt cups, a fountain pen, a box used as ash tray and an empty packet of cigarettes. All of the items are glued to the serving tray, in the exact position they were left by Spoerri and his wife Vera after their meal.⁴³ Spoerri later defined his snare-pictures in this way:

“[O]bjects found in chance positions, in order or disorder (on tables, in boxes, drawers, etc.) are fixed (“snared”) as they are. Only the plane is changed: since the result is called a picture, what was horizontal becomes vertical. Example: remains of a meal are fixed to the table at which the meal was consumed, and the table hung on the wall.”⁴⁴

Spoerri first exhibited his snare-pictures at the *Festival d’avantgarde* in Paris in 1960. His first solo exhibition was held in Arturo Schwarz’s gallery in Milan the following year, and in 1961 he also exhibited the snare-picture “Petit déjeuner de Kischka” at Museum of Modern Art in New York, who bought the work for their collection.⁴⁵

The first edition of the *Topography* was produced as a kind of *ersatz* catalogue for an exhibition of snare-pictures at the Galerie Lawrence in Paris in February 1962. In a conversation with Silvia Lorenz held at the Swiss National Library in 2004, the artist explained how he asked if he could take the gallery’s designated budget for invitations and spend it on something else – the result being the first printing of the *Topographie Anecdoteé du hasard*.⁴⁶ As to the motivation behind this project, Spoerri himself has offered several explanations. In the very first introduction to the *Topography*, he writes that the idea was formed after constructing pair of eyeglasses “equipped with needles to poke out the eyes.”⁴⁷ The glasses referred to was an element in the montage work *L’Optique moderne* (1961/62), a collection of assorted glasses hung on a wooden board, and later featured in a Fluxus publication of the same name. In the book, Daniel Spoerri models his collection of glasses,

⁴² Giancarlo Politi, “Daniel Spoerri,” in *Flash Art* Vol. XXII, No. 154 (October 1990), 118.

⁴³ Violand-Hobi, *Daniel Spoerri*, 22.

⁴⁴ Daniel Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 205.

⁴⁵ Artist’s home page, “Daniel Spoerri: Biography,” http://www.danielspoerri.org/web_daniel/englisch_ds/biografie.htm (visited May 2, 2016).

⁴⁶ Spoerri in conversation with Silvia Lorenz.

⁴⁷ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 23.

including the needle pair, accompanied by poems by François Dufrêne.⁴⁸ In Appendix II, which was added to the 1966 edition of the *Topography*, he elaborates that the glasses “made it necessary and possible” to use memory and imagination for the recreation of objects. The objects, instead of being fixed and exhibited, should then be “indicated on a numbered topographic map, with anecdoted descriptions of the objects in an accompanying text.”⁴⁹ The reasoning seems to be that once Spoerri had created a work that left the user blind, he created a work where eyesight is no longer the privileged mode of perception.

The 1966 edition of the *Topography* also offers a different spin on the book’s genesis story. In a footnote to the entry for object no. 36, Spoerri writes that the idea for the *Topography* came to him after he saw one of Arman’s “garbage cans.”⁵⁰ “Not long afterwards I emptied mine on the floor, examined the contents, and thought about how I could retrace the history of each scrap.”⁵¹ Speaking in more general terms, in a conversation with Robert Filliou, transcribed and printed as a footnote to the entry for object no. 25 in the *Topography*, Spoerri explains his idea of creating a “topographic map of chance” stemmed from a wish to push his own limits: “[I]t’s the most challenging thing I’m able to do at the moment. The things on the wall are all too easy.”⁵²

In his 2004 talk at the Swiss National Library, Spoerri claimed that the problem of capturing the stories attached to the objects was something that concerned him almost from the moment he started making snare-pictures; it was impossible to communicate the objects’ stories via the medium of the snare-pictures – the stories simply escaped.⁵³ The solution was to write them down. But because narrating an actual snare-picture could end up elevating that picture into something like the definitive snare-picture, Spoerri decided to instead make a map of a selection of objects and turn it into a book.⁵⁴ This account of the development of the *Topography* is corroborated by Emmett Williams, who in a later text writes that the project evolved from the limitations of the snare-pictures.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Spoerri and François Dufrêne, *L’Optique moderne: Collection de lunettes présentée par D.S. avec en Regard d’Inutiles Notules par François Dufrêne* (Wiesbaden: Fluxus, 1963)

⁴⁹ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 205.

⁵⁰ Arman, who like Spoerri was a part of the New Realist group, was famous for his “Poubelles” (French for garbage cans) that were, simply, collections of garbage. For a discussion of Arman’s work, see Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent 1955-1969* (London: George Weidenfeld & Nicholson Ltd, 1996), 95 – 96.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵³ Spoerri in conversation with Silvia Lorenz.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Emmett Williams, introduction to Daniel Spoerri, *Dokumente – Documents – Documenti zu Krims-Krams Magie*, trans. by André Thomkins (Hamburg: Merlin Verlag, 1971), 4.

Even though the accounts of the origin of the idea behind the *Topography* differ, they aren't necessarily mutually exclusive. In an interview with the editors of the 1995 edition, Spoerri claimed that the idea of the garbage cans and the dark glasses were connected: Arman's garbage was showcased behind glass, and Spoerri wanted to rid his works of this separation between onlooker and object, to create something more tactile. This he managed with the snare-pictures, and describing of the objects as if to a blind person was yet another version on this.⁵⁶ Even so, there is a certain lack of consistency in Spoerri's telling of how the *Topography* came about, which – perhaps unsurprisingly – reveals a diverse field of inspiration and situations leading up to the work. Yet most of Spoerri's explanations for the *Topography* have one common denominator, namely the artist's unwillingness to separate the underlying themes and conception of the *Topography* from the snare-pictures. In his conversation with the editors of the 1995 edition, Daniel Spoerri claimed that the *Topography* could just as well been called *The Narrated Version of a Tableaux Piege*.⁵⁷

This line of continuity was canonized, so to speak, in the Appendix II of the *Topography*, in which Spoerri gives his account of “The Development of the Snare-picture.” In a numbered list, he explains how all his work – from *material* to later experiments in collage and art centered on food – is based upon some of the underlying principles of the snare-pictures. According to Spoerri, chance used as an organizational principle, the use of everyday objects and situations, the questioning of the marketable value of art etc. run as a common thread through project after project – including the *Topography*: “The objects found on a table, instead of being fixed and exhibited, are simply indicated on a numbered topographic map, with anecdoted descriptions of the objects in an accompanying text. Example: the present volume.”⁵⁸

2.2 Re-anecdoting the *Topography*

The collaborative aspect of the *Topography* evolved gradually. As a non-native French speaker, Spoerri relied on the help of his friend and fellow artist Robert Filliou when writing the original manuscript. Soon Filliou started chipping in with stories and thoughts related to the objects himself, which Spoerri integrated in the text.⁵⁹ Whenever he felt that something needed elaborating, Spoerri added footnotes to his own notes offering extra information about

⁵⁶ Transcript of Daniel Spoerri in conversation with Alastair Brothche and Malcolm Green, u.d, Folder AFr 509, Daniel Spoerri Archives.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 205.

⁵⁹ Spoerri in conversation with Silvia Lorenz.

the object. As mentioned in the introduction, the first edition of the *Topography* also featured a footnote on the cover, written by New Realist founder Pierre Restany.

After it was first published in 1962, Spoerri's and Filliou's common friend Emmett Williams took an interest in the *Topography*, asking if he could translate the text into English – to which Spoerri responded that he could, and that Williams should also add footnotes of his own to the text.⁶⁰ Williams pitched the *Topography* to the New York publishing house Something Else Press, founded by Fluxus artist Dick Higgins in 1964,⁶¹ and Higgins, who was already a fan of Spoerri's work,⁶² agreed to publish the book. The resulting edition featured new notes from both Williams and Spoerri, in addition to drawings by French artist Roland Topor and appendices. In a letter to Higgins regarding the manuscript of the re-anecdoted version of the *Topography*, Williams unwittingly illustrated the increasing complexity of the work:

“I will send it to you ... typed on variously colored paper, so you'll know at a glance what's what: as follows:
white: the original text, minus notes
blue: spoerri's notes printed in the original book
green: spoerri's additions to the original text
pink: my anecdotations
yellow: Spoerri's anecdotations of my anecdotations”⁶³

The German translation process, like the English, was launched on the initiative of the translator. Dieter Roth and Spoerri knew each other from Bern and according to Spoerri it was Roth who asked if he could translate and re-anecdote the *Typography*, to which Spoerri agreed.⁶⁴ In a letter to Spoerri from 1968, Roth wrote:

I'm getting closer every day and in a week there's (certainly) already (quite) a lot more (than a lot (less)), though I can't send off the Manuscript bit by bit because all the time I need to compare the late parts of the TOPO with the early parts (of the TOPO) – if the numbers and references (+preferences) etc. match, you understand?⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ In 1965, Emmett Williams became editor-in-chief at Something Else Press, working alongside Higgins. See Peter Frank, *Something Else Press: An Annotated Bibliography* (S.I: McPheson & Company, 1984), 13.

⁶² Dick Higgins wrote to introduce himself to Spoerri and to express admiration for his work, especially the publication *material*. See letter from Higgins to Spoerri, u.d. (probably 1960), Folder "Dick Higgins Correspondence: Daniel Spoerri," Sohm Archive, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart.

⁶³ Letter from Emmett Williams to Higgins, u.d. (probably 1964 or 1965), "Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri."

⁶⁴ Spoerri in conversation with Silvia Lorenz.

⁶⁵ Letter from Dieter Roth to Spoerri, dated July 27 1968, Box 405, Sohm Archive. My translation.

After a lengthy translation process,⁶⁶ Luchterhand Verlag published the book in late 1968. *Anekdoten zu einer Topographie des Zufalls* is a German translation of the 1966 edition – including Spoerri and Williams’ new footnotes – with Roth’s own footnotes added. Roth considerably increased the size of the manuscript. Not only did he add a lot of additional footnotes, he also had a different approach to editing than the previous anecdoters. While in the 1966 edition the transcripts of the conversations between Daniel Spoerri and Robert Filliou that were printed as footnotes to objects no. 25 and 36 had been edited down, Roth included them in their entirety. In footnote where he takes on the full responsibility for this decision, he writes that he found it more laborious to edit than to write the whole thing down; that “a thin book is no thick book”; and that “the more one speaks, the more there is to hear.”⁶⁷ However, the packed layout of the Luchterhand edition, which excluded Topor’s drawings, still made sure that it ended up as a thinner volume than the Something Else Press edition.

2.3 An impersonal touch

In his very first footnote to the introduction to the *Topography*, Dieter Roth explains that unlike Spoerri, he not only doesn’t like objects, he’s afraid of them. In imagining the blue table with the objects on it, he says he feels “like one of the naughty little boys who in enormous envy, playfully destroy other boys’ (and girls’) playthings as soon as they have been lent them.”⁶⁸ This is not to say that Roth actually thought he “destroyed” the *Topography* – in a later footnote he proclaimed it would be impossible to do so⁶⁹ – but the remarks have an oddly prophetic ring to them: Spoerri repeatedly expressed his dislike for the 1968 German edition of his book, claiming that Roth made it “indigestible.” With Roth’s way of adding “two more footnotes” to “a footnote to a footnote to a footnote,” Spoerri couldn’t imagine anybody ever reading the whole book through. Emmett Williams, by contrast, had added just enough new material to keep things interesting, keeping to the game of “of writing anecdotes about our life at the time when we still lived in Paris.”⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Roth missed his deadlines several times during the process, resulting in a rather tense correspondence between him and his editor – reprinted in full in the 1995 edition of the book. See Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 27 – 30.

⁶⁷ Spoerri, *Anekdoten zu einer Topographie des Zufalls* (Neuwied and Berlin: Herman Luchterhand Verlag, 1968), 49.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁹ See *ibid.*, 132 – 133.

⁷⁰ Spoerri in conversation with Lorenz.

Dieter Roth did not stick to this game, neither quantitatively nor qualitatively. Reading the *Topography*, it's hard not to notice the distinct stylistic difference between Spoerri and Williams on the one hand, and Roth on the other. As Peter K. Wehrl, reviewing the German edition for *Die Weltwoche*, noted:

“Spoerri’s language is sober, factual like a receipt (...) Emmett Williams contributions, as well, strictly stick to the object at hand; it’s about the originality of the object and not the originality of the language. That’s why Dieter Roth’s additions are foreign [Fremdkörper] to this book. His contributions points away from the objects that he’s supposed to encircle, uncover.”⁷¹

Examples supporting Wehrl’s assessment can be found throughout the *Topography*. Take the entries for object no. 12, for example: Spoerri’s short, original note reads: “**Carton of Socosel** containing 250 grammes of fine salt, dried by evaporation, torn at the top, half full, used by KISCHKA to salt her eggs.” To this, Roth added:

“So we are very concerned. Sometimes about the salt, sometimes about the socle, sometimes about the salt on its socle, sometimes about the socle under its salt. Sometimes about the socle made of books under the salt made of letters, sometimes about the salty letters on the sochlish books. Sometimes about the flat pronted name of the salt in the flattened printed salt packet, sometimes about the flat print of the salt packet with the flat printed name of the salt on its face. And from the flat salt on the upper face of the socle made of books ascends a salted cloud full of salty meanings, first into the eyes, then into the brain, and from the brain there ascends another one on which is written: And so we are very concerned, sometimes about the salt, sometimes about its meaning. Sometimes about the salt in our eyes, sometimes about the salt in its packet. Sometimes about the salt on its packets. Sometimes about the salt on its socle, sometimes about our eyes in their sockets. From them ascends a cloud on which is written, *Das Wandern ist des Müllers Lust*: “rambling is the miller’s great delight.””⁷²

Not all of Roth’s footnotes are of equal length – and many of Spoerri’s and Williams’ contributions are longer – but the above quoted excerpt highlights Roth’s tendency to stream-of-consciousness-like writing, often rooted in a play on words and with an almost metaphysical quality to it. The strange poeticism of sentences like, “from the flat salt on the upper face of the socle made of books ascends a salted cloud full of salty meanings” could be ascribed to alliteration, a sense of surreal-ness or a kind of cerebral playfulness. In any case it represents a movement away from the actual object at hand. This is a far cry from Spoerri’s quasi-scientific descriptions and matter-of-fact elaborations – described by one reviewer as “a scholarly style that any bibliographer, museum director or art historian might be proud of.”⁷³ Despite the telling of anecdotes and incidents connected to the objects, Spoerri wanted to

⁷¹ Peter K. Wehrl, “Biografie der Dinge,” in *Die Weltwoche* nr 1881, November 21, 1969, available from Folder A-02, Daniel Spoerri Archives. My translation.

⁷² Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 57.

⁷³ Review of the first edition of the *Topography* in *Times Literary Supplement*, September 3, 1964, quoted in Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 26.

keep his writing impersonal, in keeping with the objects that were chosen not for their significance but because they simple were *there* at the table when Spoerri decided to outline his map. Emmett Williams later described Spoerri as laboring “a bold contempt for personal opinions (his own, yours and mine - but especially yours and mine).”⁷⁴ In the introduction to Spoerri’s 1968 book *25 Objets de Magie a la Noix: Zimtzaubernkonserven*, published as an exhibition catalogue for Galerie Gunar in Düsseldorf, Spoerri explains that:

Man has always given meaning to the objects that he has touched, that come from the dead or that have been touched by the gods, and what thing has not been touched by the gods? In my “Topography” that was exactly the aspect of the objects I wanted to avoid, and describe the nail as a nail and a piece of bread as a piece of bread.⁷⁵

The anti-subjective stance evident in this remark is deeply rooted in Spoerri’s early work as publisher of concrete poetry and “founder” of multiples. In a passage in the *Topography* concerning concrete poetry, Spoerri writes that “the authors [of concrete poetry] avoided any kind of subjective interpretation,”⁷⁶ thus inviting the reader to “assume the personal position that the author had vacated.”⁷⁷ As explained in a footnote to object no. 34G in the *Topography*, all issues of the review *material* were numbered with prime numbers, signaling that the content could only be understood through the content itself, and not through interpretations or comparisons with other works.⁷⁸ A similar elimination of the subjective is to be found in Spoerri’s editions of multiplied artwork, Edition *MAT*. The project was described as an attempt to multiply art outside processes of reproduction such as lithography, bronze casting, tapestry etc. For this to work, according to Spoerri, the work had to eliminate all elements of “personal handwriting,” as this would permit “only reproduction and not multiplication.”⁷⁹ The inherit movement in the works made each number of a series an original, rather than a reproduction of an original.⁸⁰

⁷⁴ Williams, introduction to Daniel Spoerri, *Dokumente – Documents – Documenti zu Krims-Krams Magie*, 1.

⁷⁵ Spoerri, *25 Objets de magie a la Noix: Zimtzaubernkonserven*, trans. by André Thomkins (Düsseldorf: Galerie Gunar, 1968), 5. My translation.

⁷⁶ Symptomatic for their difference of opinion on this matter, Diether Roth added the following footnote, blurring the distinction between the subjective and the objective: “Is the so-called subjective really itself? Is it not I who possesses and constitutes the subjective? So isn’t it a part of me, and thus not something that one can quite calmly give a name to as if it were a being? And is the objective really itself? Is it not i... and so on, as above. So are the subjective and the objective actually different? Shouldn’t one rather avoid calling them by some name or other – first, because both are not themselves, and second, because bot *are not* in the same way?” Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 208.

⁷⁷ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 204.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 70

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 204.

Speaking about his snare-pictures Spoerri stressed how the tension between movement and immobility – the freezing of something in process – evoked movement in the spectator. With Edition *MAT*, which consisted of artworks that moved or could be changed, the viewers became performers in that the picture changed when they moved, or they themselves set the artworks in motion.⁸¹ And on his involvement with the *Bewogen Beweging* exhibition of moveable art in Amsterdam, Spoerri writes: “Again, the visitors were incorporated so directly into the exhibition that they became performers. Does the viewer in an exhibition *have* to act passively?”⁸² Viewed in conjunction with this earlier work, then, the impersonal tone of the *Topography* becomes another way of inviting the reader to assume the “personal position vacated by the author.” Not offering the subjective interpretations of the objects by the artists meant that readers could more easily “finish” the work themselves – or, as Spoerri puts it in a footnote in the *Topography*: “I want to put it back into the spectators’ imagination.”⁸³

2.4 The lost supplements

At the start of Something Else Press’ 1966 edition of *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, a “Publisher’s Announcement” declares the following:

“It’s our intention to issue, at irregular intervals, supplements to this text. Readers are invited to send in their names and addresses to Something Else Press, Inc. 160 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010, U.S.A. in order to receive these supplements at a nominal, non-profit charge. Readers are also invited to send in contributions to these supplements in the form of further annotations and comments on the one hundred and one articles in this text. We are particularly interested in receiving contributions to the IV, V, XI and XIX arrondissements of Paris, in which much of the action of this book takes place. Writers of each usable contribution will receive five copies of the supplement in which their contributions appear.”⁸⁴

The one hundred and one articles, apparently, weren’t enough for Daniel Spoerri’s growing collection of thoughts triggered by his blue table. As this announcement makes clear, the Something Else Press intended to publish regular supplements to the *Topography*, including contributions from readers. Although it’s not evident whose idea this kind of supplement was in the first place, Spoerri expressed his views on the matter in a letter to his publisher dated July 1965. In it, he practically begged Dick Higgins to make sure to include the promise of “a supplement to the present version of the *Topographie*,” to be published “every year from now

⁸¹ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 204.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 205.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁸⁴ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (New York: Something Else Press Inc., 1966), xiii.

on” in the introduction to the book.⁸⁵ He pressed that it was “very important” to state that the *Topography* would continue to grow, “like poisonous mushrooms,” to signal that it had neither beginning nor end.⁸⁶ Dick Higgins obviously complied, adding a suggestion of his own: in a letter to Daniel Spoerri he wrote:

“The announcement of the supplements of the book, I think, should include an invitation to the reader to send in his own contributions. These, when we have them, can be passed on to you, absorbed, digested, evaluated, annotated, etc., and, some of them, used.”⁸⁷

No such supplement was ever published. But the ambition to do so died hard, and it wasn’t lack of new material that killed it. Already in May 1966, a few months after the publication of the Something Else Press edition, Higgins wrote that they had “a good many supplementary notes in our files,”⁸⁸ and a couple of months later he suggested that they publish the first supplement in August the same year.⁸⁹ In the correspondence between the two over the next four years, the forthcoming supplements is a recurring topic, with references made to new notes from both Spoerri himself, Robert Filliou and George Brecht. In September 1967, Spoerri wrote his publisher saying that “the manuscript for the re-re-anecdoted Topo is ready for Emmett,”⁹⁰ meaning ready for translation. He estimated the new material to amounting to something like 100 pages, and worried that Emmett would be too slow translating it.⁹¹ As an example of the new material, here’s one of George Brecht’s notes, gathered in a notebook with the name “Some notes on Daniel Spoerri’s “An Anecdoted Topography of Chance (re-anecdoted version)”:

I still have a copy of the 1962 version of the topographie, which was sent to me by Arturo Schwarz (that year, I believe), after I had written him asking for it. I had written to him asking for it after seeing “Kichka’s Breakfast” in the “Assemblage” show, and being very much impressed by it. It must have been William Seitz who suggested getting in touch with Schwarz, as I don’t think I had heard of Spoerri or Schwarz before that (though I wouldn’t swear to it, I have hardly any memory.)
Anyway, the letter “s” is the only letter all three names, Spoerii, Seitz, and Schwarz have in common.⁹²

In addition to the additional footnotes Spoerri gathered from his friends and colleagues, readers did actually send in their own contributions. Preserved in the archives are notes from one Arnold Rockman, a Canadian artist and “reader of American edition” and artist and

⁸⁵ Letter from Spoerri to Higgins, dated July 18 1965, “Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri.”

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Letter from Higgins to Spoerri, dated October 23 1965, “Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri”; Spoerri in conversation with Brothchie and Green.

⁸⁸ Letter from Higgins to Spoerri, dated May 4, 1966, “Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri.”

⁸⁹ Letter from Higgins to Spoerri, dated July 2, 1966, “Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri.”

⁹⁰ Letter from Spoerri to Higgins, dated September 14, 1967, “Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri.”

⁹¹ Letter from Spoerri to Higgins, dated September 7, 1967, “Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri.”

⁹² Notebook of George Brecht, Box 405, Sohm Archive.

composer Phillip Corner, also “reader of the American edition”⁹³ (and friend of Emmett Williams).⁹⁴ Artist Steve Balkins also chimed in, with a note about a visiting Daniel Spoerri’s installation in the Chelsea Hotel in 1965.⁹⁵ Based on this evidence, the *Topography* could certainly be said to capture the imagination of fellow artists – if not of a huge portion of the lay public.

Dick Higgins also prepared quite a few footnotes of his own. In a letter to Spoerri, Williams sent over all of Higgins’ notes, together with the ones he thought appropriate from Rockman and Corner. For example, to Spoerri’s note to object no. 22, referring to a glass of wine Spoerri is in the process of drinking, Higgins added:

Judging from the diagram, one doubts the author’s statement, since it doesn’t seem to allow enough room for him to write. Could the true position of the glass have been slightly to the right?
(Dick Higgins, publisher of American edition).⁹⁶

Higgins even gave the group of people engaged in the re-anecdoting the *Topography* a name – The Society for the Study of Daniel Spoerri’s Blue Table (S.S.D.S.B.T) – and suggested that the supplements to the 1966 *Topography* should be called “The Proceeding of the S.S.D.S.B.T.”⁹⁷ Spoerri liked the idea, but thought a subtitle was necessary: Society for the Study of Do it yourSelf Blue Thinking.⁹⁸

In addition to the plans for supplements, there’s evidence of Higgins and Spoerri facilitating further re-anecdoted translations of the *Topography*. The Danish poet and critic Hans Jørgen Nielsen wanted to do a Danish edition, which Spoerri granted permission for while at the same time handing over new footnotes from George Brecht, Robert Filliou and himself;⁹⁹ Higgins approached an Italian publisher on the possibility of doing an Italian edition;¹⁰⁰ and Spoerri planned to send the book to French author Alain Robbe-Grillet hoping for a new French edition. Higgins told him to tell Robbe-Grillet he could have all rights in

⁹³ Letter from Higgins to Williams, with contributions from himself and readers attached, u.d., Folder AFr 563 S, Archiv Daniel Spoerri.

⁹⁴ Williams mentions Phillip Corner being “a great guy” in a letter to Daniel Spoerri, July 18 (year unknown), Folder AFr 563P, Archiv Daniel Spoerri.

⁹⁵ Letter from Steve Balkin to Higgins, dated April 5 1968, “Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri.”

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Letter from Higgins to Spoerri, dated November 11, 1969, “Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri.”

⁹⁸ Letter from Spoerri to Higgins, dated November 26, 1969, “Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri.”

⁹⁹ Letter from Hans Jørgen Nielsen to Spoerri, dated 22 July (1966?), Folder AFr 563z, Archiv Daniel Spoerri; letter from Daniel Spoerri to Dick Higgins, u.d. “Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri.”

¹⁰⁰ Letter from Higgins to Spoerri, dated February 1966, “Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri.”

French in exchange for giving Something Else Press the English right to Robbe-Grillet's own notes.¹⁰¹

By 1969 Something Else Press was in a pinch. Dick Higgins was alone in handling the publishing house's affairs after the woman he "counted on so much to grow into the Press grew into Emmett [Williams]' fiancée" and thus had to be let go.¹⁰² He was unable to get hold of Williams, and the publication date for Spoerri's next book, *The Mythological Travels*, was likely to be postponed. Faced with this situation, Higgins proposed a "Salvation Package" to Spoerri, including a final push to get the first supplement to the *Typography* printed – with "all Diter's stuff that is new to the German edition (...), and add in a huge mass of material which we have received here."¹⁰³ Daniel agreed to the idea, adding that new notes from Brecht, Filliou and himself were also ready for translation.¹⁰⁴ At this point Higgins had already reached out Emmett Williams to propose to devote a Something Else Newsletter¹⁰⁵ to the "Study of Daniel Spoerri's Blue Table," asking "where are the material we received at our office from our readers?"¹⁰⁶ When the proposed newsletter was sent out to the subscribers, however, it only notified about the coming publication of the *Mythological Travels* and the paperback edition of the *Topography*.¹⁰⁷

In 1974, Something Else Press ceased its operations. The events leading up to this have been described as a "complex of factors, ranging from the nature of the times to the personal troubles then besetting Higgins himself," something that may have contributed to the failure to publish the planned supplements as well. But even though the extensions to the *Topography* never saw the light of day in the form of further editions or printed supplements, the book did grow. New footnotes and collaborators were gathered, even if they never made it to print.

¹⁰¹ Letter from Spoerri to Higgins, u.d.; letter from Higgins to Spoerri, dated March 10 1966, "Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri."

¹⁰² Letter from Higgins to Spoerri, dated November 11, 1969, "Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri."

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Letter from Spoerri to Higgins, dated November 26, 1969, Folder "Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri."

¹⁰⁵ Starting in February 1966, Something Else Press sent out newsletters to subscribers, featuring information about the activities of the publishing house as well as essays by Dick Higgins and others.

¹⁰⁶ Letter from Higgins to Williams, dated November 5 1969, Folder "Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri."

¹⁰⁷ *Something Else Newsletter* Vol. 1 No. 12, February 1970.

http://primaryinformation.org/oldsite/SEP/Something-Else-Press_Newsletter_V1N12.pdf

2.5 Conclusion

Apart from one account tracing the idea for the *Topography* back to an overturned garbage can, Daniel Spoerri consistently linked the writing of the original book to his snare-pictures. The premise for both (groups of) works is indeed similar: choosing a group of objects organized by chance and everyday life, Spoerri took inventory of a certain moment in time, freezing it for posterity. The objects that were “snared” in this manner were not of a kind that would normally be thought to deserve any kind of special attention; they were residues of the quotidian, banal traces of banal situations, the kind of stuff that were overlooked more often than not. In the *Topography*, Spoerri snares the objects through language rather than glue: he describes the objects, as if to someone blind, and recounts stories attached to them. Years after outlining the objects on his blue table, Spoerri admitted that he had given all of them away;¹⁰⁸ in other words, while in the snare-pictures, the stories are gone and the objects are all that remain, in the *Topography*, the objects are gone and the language is all that remain.

As the editors of the 1995 edition noted, the *Topography* doesn’t simply “fix” a moment in time, it also leaves it open.¹⁰⁹ The process of re-anecdoting is a defining characteristic of the whole project, exposing the *Topography* to new levels of contingency: Chance enters not only at the level of the selection and organization of the objects, or at the level of the human mind and memory, through the written notes, but also the handing over of the work to other people. Although the collaborative element wasn’t a part of the original plan for the *Topography*, the procedure of re-anecdoting appears as a natural elongation of Spoerri’s method of attaching footnotes to his own notes, as well as collaborating with Robert Filliou on the original text and allowing Pierre Restany to add a footnote to the title of the work. Eventually Spoerri saw the re-anecdoting process as a key feature of the *Topography*, insisting that the readers of the 1966 edition were made aware that the book would continue to grow.

To underline the fact that the objects are not imbued with any kind of esignificance, Spoerri described them in a simple, concrete language. Spoerri and his friends and colleagues are present in the text as characters in anecdotes and stories generated from the objects, but even so Spoerri withholds his own subjective opinions. Seeing as the frame of reference for the text is linked to a specific group of people at a specific moment in time, the *Topography* is somewhat internal. This especially evident as Emmett Williams joins Spoerri as narrator;

¹⁰⁸ Letter from Spoerri to Higgins, dated July 18, 1965, “Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri.”

¹⁰⁹ Daniel Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 12.

their shared experiences and network form the base for much of the conversation. Yet it's hardly ever private, even though the objects are the personal possessions of Spoerri.

As the process leading up to the first three editions of the *Topography* shows, its distinctive depersonalized approach to the task of presenting the objects and the open-ended character of the work were crucial features of Daniel Spoerri's vision, as well as highly defining for the work as it is presented to the reader. In the following chapters, these features will be further analyzed in terms of the work's evoking of media technologies and its archival character.

3 Media Technologies, Art and the Archive

“[F]irstly I wanted to demonstrate a ‘*piege raconté*’ and then I thought, well, from a button you can explain the world, and it became this snowball in the end, it would become as big as the *Grand Larousse*...”¹¹⁰
- Daniel Spoerri

This chapter will present the theoretical framework necessary to understand the *Topography* in terms of media technologies and the archive. In I’ll argue that the *Topography* is a work deeply influenced by technical media and that this is an important aspect of why it should be considered an archival work. The archival framing of the *Topography* will also be argued for in terms of the work’s technical structure and its affinities with the nineteenth-century bureaucratic archive as well as archival artworks from the postwar period.

The suggestion underpinning this chapter is that the *Topography*’s particular structure and its mode of recording and storing information point beyond the traditional book format and towards the archive. For this to make sense it’s important to understand the way the work is supported and influenced by different media technologies. The first section of this chapter therefore identifies the different media technologies that are either explicitly part of, or implicitly evoked in the *Topography* and discusses their influence on the form and style of the work. Focusing on the work’s photographic elements, its style of writing and its use of sound recordings, I’ll argue that technical media play an important role in bringing Spoerri’s vision of the *Topography* as an impersonal account of ordinary objects to life. Also, by incorporating such media the *Topography* takes part in the artists’ books expansion of the book medium, in a way that opens for the work to be considered not just as a book also as an archive. In the second section of this chapter I’ll consider the link formed by technical media and their ability to capture the contingent between the nineteenth-century archive and the *Topography*. I’ll also argue that the *Topography* is defined by a technical principle of registration that generates the work, and look at how this plays into the artistic re-imagining of the traditional bureaucratic archive in the postwar period.

3.1 Media technologies of the *Topography*

As discussed in chapter 2, the *Topography* evolved from Spoerri’s snare-pictures, which in terms of media means that it evolved from photography. The distinctive feature of photography as a medium is its indexical correlation with reality – the fact that a photograph never can be “distinguished from its referent (from what it represents), or at least not

¹¹⁰ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 18 – 19.

immediately or *generally* distinguished from its referent,” as Roland Barthes writes.¹¹¹ Andre Bazin points to how the camera lens, as an objective, mechanical apparatus, forces us to “accept as real the object reproduced, actually *re-presented*, set before us, that is to say, in time and space.”¹¹² Meaning, photography captures objects in space as well as a moment in time in a way that we have no choice but to admit adheres to reality.

The way Spoerri freeze-frames sections of reality in his snare-pictures can easily be viewed as a kind of three-dimensional photography. His insistence on including every last object – be it fork, dirty napkin or cigarette butt – within his chosen frame correlates with the photographic feature of documenting not just objects of significance but every single detail that’s before the camera’s lens, while his wish to represent “halted movement” finds its perfect expression in photography’s ability to isolate single moments in time. According to Spoerri himself, the snare-pictures were often mistaken for photographs after he first started displaying them. “I had to say, it’s not a photograph, it’s a photograph of original objects,” he said in an interview.¹¹³ With the snare-pictures, Spoerri merged the role of artist with that of the “detached scientific observer,” that, in the words of media archaeologist Wolfgang Ernst, is the camera.¹¹⁴ Composition was handed over to chance and the only aesthetic decision to make was which moment to choose. Part of the snare-pictures’ power resides in the fact they are aren’t staged, but simply frozen moments in time. Even if, as the snare-pictures gained a wider audience, Spoerri constructed specific situations from which the snare-pictures would emerge, their message are still one of what Ernst calls “the cold mechanical eye” of photography, which replaced the theatrically staging of the past in earlier visual media.¹¹⁵

According to Ernst, the introduction of photography in the nineteenth century prompted an obsession with the unmediated representation of the past – a change from “*describing* to *showing* [that] can be deciphered as an effect of the new optical media.”¹¹⁶ But where the snare-pictures simply *showed*, the *Topography* turned to describing. The previous chapter pointed to Spoerri’s concern that the snare-pictures weren’t equipped to retain the stories attached to the objects and how this induced him to look for ways in which these could be presented together with the snare-pictures – the result being the first edition of the

¹¹¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 5

¹¹² André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” trans. by Hugh Gray, in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 13 No. 4 (Summer, 1960), 8.

¹¹³ Conversation between Daniel Spoerri and Silvia Lorenz, Daniel Spoerri Archives.

¹¹⁴ See Ernst, “Let There Be Irony,” 49.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Topography. His concern is analogous to Siegfried Kracauer's assertion that photograph's lack the ability to store context and memories, as elaborated upon in the 1927 essay "Photography." According to Kracauer, photographs depend on the memories of the viewers in order to make sense as something beyond an accurate representation of a given spatial continuum. This in turn means that a photograph's meaning will change over time, as the viewers change – or end up meaning nothing at all, if we can't attach any kind of memories to it.¹¹⁷ If we were to transfer Kracauer's argument to the *Topography*, it would be reasonable to argue that Spoerri's written notes are introduced as a means to rescue the objects from the "oblivion" the photographic medium promises.

However, the lack of a narrative dimension to photograph's could also be framed as a positive feature, as proven by media archaeologist Wolfgang Ernst. From Ernst's perspective, human memory is selective and prone to the use of imagination and imposed narratives to make sense of the past. Photography, on the other hand, can physically register temporal events, bringing the past back to memory not by means of the fickle powers of the human brain, but as a physical, irrefutable document.¹¹⁸ Ernst's media archaeology seeks to free itself from the imposing of historical narratives on the past and rather focus on the non-discursive elements – "not on the speakers but rather on the agency of the machine."¹¹⁹ In so doing, media archaeology answers nineteenth-century-historian Leopold von Ranke's famous – and much refuted – call to tell history "*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist.*" Only that with the emergence of technical media the imperfect, subjective human registrar is displaced by the machine: "If Ranke's historiography tried to efface the author's traces in order to let an objective pastness of the past appear, " Ernst writes, "the new technological media performed this task even more radically. The camera eye displaces subjective vision."¹²⁰ Kracauer sees the same parallel between photography and Ranke's brand of historiography, in that advocates of such historicist thinking,

"believe that they can grasp historical reality by reconstructing the series of events in their temporal succession without any gaps. Photography presents a spatial continuum; historicism seeks to provide the temporal continuum."¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Siegfried Kracauer, "Photography," trans. by Thomas Y. Levin, in *Critical Inquiry* Vol. 19, No. 3 (Spring 1993), 429.

¹¹⁸ Ernst, "Let There Be Irony," 47.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ Kracauer, "Photography," 424 – 425.

Contrary to Kracauer, however, Ernst views precise descriptiveness of technical media as the model for engagements with the past.

What is left of the snare-pictures' photographic arresting of the present in the *Topography* is the map with the indexical tracing of objects. It's a retrograde evolution, bringing photography back to its mythic origins of Butades daughter tracing the shadow of her lover on the wall, thus inventing both drawing and, arguably, photography. Stepping aside to make room for written language, the question becomes one of what gap the photographic medium leaves to be filled. Are the notes and footnotes meant to rescue the objects from the inevitable obscuration imagined by Kracauer, or did Spoerri internalize the cold gaze of camera when writing his notes?

In one of his conversations with Robert Filliou, which is printed as a footnote to object no. 25 in the *Topography*, Daniel Spoerri reflects on the fact that, having reduced the objects on his table to outlines, he “would like to explain very fully. For example, everything here. I'd have to explain that this is a tape recorder, because no one would know what it was, it would just be a square... a rectangle.”¹²² The text would be there to complement the map, and vice versa: “Without the outline the *Topography* wouldn't make any sense, and without the text the outline wouldn't make any sense,” Spoerri writes.¹²³ Through the removal of the actual objects, and making the readers rely largely on the notes, Spoerri wanted to force readers to picture the objects using their imagination: “it is described, and then one has to imagine how it looks. It doesn't exist as a picture, only as a described object, described situations.”¹²⁴ To do this, he relied on writing.

Spoerri's notes tend to start off with a more or less exact description of the object at hand, before, in some of the notes, the story behind how the object ended up at his table, or any kind of story is revealed. A typical entry goes like this:

15. Jar of celery salt, three-fourths full, bought in one of the IRMA chain stores in Copenhagen, price 79 øre. about 56 centimes. IRMA stocks a wide range of spices in these practical containers, all at the same astonishingly low price. I made this purchase with ROBERT FILLIOU, and I recall that the pretty blonde cashier blushed violently at our pleasantries in French. On the label is stamped “Caution, work of art.”¹²⁵

Another example: “**66. Ordinary cork**, on a corkscrew, the missing handle of which was broken off a long time ago. I have continued using it with the aid of pliers because I keep

¹²² Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 79.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹²⁴ Spoerri in conversation with Silvia Lorenz, Sohm Archive.

¹²⁵ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 61.

forgetting to get a new one.”¹²⁶ The direct, matter-of-fact style of writing in these two examples is typical for Spoerri’s approach to the items on his own table. Rather than accentuating any special or extraordinary aspects the objects, he chose to keep to the rather banal reality of their appearance and simple facts about their use. As such, they read like literary critic Georg Lukács’ nightmare. In his famous 1936 essay “Narrate or Describe?” Lukács launched an attack on the rise of the so-called “descriptive,” formalist mode of fictional writing, lamenting its rise at the cost of the epic, narrative novel from the mid-nineteenth-century onwards. Lukács contrasts the minutely described, but essentially lifeless tableaux of writers such as Émile Zola and Gustave Flaubert with the richly plotted novels of Walter Scott, Honoré de Balzac and Leo Tolstoy.¹²⁷ While Lukács’ binary opposition between the narrative and the descriptive leaves much ground for nuancing, he formulates an eloquent frame for understanding Spoerri’s plain prose. “Narration establishes proportions,” Lukács writes, “description merely levels.”¹²⁸ Or even worse, description reverses the entire order of significance, by describing the important and the unimportant with equal attention.¹²⁹ This comes very close to describing what Spoerri does in the *Topography*. Although the length of the entries and the number of footnotes added to the various objects vary, the amount of information attached to an object isn’t necessarily an indicator of this object’s importance. For example, object no. 74, a paper clip, is richly anecdoted with footnotes from Spoerri as well as Williams and Roth. Yet most of the footnotes depart from Spoerri’s quoting of a French dictionary’s highly detailed definition of the musical instrument trombone, before adding “None of these trombones, but a paper clip” – a French term for paper clip being *trombone*.¹³⁰ The number and length of the footnotes added to this and several other objects serve to hint at the revelation of something important that never, really, materializes. The same could be said of the scholarly formatting of the text, with its encyclopedia-like entries and abundance of footnotes. Although alluding to the seriousness of official documents or academic writing, these connotations are undermined when the footnote genre is used to expand on stories with no seeming need to be expanded, to exchange jokes and quibbles, to nit-pick over the meaning of words or chain of events, to cite passages of literature with only a fleeting relevance to the subject at hand, etc. As Craig

¹²⁶ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 175.

¹²⁷ See Georg Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?” in Lukács, *Writer and Critic and other essays*, ed. and trans. by Arthur Kahn (London: Merlin Press, 1970).

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹³⁰ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 186.

Dworkin notes, “the anecdotes fail to divulge any especially interesting secret histories; the banal accounts of quotidian objects ultimately reveal them to be, in fact, rather ordinary.”¹³¹

Even as the notes digress into stories and anecdotes involving real people, they mostly remain detached from anything of actual importance to the world outside of the *Topography* and refrain from revealing intimate details about the writers. One of very few exceptions is this single footnote to object no. 48, added by Spoerri to the 1966 edition:

“I had just taken up dancing when I met MAX TERPIS, ballet master of the Berlin Opera during the 1920s. (The Nazi rise to power ended his career.) (...) I mention this meeting here because it is to him that I owe most in life. Over the years we saw one another everyday, and thanks to him I realized my potential. Once I acquired my own individuality, however, it inevitably conflicted with his, and I saw him only rarely the last years of his life, which he spent alone. After his death in 1958, his brother, in announcing the decease and informing me that TERPIS had remembered me generously in his will, justifiably reproached me for my ingratitude.”¹³²

The expression of gratitude, personal bonds and ultimately regret and shame in this footnote stands out in *Topography*. The phrase “I mention this meeting here because it is to him that I owe most in my life” is particularly striking, simply because it implies that this information has its natural place in the *Topography* – when in fact the *Topography* is a work quite devoid of heart-felt elaborations on formative experiences. For instance, the death of Spoerri’s Jewish father following the Nazi invasion of Romania is only mentioned in passing – and only in the phrasing of Robert Fillou, in his brief biographical sketch of Daniel Spoerri toward the end of the book: “After [his father’s] death at the hands of the Germans in 1941, the family fled to Switzerland, where DANIEL was adopted by his maternal uncle ... THEOPHIL SPOERRI, rector of the University of Zurich.”¹³³ In general, the stories of the *Topography* very seldom dates back to Spoerri’s childhood or youth, focusing rather on the immediate past and situations relating to the life Spoerri is currently leading in Paris.

Spoerri’s simple, descriptive style of writing is consistent with a wider literary trend that in no way declined after the publication of Lukàcs’ essay. Writing from her salon in Paris, the idiosyncratic, descriptive prose of Gertrude Stein became a massive influence on writers such as Ernst Hemingway, which spread her style far beyond the relatively small circle of people who actually read her books.¹³⁴ Dick Higgins later became an important American publisher of the works of Stein, to such an extent that he in 1972 devoted a

¹³¹ Craig Dworkin, “Textual Prostheses,” in *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 57, No. 1 (Winter, 2005), 3.

¹³² Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 48.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹³⁴ Commenting on the early French translations of Gertrude Stein, Renée Riese Hubert thinks it likely that “her texts in French had as many readers as her texts in English – that is, very few.” Renée Riese Hubert, “Gertrude Stein and the making of Frenchmen” in *SubStance*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Issue 59 (1989), 72.

Something Else Press Newsletter to the question “Why do we publish so much Gertrude Stein?”¹³⁵ In France, at the time the first edition of the *Topography* was published, the most visible proponent for a descriptive, “steinian” writing was Alain Robbe-Grillet, inventor of the *Nouveau Roman*. By the time the first edition of the *Topography* was published in 1962, Robbe-Grillet had already published several of his “New Novels” and in 1963 he elaborated upon the theory behind them in the essay collection *Pour un Nouveau Roman*.¹³⁶ Here Robbe-Grillet discards the notion that novels are dependent upon devices such as plot, character and narrative, envisioning instead a novel based around objects whose presence prevails “over whatever explanatory theory that may try to enclose them in a system of references, whether emotional, sociological, Freudian or metaphysical.”¹³⁷ The similarities between such statements and Spoerri’s object-descriptions led several early readers and critics to compare the *Topography* with Robbe-Grillet’s writing.¹³⁸ Spoerri, however, denied being inspired by the French writer. Writing about Robbe-Grillet in the *Topography*, he claims he was unable to read more than three pages of his work before growing bored.¹³⁹

What were the reasons for the proliferation of this type of writing, to whose tradition *Topography* can be said to belong? Georg Lukács blames the rise of capitalism in the nineteenth-century and the tendency among younger writers to adhere to the capitalist division of labor, becoming specialists in their craft and aloof commentators to society in general.¹⁴⁰ At the same time, his identification of the “leveling effect” of the descriptive mode could be linked to the previous discussion of photography’s – and, by extension other technical recording media’s – ability to indexically reproduce reality. Description levels, according to Lukács – and so does the indifferent, “cold gaze” of technical media.

Media theorist Friedrich Kittler has, in his study of late nineteenth-century literature, come to some of the same conclusions as Lukács, precisely by focusing on the effects of technical media on communication. According to Kittler, the introduction of the gramophone, film and typewriter in the late nineteenth century had severe combined effects on literature, the most important of which was to free writing from acting as a surrogate for sound and the

¹³⁵ See Dick Higgins, “Why do we publish so much Gertrude Stein?” in *The Something Else Newsletter*, Vol. 2, No. 4, September 1972. http://primaryinformation.org/oldsite/SEP/Something-Else-Press_Newsletter_V2N4.pdf

¹³⁶ It should be noted that Robbe-Grillet in this book spends considerable energy lamenting the tendency in critics and readers towards measuring all new literature against the standard of Balzac, thus illustrating that the normative views of Lukács were still prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s.

¹³⁷ Alain Robbe-Grillet, “A Future for the Novel,” in *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. by Richard Howard (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1989), 21.

¹³⁸ See Carrick, *Nouveau Réalisme, 1960s France, and the Neo-Avant-Garde*, 145.

¹³⁹ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 188.

¹⁴⁰ See Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?” 116-120.

moving image.¹⁴¹ Literature, in the early nineteenth century, was supposed to act as “both film and record,” installing sound and moving image in the imagination of the reader. Only when typewriting, film and sound recording became equal options for the transferal of data and information was writers and readers freed from “the powers of hallucination.”¹⁴²

Therefore, towards the end of the nineteenth century, literature stopped conjuring individually rich characters and the hallucinatory sensualities of film and audio, in favor of a new kind of literature defined by the discreteness of the standardized letters of the typewriter.¹⁴³

Before writing the *Topography*, Spoerri played an important part in the international movement of concrete poetry, which rose to prominence in the 1950s and 60s. As the title of Spoerri’s journal, which he co-published with Claus Bremer, suggests, concrete poetry is a poetry of material: it draws attention to the essential substance of poetry, namely the printed letter or word and the space that surrounds them.¹⁴⁴ The broadest definition of concrete poetry will stress the typographical or visual aspect of the poems as equally or more important for conveying meaning than semantic coherence. “The visual element in [concrete poetry] tended to be structural, a consequence of the poem, a “picture” of the lines of force of the work itself, and not merely textural,” Emmett Williams writes in the introduction to *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, published by Something Else Press 1967, resulting in:

“a poetry of direct representation – the word, not words, words, words or expressionistic squiggles – using the semantic, visual and phonetic elements of language as raw material in a way seldom used by the poets of the past. ... It was born of the times, as a way of knowing and saying something about the world of now, with the techniques and insights of now.”¹⁴⁵

Kittler views concrete poetry and its use of “language as raw material” as symptomatic for a shift in literature ushered in by the introduction of the typewriter in the nineteenth century – a writing that is “solely the materiality of its medium.”¹⁴⁶ The typewriter separated writing from handwriting, which formerly had been the channel through which writers brought forth their very voice, soul and individuality.¹⁴⁷ When handwriting was made obsolete, so these elements took a backseat in literature, and through the typewriter the letter emerged as a material, discrete sign. The effect was a modern literature that was “mechanized and

¹⁴¹ Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 14.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁴⁴ See Roy F. Allen, “Fluxus and Literature,” in *Visible Language* Vol. 26 ½ (Winter/Spring 1992), 74.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, vi.

¹⁴⁶ Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 208

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 210.

materially specific,” disappearing in “a type of anonymity”¹⁴⁸ In his entrance in *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, poet Aram Soroyan echoes Kittler in writing that, “I write on a typewriter, almost never in hand (I can hardly rewrite, I tend to draw words), and my machine – an obsolete red-top Royal Portable – is the biggest influence on my work.”¹⁴⁹ Lori Emerson, who have studied the relationship between the typewriter as a medium and the output of concrete poets, writes:

“These poems express and enact as a poetics of the remarkably varied material specificities of the typewriter as a particular kind of mechanical writing interface that necessarily inflects both how and what one writes.”¹⁵⁰

This point is well illustrated by Emmett Williams’ series *konkretionen*, printed in the third issue of Spoerri’s *material* (devoted in its entirety to Williams’ work) and later reproduced in *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*. One of the poems pictures the letters for the words “gross” (large / capital) and “klein” (small) written out in a converging and diverging pattern, each line alternating between capital and small letters. “The expressive changeover from one to another is shown through the gradual engagement and disengagement of the shift key,” Spoerri and his co-publisher Bremer wrote in the introduction to the issue,¹⁵¹ thus highlighting the technical features of the typewriter as providing the formal boundaries of the poem.

Writing the *Topography*, Spoerri once again turned towards the anonymity of the typed letter, his “bold contempt for personal opinions” resonating strongly with a modern literature that turned away from epic narratives and personal expression. The writing in the *Topography* isn’t pure matter, as in concrete poetry, yet the meaning it conveys is predominantly impersonal, inconsequential and detached from the “soul” of the writer. Like concrete poetry, the *Topography* sought to be systematic in itself, not dependent on the subjective input of the author. Considering Spoerri’s resistance towards superimposed meaning and his insistence on pure description as the starting point for all of the notes, the writing of the *Topography* does indeed align itself with the indifferent recording abilities of technical media, rather than with the memory-images of Kracauer.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 226.

¹⁴⁹ Emmett Williams (ed.), *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967), u.p.

¹⁵⁰ Lori Emerson, *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 88.

¹⁵¹ Spoerri and Claus Bremer quoted in Williams (ed.), *An Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, u.p.

The *Topography*, then, incorporates photography, via the indexical map, and presents a mode of writing influenced by the typewriter as well as other technical media. In addition to this, the work includes an element of yet another media technology, namely sound recording. Two major footnotes of the *Topography* consist of excerpts from of conversations between Daniel Spoerri and Robert Filliou that were “captured” or “snared” on magnetic tape.¹⁵² The aforementioned footnote to object no. 25, where Spoerri and Filliou discuss the idea of the *Topography*, was printed in the first edition. In a footnote to object no. 36, added to the 1966 edition, the two talk about “two precursors of JEAN TINGUELEY”: a village eccentric from Filliou’s childhood called Plato, and Anton Müller, a Swiss inventor who ended up in an asylum after going mad.¹⁵³ The lengthy dialogues are written out in a way reflecting a realistic speaking pattern: sentences are often left hanging in the air unfinished and include the reaching for words and the pauses that are normal in human conversations, but that are mostly edited away in, say, interviews that can be read in newspapers or dialogues written for fiction. A typical excerpt reads:

DS: I... I believe... I thing what you said, to add something being the same as isolating... to add something isn't the same as isolating... I don't know...
 RF: I have seen a lot of things I reproductions of paintings, in REMBRANDT, for example, details... you see more, a hand, how he does the ands, they specialized in things like that.
 DS: Yes yes yes.
 RF: Right now you're holding a bottle and pouring something to drink, I don't really notice the hand, but they... it's...
 DS: It's... it's...
 RF: It's there that they started... they started all that... that... the plastic perception that exists... it's... it's they who started it, who elaborated it, and from the most obvious things, that which man himself is, and it's... it was in accordance with their conception of life.¹⁵⁴

Spoerri had previously included tape recording in his work, notably in the 1962 play *Ja, Mamma, Dass Machen Wir* (“Yes, Mamma, We’ll Do It”). In this play, a conversation between four persons was recorded and then acted out on stage – and once again taped. In the second part of the play, the actors “listened to themselves speaking their roles in the first part and commented spontaneously.”¹⁵⁵ To Spoerri, this is a prime example of how the principles of the snare-pictures “can be applied to other arts.”¹⁵⁶

The feature of the sound recording seized upon by Spoerri is the medium’s ability to capture sound indiscriminately; what the snare-pictures (and photography) does with objects,

¹⁵² Ibid., 78 and 125.

¹⁵³ Swiss sculptor Jean Tinguely, member of the New Realist group, was known for his moving sculptures and a pioneer within the field of kinetic art. Plato and Müller are called “precursors” of Tinguely because they both built moving machines.

¹⁵⁴ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 81.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 206.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

sound recording does with acoustic. Unlike the human ear, the phonograph isn't trained to filter unnecessary information, or to separate noise from meaning – it merely registers what Kittlers calls “acoustics events as such.”¹⁵⁷ And unlike photography, sound recording can record the very flow of time, not just the freezing of it. Together with the invention of cinematic film a few years later, this is what brought down the hegemony of writing as *the* media for storing and transmitting data, according to Kittler, by enabling acoustic and optical data to be stored in their own temporality.¹⁵⁸

Spoerri wasn't alone in incorporating elements of sound recording in his work. In addition to the aforementioned effect this had on literature, the recording of real sound soon found its way into art production in its own right. The Italian Futurists advanced an early suggestion that new music could be based on turning the noises of the world into music;¹⁵⁹ *Musique concrète*, as pioneered by French composer Pierre Schaeffer in the 1950s, made extensive experiments into the use of gramophone recording of “found sounds” as the basis of original music;¹⁶⁰ composer John Cage's pioneering work into the recording and manipulation of sounds from the environment became widely influential in the post-war period. Cage both used recording media such as tape recorders as *instruments* and, less technically, incorporated random sound in his works – perhaps most famously his *4'33*, which premiered in 1952 and consists of a performer not playing his instrument for the duration of the performance. Staged as a live performance, the random noise produced by the audience during the performance is at the core of the work, directing our attention to the simultaneous absence and presence of sound. Inspired in part by Cage, but working outside “music” as a framing device, a wide range of artists working in the 1960s, notably Fluxus artists, also attuned their work to the acoustic event.¹⁶¹ Take, for instance, Fluxus artist La Monte Young's Event score for *Composition #4* (1960), which reads:

“Announce to the audience that the lights will be turned off for the duration of the composition (it may be any length) and tell them when the composition will begin and end.
Turn off all the lights for the announced duration.
When the lights are turned back on, the announcer may tell the audience that their activities have been the composition, although this is not at all necessary.”¹⁶²

¹⁵⁷ Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 23.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁵⁹ Marc Battier, “What the GRM brought to music: from musique concrète to acousmatic music,” in *Organised Sound* Vol. 12, No. 3 (December 2007), 189.

¹⁶⁰ Although this meant that the tape recorder ultimately was turned from an instrument of reproduction into an instrument of production. See Battier, “What the GRM brought to music.”

¹⁶¹ Ina Blom, “Boredom and Oblivion,” in Friedman, *The Fluxus Reader*, 75.

¹⁶² La Monte Young's *Compositions* was first published in *An Anthology of Chance Operations, Concept Art, Anti-Art, Indeterminacy, Improvisation, Meaningless Work, Natural Disaster, Plans of Actions, Mathematics,*

The “activities” of the audience within the chosen time frame is ultimately unpredictable, but will inevitably feature noise – chair scraping, chatter, bodies shifting etc. The gesture of turning the lights off implies a sharpening of the non-optical senses, in the most basic sense making the participants more aware both of their own presence and of the flow of time as marked by random sound. Although the recording of the sounds produced isn’t an explicit part of the piece, the way it directs our attention towards the more easily overlooked components in the fabric of time – including auditory events – is exemplary for several seminal Fluxus Events, and relatable to the features of the tape recorder.¹⁶³

Of course, transcriptions of recorded conversation like the ones found in the *Topography* aren’t the same as the recording itself. In fact the very element that Kittler identifies as signifying the “real” flow of time are missing from the *Topography*. The blind and unpredictable noise – the sound of wine being poured, car engines outside the window, the clinking of glasses etc. – are not transferable to the 26 letters of the alphabet the *Topography* largely relies on. The flow of the conversation is represented faithfully, but it is passed on “through the bottleneck of the signifier,” such as was the faith of all information in the time of the alphabetic monopoly, according to Kittler.¹⁶⁴ Yet the inclusion of “snared” sound in the *Topography* reinforces the project’s commitment to the non-hierarchy of the elements constituting everyday life: like photography, it records and stores everything within its reach, regardless of the presumed importance of the data. The tape recorder Spoerri uses to record his conversations with Filliou is the perfect reflection of the *Topography*’s essential distrust in authoritative statements as to what is supposed to be interesting or not; it acts as an anti-editor, completely indifferent to what it records.

3.2 An archival artist’s book

The above section discussed the way technical media are made a part of the *Topography*, as well as how such media influence Spoerri’s style of writing. At the same time, the very fact that the *Topography* evokes these technical media in the format of the book is consistent with a wider trend in avant-garde art from the postwar period, namely the breaking down of boundaries between different art forms and the experimentation with non-artistic media. In

Poetry, Essay, ed. by Young and Jackson Mac Low (New York: Heiner Friedrich, 1961). They are also available from Fondazione Bonotto, “La Monte Young,”

<http://www.fondazionebonotto.org/fluxus/younglamonte/performance/fx1407.html> (visited May 10, 2016).

¹⁶³ As Ina Blom points out, an important difference between Cage and later Fluxus experiments with sound is Cage insistence on framing aural events as “music.” See Blom, “Boredom and Oblivion,” 75.

¹⁶⁴ Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 4.

the 1960s, the move away from the medium-specific artwork and towards a multimedial or intermedial approach united such otherwise disparate modes of art production as Performance art, Pop art, Conceptual art, Happenings and Fluxus – to name but a few. An important element in this trend, and attracting artists from across the field, was the increased attention directed towards the book and the attempts to free this medium from its traditional constraints. From the late 1950s and onwards, rather than viewing the book as a medium in which their art could be reproduced or written about, more and more artists started producing books that were works of art in themselves.¹⁶⁵ Through the efforts of these artists, the book went from being a relatively stable object – text on a sequence of pages bound together – to being an object open to all kinds of reconfigurations. A few examples: Spoerri’s co-anecdoter Dieter Roth spear-headed the development of artists’ books with wordless volumes such *kinderbuch* (1957), which centered on an increasing and decreasing number of graphic shapes;¹⁶⁶ Fluxus artist David Hompson’s *Diassemblage* (1966) protested against the very fact that books were an object to be read and then put aside by instructing the reader to crumple the book into the smallest possible unit and ignite it;¹⁶⁷ Ed Ruscha’s underscored the potential of the self-published artist’s book to bypass the traditional infrastructure of the art world by distributing the first edition of his seminal *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* (1962) in the gasoline stations documented in the book.¹⁶⁸

The *Topography* is undoubtedly part of this tradition. Like many artists’ books, it was originally self-published in a relatively small edition – around 1500 copies¹⁶⁹ – before the later editions by Something Else Press and Luchterhand Verlag made it into “one of the most widely published artists’ books,” according to Barbara Moore and Jon Hendricks.¹⁷⁰ My suggestion is that the *Topography* is an artist’s book that takes part in the reshaping of the book format – and specifically in a way that points to the archive. One aspect is its relationship with a fixed site: Similar to how concrete poets turned their attention to the materiality of language, many artists’ books highlight the book as a concrete object or site –

¹⁶⁵ Sarah Suzuki et al., *Wait, Later This Will Be Nothing: Editions by Dieter Roth* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2013), 9.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 10

¹⁶⁷ Bury, *Artists’ Books*, 4.

¹⁶⁸ Barbara Moore and Jon Hendricks, “The Page as Alternative Space: 1950 to 1969,” in Lyons, *Artists’ Books*, 94.

¹⁶⁹ According to Spoerri, Galerie Lawrence paid for the printing of 1000 copies; he himself paid to have 500 more printed. The first edition of the *Topography* was sent out in the mail as invitations for the exhibition – after which Spoerri himself believes most of them were thrown in the trash. Spoerri in conversation with Brotchie and Green, Daniel Spoerri Archives.

¹⁷⁰ Moore and Hendricks, “The Page as Alternative Space,” 94. Note that the statement refers to artists’ books published up until 1989.

either by creating a unique, handmade item or, even more literally, make the book into a sculpture; Alison Knowles' *Big Book* (1967), for instance, was an eight-foot high construction with a pole for a spine, "pages" on casters, and each page a three dimensional room you could actually live in.¹⁷¹ Even though the *Topography* itself is mass-produced and not an unique object as such, it is similarly anchored to a concrete site – Spoerri's table – which is transferred to the book through the topographic map. And through the procedure of adding footnotes to the text and letting other people re-visit the book to "re-anecdote it," the text itself becomes a site one can return to and actually change; it becomes a site of continual change and reconfiguration, much like an archive built to accommodate an ever-increasing amount of information. Another point is how, the introduction to the *Topography*, Spoerri encourages the reader to first pick out a shape on the map, and then flip to read the corresponding note in the text¹⁷² – a mode of reading that undercuts the traditional linear narrative of a book and reminds us of how, in the archive, information have to be searched for and sought out.

In the first part of this chapter, I outlined the media technologies evoked or employed in the *Topography* and discussed how these media influence the work. The following section will elaborate on how these media plays into the work as an archive. I'll argue that the *Topography* is defined and generated by a technical principle of accumulation and openness and that is derived from the nineteenth-century archive and that was picked up on and in part subverted by artist working with archival strategies in the postwar period.

"One of the defining characteristics of the modern era has been the increasing significance given to the archive as the means by which historical knowledge and forms of remembrance are accumulated, stored and recovered." So writes Charles Merewether in the introduction for *The Archive*, a reader offering an introduction to artistic definitions, examinations and reinventions of archival concepts from the early twentieth century to the present.¹⁷³ Here, the archive is defined as distinct from a collection or library by being "a repository or ordered system of documents and records, both verbal and visual, that is the foundation from which history is written."¹⁷⁴ According to Merewether, the centrality of archival formats and methodology to art production throughout the twentieth century –

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 92.

¹⁷² Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 23.

¹⁷³ Charles Merewether, "Introduction: Art and the Archive," in *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. by Charles Merewether (London: Whitechapel and The MIT Press, 2006), 10.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

yielding, in the words of Sven Spieker, “a dazzling variety of activities”¹⁷⁵ – ties in with this increased significance of archives to official society in general, as well as with the significant challenges new media and new modes of thinking about history, memory and remembrance has posed to the official, authoritative archive. Hal Foster points to the extension of the repertoire of political and technological sources as informing the pre-war “archival impulse” in artistic production – an impulse that became even more pronounced and varied in the post-war period, especially through the rise of appropriated images and serial formats as common idioms for art production.¹⁷⁶ The 1960s is often associated with the rise of information in art, as well as with a dismantling of the traditional art object. Robert Rauschenberg combines and Richard Prince’s re-photographed photographs, as well as the informational structures in conceptual art, institutional critique and feminist art are among the efforts cited by Foster as examples of the archival impulse of this period – but of course the list could be extended. The exhibition *Deep Storage*, which was first shown at the Haus der Kunst in Munich in 1997, is one of the several large-scale exhibitions of the last couple of decades devoted to the archive.¹⁷⁷ The exhibition presented artists from the 1960s onward who, according to the organizers, concerned themselves with questions of memory and the meaning of recollection. Writing in the introduction to the catalogue, curators and art historians Christoph Vitali, Peter-Klaus Schuster and Stephan von Wiese frames the 1960s and 1970s as a period marked by the renewed focus of art’s mnemonic functions, prompted by the emergence of the consumer society in the wake of World War II. “Since the 1950s an increasing constipation unfolded in the western hemisphere of our planet,” they write. “The consumer society didn’t only fill up the window displays and stores of the department stores of the prosperity states; the mountains of waste and garbage also reached new heights.”¹⁷⁸ Vitali and his co-authors point to how, faced with this development, artists started using consumer goods or the waste of consumerism as raw material for their art, as a way of re-instating remembering in art after decades where the avant-garde was mostly concerned with tradition-hostile forgetting.¹⁷⁹ Spoerri’s snare-pictures are put forth as an example of these artists’ evoking of the archive in

¹⁷⁵ Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy* (London and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2008), 4.

¹⁷⁶ Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” in Merewether, *The Archive*, 143.

¹⁷⁷ Others have been Universal Archive (MACBA, Barcelona 2008) and *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (ICP, New York, 2008).

¹⁷⁸ Christoph Vitali, Peter-Klaus Schuster and Stephan von Wiese, introduction to *Deep Storage; Arsenale der Erinnerung. Sammeln, Speichern und Archivieren in der Kunst*, ed. by Ingrid Schaffner and Matthias Winzen (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1997), 7. My translation.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.* The authors view this as a hallmark of nineteenth century avant-gardism, indebted to Malevitch’ black square.

their works. The authors see a clear parallel between the accumulating of objects practiced by Spoerri and his contemporaries and the metaphor of the archive as a storehouse for memories. Spoerri's snare-pictures are thus viewed as materializations of the memory-as-archive – as collections of objects and situations that would otherwise be forgotten, time capsules from an emerging capitalist society ruled by consumer goods.

Yet, following Merewether's definition of the archive, the snare-pictures can hardly be called an "ordered system of documents and records." Moreover, the notion of the archive as a repository for memories is somewhat problematic. Before moving on to further explorations of how the *Topography*, rather than the snare-pictures, is consistent with archival strategies, this needs to be addressed. In his book *The Big Archive*, Sven Spieker quotes Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi as saying, "Memory is not an archive, nor is an archive a memory bank. The documents in an archive are not part of memory; if they were, we should have no need to retrieve them; once retrieved, they are often at odds with memory."¹⁸⁰ In other words, the positive link between the material traces and documents gathered in an archive and our own memories is by no means guaranteed. In his 2002 book *Das Rumoren der Archive* (The Archive's Murmur), Wolfgang Ernst too stresses the radical difference between memory and the archive. The archive, according to Ernst, isn't even *about* memories but about the storing of data under the confines of whatever technical support is available. Material and technical confines make the archive less about preserving than about selection and deletion, less a complete memory-history than a collection of fragments with gaps and holes between them.¹⁸¹ Ernst views the archive as defined by the mechanisms that regulate what enters the archive and what is left out. The archive, then, is technical structure shaped by technical principle, and as such it's not comparable to the far less rigorous functioning of human memory.

The *Topography*, too, should be considered a technical structure – one that both disqualifies it as an analogy for human memory and marks it as an archive. This structure is generated from the principle according to which material is added to in the work: the principle of anecdoting and re-anecdoting a specific selection of objects. Each object is described together with any associations they evoke, with footnotes added whenever there were "texts or other data relating to an object," as Spoerri put it in his introduction¹⁸² – though in the end, through the process of re-anecdoting, these "text or other data" not only

¹⁸⁰ Spieker, *The Big Archive*, 4.

¹⁸¹ Ernst, *Sorlet från arkivet*, 32

¹⁸² Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 23.

related to the object but also to whatever had been previously stated. Thus a “file” is created under the heading of each numbered object, reminiscent of the *Akten* of the bureaucratic archive that consists of “several documents that share a common subject [that] are combined by either physically tying them together in a binder of some sort or grouping them as a loose collection.”¹⁸³ The potential endlessness of this procedure – the openness inherent in the principle – is distinctly archival in nature; the technical principle generating the archive doesn’t “stop” until it has exhausted its designated field of interest.

To properly understand how the archival character of the *Topography* ties in with the widespread artistic engagement with archival formats and methodologies in the decades following World War II, one needs to understand what aspect of the archive these artists explored and questioned. In his book *The Big Archive* Sven Spieker argues that while the nineteenth century was characterized by a confidence in the archive’s ability to register contingent time and thus deliver us with an accurate image of the past, this notion was assaulted by the early-twentieth-century avant-gardes, which in turn spurred a wide variety of reactions from late-twentieth-century artists.¹⁸⁴ During the nineteenth-century, the thinking about and structuring of archive underwent major transformation – transformation that to a large extent is attributable to the new media technologies that also underpin the *Topography*. As was pointed to in the previous section of this chapter, technical media such as photography, film and phonography are marked by their ability to capture “the singular, the instantaneous, the contingent – that which is most accessible to indexical signification,” in the words of Mary Ann Doane.¹⁸⁵ What these media promised was the ability to record and store time – the flow of it with regards to film and photography, the freezing of it with regards to photography. This not only affected literature and art production – it also resulted in an nineteenth-century archive that, as Spieker writes, was marked by

“its trust in the possibility of registering contingent time in the form of discrete traces (records), the hope that the present moment – contingency itself – might become subject to measurement and registration.”¹⁸⁶

Much like Spoerri’s evoking of photography’s ability to “archivize even the most inconspicuous details”¹⁸⁷ in both the selection of items and in his descriptive approach to the

¹⁸³ Spieker, *The Big Archive*, 24.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁸⁵ Mary Ann Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 221.

¹⁸⁶ Spieker, *The Big Archive*, 5.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

anecdoting process, this ability was reflected and mimicked in nineteenth-century historians' quest to store and make a study of data that previously had been thought insignificant. As material traces of an obscure beyond, "literally anything could be or become a clue."¹⁸⁸ This turn towards the archiving of "literally anything" was in itself enabled by technical media and their hitherto unseen capacities for recording and storage. Kittler quotes Goethe as calling literature a "fragment of fragments," because "the least of what had happened and of what had been spoken was written down," and "of what had been written down, only the smallest fraction was preserved."¹⁸⁹ In the age of technical media, however, the appropriate quote becomes that of the Austrian baritone Otto Wiener, saying in 1900 that "in principle it would not be difficult to take stock of our entire knowledge by using self-recording machines and other automatic devices, thus creating a physical museum of automata."¹⁹⁰

In the introduction to the 1990 republication of the first edition of the *Topography*, Roland Topor writes: "In the end, objective reality organised by chance is the surest means of obtaining a true-to-life-picture."¹⁹¹ The sentence reads like an echo of the ambitions of nineteenth-century historians, expressing the belief that the precise recording of the contingent, uncontrollable aspects of reality is sure to wield a more definitive truth-claim than other modes of historiography. And the *Topography* does indeed align itself with important aspects of the nineteenth-century archive. Not only does the work rely on technical media first introduced and applied archivally in the nineteenth-century – like the historiographers of this age Spoerri lets the properties of these media guide him in his own machine-like recording of the past, as discussed in previous paragraphs. In fact the very concept behind the *Topography* is reminiscent of the nineteenth-century archive turn towards considering "everything" worthy of preservation – not just the data thought to exemplify the workings of a Hegelian *Weltgeist*, which Spieker locates as the eighteenth-century archival motivation.¹⁹² Through the indexical outlining of the map, the *Topography* makes use of the quintessential nineteenth-century organizing principle of the *Provienzenprinzip* (principle of provenance), which stipulated that all archival files were to be organized according to how they had accumulated in their place of origin. Such an archive aims to reconstruct not simply content, but "the formal (administrative) and technical conditions for its emergence."¹⁹³ The map the objects on Spoerri's table in the positions and relation to each other in the exact

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 30.

¹⁸⁹ Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 77.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 22.

¹⁹² Spieker, *The Big Archive*, 23.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 18.

moment they entered the archive (the moment Spoerri decided to trace them). In the notes the conditions under which the objects ended up in this position is elaborated upon, “how they ended up on the table” being a central theme of Spoerri’s notes. The interplay between the map and the individual entries of objects in the *Topography* is in accordance with Spieker’s observation that the principle of provenance conflates “the present order of the archive (“the matter of each document”) and the past order of the agency or individual that first accumulated its records (“the original interdependence of documents.”)¹⁹⁴

Spoerri’s own introduction to the first edition also rings in tune with nineteenth-century archival ambitions. Here he explains how he set out to see what the objects on the table might suggest to him in describing them, “the way SHERLOCK HOLMES, starting out with a single object, could solve a crime; or historians, after centuries, were able to reconstitute a whole epoch from the most famous fixation in history, Pompeii.”¹⁹⁵ The invoking of Holmes, the famous, cool-headed nineteenth-century detective who used scientific methods to solve crimes, as well as the ruins of Pompeii, whose excavation started in 1861, is telling. Kittler points to the scientific and juridical implications of the introduction of technical media, whose power of observation went beyond the subjectivity of human interpreter. “With technological media,” he writes, “a knowledge assumes power that is no longer satisfied with the individual universals and its subjects, their self-images and self-representations – these imaginary formations – but instead registers distinguishing particulars.”¹⁹⁶ This new knowledge rules aesthetics (Morelli¹⁹⁷), psychoanalysis (Freud) and criminology (Holmes) as its archetype, according to Kittler. And, we can add with Spieker, the nineteenth-century archive that employed technical media in the gathering of clues about the workings of the past.

Still, the nineteenth-century historians went about recording lost fragments and inconspicuous details in the hope of discovering some universal truth; the archive being, after all, the foundation from which history is written. What the *Topography* documents is not only banal in terms of the objects on the table – it is as much about itself and the process of its own making as anything else; references to the act of making the *Topography* litter its pages. For example, both Willams and Roth begin their re-anecdotations by stating their own time and location: Willams begun his translation “at 9 p.m. on the first day of December 1964,

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 23.

¹⁹⁶ Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 83.

¹⁹⁷ Spieker writes: “As Giovanni Morelli demonstrated by bypassing a painting’s *Gestalt* to determine its author on the basis of unsystematic clues, the best (art) historian or scientist may well be the detective (or, in Freud’s case, the psychoanalyst).” *The Big Archive*, 31.

only at an arm's length away from the principal terrain feature of the *Topography*, the blue table"; Roth worked on his "in Reykjavik in 1965, in the rear building of Vestürgata 45; 1968, in the cellar of Grundarstig 11 – at RAGNAR'S – and at Skolavördustig 3..."¹⁹⁸

Sven Spieker points to a similar tendency in the archives of postwar artists such as Robert Morris, Susan Hiller and Gerhard Richter. In their works, Spieker writes, the archive "is neither simply a grammar of abstract rules nor a storehouse of information; rather, it is a grammar (a model) whose rules constitute themselves together with the statements they help formulate."¹⁹⁹ As such, these works work roughly in the vein of Michel Foucault's conception of the archive as a kind of historical a priori, with the rules of the archive emerging from the archive itself.²⁰⁰ Spieker elaborates upon Robert Morris' *Card File: July 11 – December 31, 1962* (1962), a work consisting of a hand-operated Cardex file with each entry reflecting the process of its own production. This process is also the beginning and the end of the work – it is the only thing that is actually stored in the archive. But as Spieker writes, this "amounts to no less than the banishment from the archive of what had constituted its essential *Lebenskraft* in the nineteenth century, the idea that archives connects us with time itself by catching it unawares."²⁰¹

The *Topography* lacks *Card File*'s elegant simplicity, but is similar in its use of archival strategies to perform an ironical gesturing towards the perceived authority of the archive. Like Spieker's locating of archives that formulate their own grammar, the *Topography* too emerges from a set of rules – rules that initially were defined by Spoerri, but that evolved in conjunction with the collaborative nature of the work. This is consistent with the nineteenth-century archive, only that in the *Topography* it's these rules, from which the distinctive structure of the *Topography* is generated, that are the defining feature of the work. The content with which the book is filled – the objects, the anecdotes – is less distinct, not to say memorable, than its potentially endless, branching structure. In other words, it is less the *what* of the memories, and more the *how* of the gathering and structuring of them that lends the work its most recognizable features.

This generative principle is, like the technical media that underpins the *Topography*, closely related to chance-operations and contingency. The handing over of the work to others – letting the work be re-anecdoted – is an act of letting go of control. As discussed in chapter 2, the process of re-anecdoting the *Topography* could very well have gone even further than

¹⁹⁸ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, 24.

¹⁹⁹ Spieker, *The Big Archive*, 12.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 14.

it eventually did: Spoerri had gathered additional footnotes from a number of artists and the plans to publish supplements to the 1966 edition, including contributions from readers of the *Topography*, were well on their way. The correspondence between Daniel Spoerri and Dick Higgins also revealed attempts at getting the *Topography* translated (and re-anecdoted) into several more languages, including Italian, Danish and a new French edition. This openness that is inscribed in the work would, if taken to its limit, yield an infinite open archive, put together by an endless network of contributors. As such it not only ties in the bureaucratic archive but also with a number of 1960s works that challenged the notion of individual authorship through collaborative processes and networks.²⁰² Although not necessarily overtly archival in character, works and projects such as these share an employing of bureaucratic formats and systems evocative of the archive. One example is the “correspondence piece” Spoerri and Higgins, together with 16 other artists, took part in between 1965 and 1967 – that is, roughly at the same time as the work on the Something Else Press edition of the *Topography* took place.²⁰³ In *Revue Rendez-vous* each artist prepared a questionnaire addressed to himself, which was sent out to the other participants, who answered them as they saw fit – mostly through text, but also through copies, drawings, newspaper cuttings and found objects.²⁰⁴ To analyze the exact content and implications of the correspondence that resulted from the *Revue Rendez-vous* is beyond the scope of this thesis, but suffice to say this very concept is a challenge to the ego of the individual artist. It demands that, in order to follow the rules of the game, one has to accept a certain lack of control over the finished work. Like the archive, it has no definitive author.

Another notable example of art based on collaborative process and expanding networks is Mail art, as pioneered by Ray Johnson in the 1950s and 1960s. The term in its most basic meaning refers to art that utilizes the postal service, or even art that take on a form related to this, such as postage stamps. A survey of the history of Mail art often begins with Johnsons “New York Correspondance School of Art” (sic) – basically a network that sent and received mail from Johnson and each other – letters, drawings or found images or objects.²⁰⁵ As it evolved in the 1970s, Mail art came to represent a democratic vision of art making,

²⁰² For a wider discussion of such work, see Craig J. Saper, *Networked Art* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), xi-xii.

²⁰³ The other artists were: Eric Andersen, George Brecht, Bazon Brock, Robert Filliou, Al Hansen, Bernhard Höke, Jiri Kolár, Addi Köpcke, Joachim Maximillian Krauß, Dieter Lübeck, Nam June Paik, Benjamin Patterson, Gerhard Rühm, Vagelis Tsakiridis, Ben Vautier and Oswald Wiener.

²⁰⁴ See S.D. Sauerbier, “Correspondance and Communication: Intermedia of Human Beings,” in Ina Blom (ed.) *Dick Higgins* (Høvikodden: Henie Onstad Art Center, 1995), 56 – 94.

²⁰⁵ Richard M. Plunkett, “The New York Correspondence School,” first printed in *Art Journal* (Spring 1977), available from <http://www.artpool.hu/Ray/Publications/Plunkett.html> (visited May 10, 2016).

based in communication, generosity and interactivity.²⁰⁶ This emphasis sometimes leads to Mail art being understood synonymously with Robert Fillious concept of the “Eternal Network,” which he coined in 1968 in collaboration with George Brecht. The scope of the Eternal Network, however, went beyond even that of Mail art: it was a proposal to restructure or replace the historical avant-garde with an on-going international community of artists. As opposed to the tightly organized avant-garde, with its geographical centers of activity and rigid hierarchies, the Eternal Network proposed much looser network of like-minded individuals, working in a spirit of mutual exchange.²⁰⁷

The notion of an ever expanding, or at least unpredictably evolving, network and the democratic attitude to art making this implies to a certain extent goes hand in hand with the notion that anything could be included in the category “art” – or, with regards to the *Topography*, enter the archive. In a footnote to object no. 36, added to the 1966 edition, Spoerri writes that “I consider the *Topography* a garbage can (“the human garbage can”) and ... nothing restrains me from accepting anything that can be accumulated in it.”²⁰⁸ Several of the artists exemplifying the “archival turn” in art from the 1960s onward share a similar interest in sheer accumulation. Gerhard Richter’s *Atlas* – a vast collection of photographs, newspaper clippings and sketches that the artist started assembling in 1962 – is one apt example. The mass of mostly non-descript photographic material is, according to Benjamin Buchloh, symptomatic for the post-war period’s loss of faith in modern technologies ability to serve a mnemonic function.²⁰⁹ The open-endedness of Richter’s *Atlas* (it remains unconcluded) also hints at the impossibility of ever reaching the point of sufficient information, or the impossibility of even knowing where that point might be.

Another interesting example is Dieter Roth’s artist’s book *Snow*, made over an extended period in 1964. Bound together as a book, *Snow* consists of a massive, heterogeneous gathering of material from Roth’s everyday life, represented through a multitude of different – and often overlapping – printing techniques. On the making of it, Roth has explained that he photographed everything that caught his attention and that each

²⁰⁶ Ina Blom, “How (Not) To Answer A Letter: Ray Johnson’s Postal Performance,” in *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (May, 2007), 7. In this article, Blom argues that, despite his defining role with regards to the beginnings of mail art, Johnson was not in a simple and direct way a model for what were later to be known as mail art.

²⁰⁷ Steven Harris, “The Art of Losing Oneself without Getting Lost: Brecht and Filliou at the Palais Idéal,” in *Papers of Surrealism*, issue 2 (Summer 2004), 12.

<http://www.surrealismcentre.ac.uk/papersofsurrealism/journal2/index.htm>

²⁰⁸ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 131.

²⁰⁹ See Benjamin Buchloh, “Gerhard Richter’s *Atlas*: The Anomic Archive,” in Merewether, *The Archive*, 85 – 102.

evening he took everything he had touched that day, ”absolutely everything I had touched in the way of paper, regardless of whether they were drawings, sketches, photos, or simply the paper I’d used to wipe the printing plates.”²¹⁰ From this massive material he did the final selection of material to end up in *Snow*. Parts of the material were of the kind that wouldn’t stand the test of time, something Roth alluded to in an inscription on the inside of the book that reads, “wait, later this will be nothing.” This embrace of chance, accumulation and mess has been described as a “physical embodiment of Roth’s burgeoning interest in entropy and decay.”²¹¹

The same could arguably be said of the *Topography* – at least that’s apparently how Roth interpreted Spoerri’s likening of the *Topography* with a garbage can. In a footnote to one of Spoerri’s remarks Roth adds the following:

“Anyone who has anything in DANIEL SPOERRI’S *Topography*, anyone who has, for instance, added something, might start to think: “Might this be garbage that I am writing here now? Am I not writing something, but producing garbage, throwing away, instead?” Personally I comfort myself when visited by such thoughts by thinking: “This writing here, that’s not an act of throwing away, but for the moment simply of throwing – of throwing in, into the garbage can called the *Topography* – and even when the act of throwing has been fully completed, when I have finished writing, the stuff is not thrown away at once but printed first – for it is hard to imagine that SPOERRI will let anything put him off – and once it is has been printed it won’t be so easy to throw away, as everyone can see.”²¹²

Roth rightly asserts that once something had found its way into the *Topography*, it would stay a part of it; the *Topography* evolved through a process of accumulation, with no material disappearing from one edition to the next.²¹³ And yet it is precisely Spoerri’s reaction to the Roth’s contributions that reveals some of the ambivalence hidden in the *Topography*’s openness. As shown in chapter 2, Spoerri didn’t feel that Roth adhered to the style and pattern of anecdoting that he had laid out in the first edition of the book and that Williams followed in the 1966 edition. Roth’s dense writing style and the sheer amount of additions he made rendered the whole thing unreadable, according to Spoerri. In other words, behind the democratic vision of openness hides a specific set of rules that contributors were implicitly expected to follow.

A related concern is revealed in Spoerri’s attitude towards the planned additions to the 1966 edition, which were to include new footnotes from both fellow artists and readers.

²¹⁰ Sarah Suzuki et al., *Wait, Later This Will Be Nothing*, 15.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*

²¹² *Ibid.*, 132.

²¹³ The only exceptions are parts of the transcripts from the conversations between Spoerri and Filliou. They were printed in full in the German edition of the book (the previous editions had removed excerpts) but were restored to the length printed in the 1966 edition for the 1995 edition.

Although he repeatedly expressed his enthusiasm for letting the *Topography* keep growing, he also voiced a fear for the work to end up too “huge.”²¹⁴ Even the call for contributions from the readers in the 1966 edition hints at an uneven playing field: it states that writers of “usable contribution[s]” will receive five copies of the supplement in which their contributions appear.²¹⁵ Once again comparing this with the work of Roth, it’s a marked contrast between the evaluation each contribution apparently would be put through in order to become a part of the *Topography* and Roth’s *Review for Everything*, the artist’s magazine he published between 1975 and 1986. The editorial note for this magazine states that in the *Review For Everything*, “everybody (Everybody), every man (everyman) can appear [where contributions of anybody who can write or draw (or not) may (can) appear], if she (he) likes to (do so); she (he) should send her (his) contribution (stuff).”²¹⁶ The magazine stayed true to this policy and ended up featuring the work of more than 300 contributors.

Thus, while the principle that generated the *Topography* is one of radical openness, Spoerri’s own attitude betrays an apprehension with regards to handing the work over to entropic procedures. Somewhat ironically then, he displayed some of the same anxiety that technical media had made widespread almost from the very moment of their introduction: the fear of information overload, of a breaking down of the system. For if technical media were marked by their ability to capture, store and reproduce an unprecedented amount of data, they were also able to capture, store and reproduce more data than the archive would be able to accommodate. Sven Spieker views the early twentieth-century modernism precisely as a reaction formation to the “storage crisis” that came in the wake of the rationalizing modern bureaucracy and communications technologies of the late nineteenth century: “a giant paper jam based on the exceptional increase in stored data, both in realm of public administration and in large companies whose archives were soon bursting at the seams.”²¹⁷ The avant-garde’s critique of the infallibility of the archive were then intensified by artists from the mid 1960s and onwards – a critique in which the *Topography* plays its own part.

3.3 Conclusion

As noted previously in this thesis, Spoerri at one point explains the *Topography* as the result of an “urge to recreate objects through memory rather than actually displaying them.” This

²¹⁴ Letter from Spoerri to Higgins, dated November 26 1969, Folder “Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri.”

²¹⁵ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1966), xiii.

²¹⁶ Gwen Allen, *Artists’ Magazines: Alternative Spaces for Art* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 292.

²¹⁷ Spieker, *The Big Archive*, 5.

chapter has argued that the *Topography* is not only shaped by Spoerri's memory, but by media technologies and archival strategies. Indeed, Spoerri's descriptive, matter-of-fact mode of registering information about the objects on his table has more in common with the properties of technical recording media than it has with the human capacity to remember that which holds personal significance. The chapter has emphasized technical media's influence on the style and form of the work and shown how these media are tied in with a broadening of the book medium, leading to my suggestion that the *Topography* should be considered an archival artist's book, or an artist's book that specifically employs archival strategies in its efforts to broaden the book format.

In the nineteenth-century, the media technologies evoked and employed in the *Topography* were instrumental to a reshaping of the archive, due to their ability to capture contingency, to arrest time and to record data in a non-hierarchical manner. At the same time, the introduction of these media freed the written word from being the only channel for information – a fact that not only changed literature but also opened the very medium of the book up for re-debating. During the 1960s, this led to a proliferation of artists' books that challenged the traditional notion of a book. It's from these conditions that the *Topography* emerges. Daniel Spoerri's vision of the *Topography* being a depersonalized account of a random selection of objects came to life under the influence of media that erased personal handwriting (the typewriter) and recorded "everything," including contingent time, with mechanic precision (photography and phonography). Furthermore, and crucially, the *Topography* is generated from a technical principle of openness and accumulation, much like an archive. The process of anecdoting and re-anecdoting, of leaving the work open, gives the work its most recognizable characteristic, far more so than the actual information disclosed in the writing. The self-reflexive nature of the notes and footnotes, their failing to reveal information of any discernable interest to the world outside the *Topography* links the work to a tendency in postwar art to evoke the bureaucratic archive – specifically the nineteenth-century archive that thought of "everything" as potentially revealing evidence about the past – only to subvert it. At the same time the principle of potential endless re-anecdoting and adding of material opens up for chaos and limitless accumulation to enter the archive. The fear of "information overload" was a natural consequence of modern media's ability to record, store and reproduce an endless amount of data, and the *Topography* can thus be viewed as a staging of this fear – even if, as Spoerri's own attitude shows, the artist himself personified some of this anxiety.

4 Between Art and Life: The *Topography*, Biopower and Intermedia

"I want to put it back into the spectators' imagination."

- Daniel Spoerri²¹⁸

The previous chapter argued for the influence of technical media and the archival character of the *Topography*. This chapter will discuss possible implications of such a reading, specifically in terms of the work's integration of art with real life. Arguing that Spoerri's depersonalized approach to writing about himself and his own life ties in with wider a artistic trend of approaching personal subjects in a depersonalized way, I'll look at how this can be viewed as symptomatic for a kind of power formation that aims at a non-coercive control of individuals and populations through strategies of surveillance, confession and the internalization of norms and expectations regarding appropriate behavior. In the final section of this chapter, I'll consider whether the *Topography*'s undermining of pure visuality and the invitation extended to the reader to act as co-creator of the work could be viewed as a formulation of this mode of power's need for attentive, engaged subjects. In order to do this, a discussion of the work's intermedia character is necessary.

Much of the chapter's analysis will be based on one specific entry in the *Topography*. Focusing on one section of the work provides a deeper understanding of how the process of anecdoting and re-anecdoting worked and how a single item could end up generating a stream of more or less interesting information. The entry I have chosen is the entry for object no. 36 – a packet of condoms. Although more richly anecdoted than some of the other entries in the book, the entry is exemplary in the sense that it displays the full range of voices, media, descriptions and stories that went into the making of the *Topography*. Furthermore, its intimate nature of the object itself and some of the information in generates illustrate how the detached mode of writing that characterizes the *Topography* also extends to the handling of explicitly personal and sexual content.

4.1 Object no. 36

In the map that's part of the *Topography*, the outline accompanied by the number 36 is a small-ish rectangle, its lines partly dotted due to overlapping with objects no. 37 and 39. The non-descript shape makes it an example of objects featured in the *Topography* that are impossible to identify without the accompanying note, or, like Spoerri states in a footnote to

²¹⁸ Ibid., 79.

different item, “a technical picture, without any trace of individuality.”²¹⁹ Flipping to the entry for object no. 36 reveals the following note, penned by Spoerri for the first edition:

“**36. Gold-coloured package**, Blausiegel^a brand, with a tongue-flap opening, containing two of the original three condoms,^b with the notice: “Genuine only in this package. Carefully tested several times. Known and proven trustworthy for decades.” The pack was obtained by inserting a 1-mark coin in an automatic dispenser in the men’s room of a nightclub^c in Krefeld, Germany, where I went with JEAN TINGUELY^f in August 1960 to help him prepare his second exhibition of scrap-metal objects at the Museum Haus LANGE. The missing condom was used, during one of my absences, by X, who later told me the use he had put it to in my Parisian hotel room^k: the prickly surface of his sheathed sex, studded with raisins, aroused his companion more than usual.”¹²²⁰

The raised letters indicate footnotes to follow, which, by way of footnotes added to the footnotes, eventually runs up to the letter Q.²²¹ This makes entry no. 36 is one of the more richly anecdoted entries in the *Topography*, with multiple additions from both Spoerri, Williams and Roth. The footnote attached to Jean Tinguley’s name is particularly long, presenting excerpts from conversation between Daniel Spoerri and Robert Filliou transcribed from magnetic tape.

As the parentheses noting the initials of the author of the individual footnotes and the year of they were added reveal,²²² the original 1962 edition of the *Topography* contained Spoerri’s original entry for the object, together with two footnotes of his own (“a” and “l” in the 1995 edition). These two footnotes relate, respectively, the exact phrasing of the product information printed on the packet of condoms in question and a paraphrasing of the French writer Louis Pergaud’s assertion that “the female suffers terribly during penetration because the sex of the male is barbed.”²²³ In the 1966 edition Emmett Williams added five footnotes, with Spoerri adding three. The 1968 edition saw the addition of seven further footnotes by Dieter Roth, most of them commenting on previous footnotes by Spoerri and Williams rather than on the original note. This gives a sense of the growth the work went through from 1962 to 1968, with the number of footnotes for this particular entry swelling from two to seventeen.

The two footnotes Spoerri added to object no. 36 in the 1966 edition, in addition to the longer footnote featuring the conversation with Robert Filliou, contain what could be rightly called anecdotes. The first one tells of how a condom he found when cleaning up the

²¹⁹ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 80.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

²²¹ In the 1962, 1966 and 1968 editions of the *Topography*, footnotes are indicated by asterisks. Letters were introduced in the 1995 edition.

²²² This form of indication of name and year was also added to the 1995 edition.

²²³ See Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, (1995), 124; 131.

studio after his late friend “guitarist-singer-composer JEAN-PIERRE SUC” later found its way into a snare-picture that came into the possession of Enrico Baj. Spoerri ends on the dry punch-line, “During a visit to Paris ENRICO asked me . . . if all the objects fastened to the table were fixed solidly, because it hangs over his costly radio set in a de luxe apartment in Milano.”²²⁴ The second anecdote relates to Spoerri’s friend “KARL GERSTNER, a purist of the mathematical and geometrical school of abstract painting” and how he once compared Spoerri’s French phrase “*truffé de raisins secs, son sexe, m’a-t-il dit, excitait davantage sa compagne par sa surface granulée*” – translated by Emmett Williams as “the prickly surface of his sheathed sex, studded with raisins, aroused his companion more than usual” – to the best phrases by the French poet Mallarmé.²²⁵ Spoerri goes on to compare the *Topography* with a garbage can, as discussed in chapter 3.

Williams too contributes with anecdotes related to the work on the *Topography* and to people encountered. In one his footnotes he tells of his difficulties translating the above French phrase into English and of the suggestions he got from different parties, humorously noting: “TOM WASMUTH suggested a play on the words “raisin” and “raising,” but this seemed to me too homely for the rather sophisticated situation.”²²⁶ In a footnote to the conversation between Spoerri and Filliou he offers the story of first hearing of Anton Müller, an eccentric around whom much of the conversation centers, in conjunction with an exhibition he did together with Spoerri and Jean Tinguely in the German town Aschaffenburg. He also scolds Spoerri for holding a “dangerously absurd point of view” on the positive links between creativity and madness, in another footnote to the same conversation, and quotes archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley writing on “rubbish pits” in the excavation of two mounds in the Turkish Hatay, thus highlighting the parallel between the *Topography* and archaeological endeavors (a link Spoerri also makes in the introduction).

In his footnotes to object no. 36 Dieter Roth displays the same unwillingness to conform to the tone of his co-anecdoters as discussed in previous chapters. Although all of the anecdoters inevitably stray into regions quite remote to the specific object that serves as the starting point, Spoerri and Williams tend to point to concrete situations and people, briefly summarizing them for the reader. (The exception would in this case be the conversation between Spoerri and Fillious). Roth, in his footnotes, is more prone to abstract or metaphysical thinking and seems to find in the dissecting of concepts and phrasings more

²²⁴ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 124-125.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

interesting than the actual object or specific situations related to this. His first footnote to object no. 36 is exemplary in this sense. In it, he seizes upon Spoerri's story of the snare-picture owned by Enrico Baj in order to perform a dissecting of the *concept* of snare-pictures. The note begins:

“Is a snare object an object that lies in a snare (the thing lies firmly on the table), or is the snare object the snare in which the object lies (the table that holds the object firmly glued)? Or is the snare object perhaps both together? That is to say: isn't both an object that is lying in a snare as well as a snare in which an object is lying?”²²⁷

Roth's style of anecdoting also differs from Spoerri's and Williams' in its dealings with the personal. In a footnote to a footnote by Williams, Roth uses Williams' mentioning of carp fish as a springboard to dive into a decidedly lyrical account of him indulging in sexual fantasies about a shop girl, before realizing she was unpacking a basket full of carps:

“O, and with that my naked, unpacked shop girl disappeared completely from my inner eye to be replaced by the suffering carp – even though they had already completely filled my outer eye – along with a couple of grey clouds which were already waiting in front of the shop door as I left, and sprinkled my bald head with a cold rain that made it tingle.”²²⁸

As discussed in previous sections of this thesis, Spoerri viewed personal opinion and intimate details as something to be avoided when anecdoting the *Topography*. And the notes and footnotes of object no. 36 do indeed keep the reader at an arm's length from the personal life of its main author. Take, for instance, Williams' first footnote, relating to Spoerri's original note:

“I have in my possession a full-scale map of the blue table to which is affixed the Blausiegel package containing the remaining two condoms. The map is inscribed (in French): “No. 36. Original object from the Anecdoted Topography of Chance. For OSCAR-EMMETT-POLLY-WILLIAMS. Thank you, my friends. Jan. 1962. DANIEL SPOERRI.” And on the inside tongue-flap of the package itself: “For EMMETT, one of my three friends. DANIEL.”²²⁹

This note in many ways testifies to the close friendship that existed between Williams and Spoerri – but only implicitly so. The fact that the map and the original object were given as tokens of friendship is recorded, without revealing anything about the specific nature of the relationship between the two. Why Spoerri adds “Polly” to Williams' birth name – Polly being the name of Williams' wife – is not explained, neither is Spoerri's slightly melancholy description of Williams as “one of my three friends” elaborated upon. Similarly, when

²²⁷ Ibid., 125.

²²⁸ Ibid., 130.

²²⁹ Ibid., 124.

Spoerri associates the packet of condoms on the table with the condom he found in the studio of a friend who had committed suicide, it is related thus:

“The sole vestige of the guitarist-singer-composer JEAN-PIERRE SUC, who committed suicide on the Paris-Montpellier train in 1960, and with whom I used to pass an evening from time to time at a nightclub in the quarter, is a deluxe condom terminating in a hand.”²³⁰

In this matter-of-fact relating of information, the obvious tragedy of this story – a young man, a friend of the artist, killing himself – is hardly a topic. Rather his death is presented as a simple link in a chain of events leading up to the making of a snare-picture:

“After SUCS’ death, his studio ... was rented by EVA AEPPLI. I helped her clean out the infernal disorder and found the condom, which I threw into the drawer of a small table, later made into a snare-picture...”²³¹

The intimate nature of the object – a packet of condoms with one condom missing, connoting not just sex but sex just for the fun of it – makes the entry for object no. 36 especially suited to show the lengths Spoerri went to keep the *Topography* from turning private. Following the principle of the *Topography*, which generates stories related to the object, it’s reasonable to expect a story of when and how the missing condom was put to use. And it does: in the original note Spoerri writes that it was used “by X, who later told me the use he had put it to in my Parisian hotel room: the prickly surface of his sheathed sex, studded with raisins, aroused his companion more than usual.”²³² This rather raunchy sentence is in fact it is the only overt mentioning of sexual intercourse in the whole *Topography*. Its ability to shock is proved by a footnote by Emmett Williams to object no. 4 (added in the 1995 edition but written in 1968), where Williams relates how his mother had made him promise never to show the *Topography* to any members of her family, partly because she assumed Williams was the Mr. X in no. 36. “She had been shocked to see a public declaration by her son the he was a sex fiend,” Williams writes.²³³

Yet for readers less sensitive to the reputation of the authors, the anonymization of the person in question makes the whole story somewhat less potent. The withholding of the name is an eye-catching detail in a work otherwise brimming with capitalized names; 13 individual names are mentioned in the entry for object no. 36 alone, not counting the names of the authors. The index of names at the end of the *Topography* lists more than 500 individual

²³⁰ Ibid., 124 – 125.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid., 124.

²³³ Ibid., 45.

names. Yet to reveal this particular name would have made the note about the object explicitly personal and for this reason, presumably, it is withheld.

This juxtaposition of personal subject matter and non-personal writing continues throughout the rest of the footnotes. Spoerri's first footnote to entry no. 36 – attached to the word “condoms” – is a word-by-word reproduction of the German text on the packaging. To quote an excerpt: “Ich bitte um diskrete Aushändigung eines Päckchens / Blausiegel B3-BR3-B6-BR6 'Export' 'Queen' 'BF2 Spezial.’”²³⁴ This way the sketching of a sex scene is directly countered by dry, encyclopedic description and, through the paraphrasing of Pergaud, literary allusion. Emmett Williams' quotes a rather more amusing text in one of his footnotes, namely an advertisement for two Japanese sexual aids. “It would be interesting to speculate on the preparation of the female organ of sex to “surprise” the male, as the male does to the female with raisin,” Williams writes, referring to the “prickly surface” of the condoms. The products then presented are quite absurd, made even more so by the broken English of the advertisement. The first, “Jugenol”, promises that, “when used, you will receive days. Aged ladies who have too roomy vagina, should use this; then you will regain the same condition as a virgin.” The second – a “Gold Music Ball” – rings even more bizarre: “This ball automatically plays music, which can be enjoyed by both sexes. ... This is to be inserted into the female organ with your fingers. With every movement of it, a very exciting sound will be heard to your excitement.”²³⁵

When talking about issues related to sex, then, both Spoerri and Williams counter the intimacy of the subject matter with mock-seriousness, absurdity and slight ridicule in their handling of it. Their approach is one of detached amusement, an effective vaccine not only against pretentiousness but also against sentiment. As shown in previous chapters, this detachment was an intended part of the *Topography* and supported by the utilization of technical media in the making of the work. Yet this doesn't change fact that the *Topography* is a work very much centered on Daniel Spoerri. It is, after all, his objects that are used as the starting point for the project and his circle of friends and acquaintances that consequently are activated as contributors to and characters in the *Topography*. And he does tell stories from his own life, albeit not in a manner that makes the reader intimately acquainted with the author. As such the work ties in with several attempts made by avant-garde artists in the 1960s and 1970s to approach personal subjects in a non-expressive manner – a tendency that is thrown into particularly sharp relief when looking at works dealing with sex.

²³⁴ Ibid., 124.

²³⁵ Ibid., 131 – 132.

One of the most enduring legacies of the 1960s, according to art historian Anna Deuze, is the promotion of practices such as sex before marriage, contraception and sexual experimentation. It is therefore no wonder that interest in the body as the site of sexual revolution, desire and pleasure became important tropes for artist working in this decade.²³⁶ One famous example the New York-based performance artist and filmmaker Carolee Schneeman movie *Fuses* (1965), which documents the artist and her then partner making love; another, more understated example is Fluxus artist Yoko Ono's *Film No. 6: A Contemporary Sexual Manual (366 Sexual Positions)* (1968), showing a couple and their daughter sleeping on a bed, where "[a]ll they do is sleep, the 366 sexual positions are all in the mind of the audience."²³⁷

While much of the sexually art of the postwar era is centered on the body and personal experience of the artist, an important common thread is the depiction of sex as a simple fact of everyday life rather than as a deeply intimate act belonging to the personal sphere. Writing on artistic approaches to the subject of sex in the twentieth century, Joanne Bernstein points to two distinct strands: the objective, internal view and the objective, external view. While the former approach, heavily indebted to Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, dominated the first half of the century, artists working in the second half increasingly gravitated towards the latter.²³⁸ In his 1963 film *Blow Job*, for instance, Andy Warhol documents sex as a banal, even boring act, similar to his depictions of sleeping or eating other films. For forty-one minutes the camera stays on the face of a man receiving oral sex, recording only subtle shifts in the man's expression up until the moment of climax. The straight-forwardness of the film ties in with even more explicit works of art of the same era, such as Robert Mapplethorpe's 1970s photographs of homosexual sadomasochism; like Warhol, Mapplethorpe's highly aestheticized images are simply documents of the world surrounding the artist as much as projections of internal desire.²³⁹ This resistance to introversion can also be extended to art working directly with the body as a medium: As Thomas Crow notes in his survey of art of the 1960s, the naked bodies involved in Carolee Schneeman's performance *Meat Joy* (1964) "undercut the standard spectacle of the self by

²³⁶ Anna Deuze, "The 1960s: A Decade Out-of-Bounds," in Jones, *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, 47.

²³⁷ Yoko Ono, "Score for Film no. 6," in *Sexuality: Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. by Amelia Jones (London: Whitechapel and The MIT Press, 2014), 68.

²³⁸ Joanne Bernstein, "Playing with the Edge," in *Seduced: Art & Sex from Antiquity to Now*, ed. by Marina Wallace (London: Merrell, 2007), 178.

²³⁹ See *ibid*, 176.

multiplying the numbers of dancers and distributing actions among them on equal terms.”²⁴⁰ A later work of Schneeman is her *ABC – We Print Anything – In the Cards* (1976-77), which centers on personal and sexual confession. The work is an assembly of 156 color-coded notecards: yellow cards are extracts from the artist’s diary and dreams; pink cards contain comments from friends; and the blue cards contain comments from Schneeman’s soon-to-be ex, her new lover and herself. Like the *Topography*, *ABC* employs a non-linear narrative structure, which in effect removes the statements from her personal life from a meaningful context; writing about the work, Robert Morgan notes how, despite the confessional content of the cards, they offer little disclosure as to the real psychological motivation behind them.²⁴¹

Although the art works mentioned above are very different from the *Topography* – and each other – in many respects, they exemplify the postwar avant-garde’s wish to remove subjectivity from the equation in their approach to personal and sexual subject matter. The technical handling of such matters, as exemplified by the static camera motion of Andy Warhol’s film, the non-linearity of Schneeman’s *ABC* as well as the matter-of-fact, descriptive approach of the *Topography*, becomes an important strategy for the artist-subject to remain elusive. While the personal subject matter is a way for the artist to look at him- or herself, the detached approach hints at an awareness of being watched – an awareness that could, as the following section will detail, be framed as symptomatic for societies that aim at the control of human bodies.

4.2 The *Topography* and biopower

Much of the footnote to object no. 36 containing the transcript of a conversation between Spoerri and Filliou is devoted to Spoerri’s telling of the fate of the eccentric Swiss inventor Anton Müller, who started building moving machines while incarcerated at an asylum for the insane. One passage reads:

“DS: ...and he got sicker and sicker...

RF: But in general they treated him very well, didn’t they?

DS: ...and finally he died...

RF: I mean he was well treated because they... they let him be, they didn’t prevent him...

DS: They let him go to the limit of his madness.

RF: Yes.

DS: He was creative in his madness, and they let him carry out his ideas as far as he could... like an artist.

RF: Yes.

²⁴⁰ Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties*, 126.

²⁴¹ Robert C. Morgan, “Systemic Books by Artists,” in Lyons, *Artists’ Books*, 215.

DS: While today they give such people injections immediately and replace them in a social environment and all that... They stop them from going to the limit.
 RF: Right.
 DS: And that's why there aren't any more... any more creative madmen.
 RF: Right
 DS: Because as soon as they get lost in a fixed idea... every artist basically...
 RF: They psy...
 DS: ...every artist has a...
 RF: They psychoanalyse them, they...
 DS: Yes, they immediately take away their...
 RF: Yes.
 DS: ...the fixed idea...and then it's finished...²⁴²

What Spoerri's disparaging (if fragmentary) comments on contemporary treatment of insanity most clearly evokes, is Michel Foucault's notion of biopower – that is, a contemporary mode of power that aims at “the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life.”²⁴³ Viewed in conjunction with the detached approach to sex and the personal in the notes for object no. 36, this perspective helps bring out some of the ambiguities of the *Topography*, and how the work as an archive hints both at the submitting to and the evasion of this kind of power.

The rise of explicitly sexual art in the 1960s is frequently viewed as a consequence of the sexual revolution and the breaking of previously held taboos; Dezeuze, for example, writes of how the “notion of sexuality as a taboo subject had been inherited from the 1950s, a quasi-Victorian period of social conservatism in Europe and the United States.”²⁴⁴ In the first volume of *History of Sexuality*, Foucault aims to counter this kind of narrative of repression – specifically the hypothesis that states that ever since the seventeenth century, sexuality has been restricted and repressed and that only at the turn of the twentieth century onwards did the restrictions imposed on sexuality undergo a gradual slackening.²⁴⁵ Contrary to this, Foucault argues that the modern period has been one of sexual expansion. He grants that there has indeed been a restrictive economy surrounding sex in the last centuries, but that at the level of “discourses and their domains,” practically the opposite phenomenon occurred: “There was a steady proliferation of discourses concerned with sex ... a discursive ferment that gathered momentum from the eighteenth century onward.”²⁴⁶ For three centuries, Foucault claims, Western man has been encouraged to tell everything concerning about his sex – a development that is inextricable from that of biopower:

²⁴² Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 129.

²⁴³ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 140.

²⁴⁴ Dezeuze, “The 1960s: A Decade Out-of-Bounds,” 48.

²⁴⁵ See *ibid.*, 3 – 13.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

“One had to speak of sex ... one had to speak of it as of a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated but managed, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum. Sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered.”²⁴⁷

These confessions, according to Foucault, became data that functioned as the basis for institutions of power to construct mechanisms of social control. The confession was thus cemented as a privileged mode of revealing truth in Western society. Starting with the obligatory Christian confession, this mode has spread to areas such as justice, medicine, education, family relationships and love relations – and literature.²⁴⁸ Art and literature centered on personal confession, viewed in this light, emerges as the consequence of a power that aims at the managing of sexual and personal habits of its subjects. While the history of such literature is rich and varied – St. Augustine’s fourth-century *Confessions* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau identically titled 1781 book being among the most prominent examples – the mid-twentieth-century saw a resurgence of confessional writing in the West. Poets and writers such as Sylvia Plath, Allen Ginsburg and Robert Lowell were amongst those counted into the school of “Confessional poetry” – a term coined by literary critic M.L Rosenthal in a 1959 review of Lowell. Traditional accounts of these and other writers subsumed under the label of “confessional writing” generally focus on the way the writer speaks directly to the reader from a first-person point of view – often about intensely intimate matters, as an expression of personality.²⁴⁹ While Dieter Roth’s above mentioned account of sexual fantasizing about a shop girl – at once personally revealing and self-derogatory – could be viewed in this context, the correlation between a kind of prose of personal exposition and Spoerri’s far more descriptive, depersonalized writing in the *Topography* are less obvious, as the discussion in the previous section showed. The anonymization of “Mr. X” in the entry for object no. 36, for example, is directly contradictory to the confessional tendency – especially considering that Mr. X is likely to be Spoerri himself. The referred to sex did, after all, take place in his hotel room; in the index at the back of the *Topography* “X” is listed as “egghead diddler”; Emmett Williams frequently refers to Daniel Spoerri as “Dan the Egg man” due to his fervent interest in eggs.²⁵⁰

As Jo Gill notes, however, newer readings of confessional writing tends to highlight strategies of evasion, displacement and the possibilities of non-disclosure or self-invention

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 24.

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Jo Gill, introduction to *Modern Confessional Writing: New critical essays*, ed. by Gill, Routledge Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 7.

²⁵⁰ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 33.

rather than confessionalism as “expressions of individuality.”²⁵¹ Foucault, too, elaborates on how the monitoring of sexual behavior is related not only to the pleasure of exercising a power that “questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out” both also to the pleasure of evading this power – the pleasure of “showing off, scandalizing, or resisting.”²⁵² Considered together with the detached, but still amused way of matter-of-factly referring to sex with studded condoms, the anonymization of Mr. X suggests that Spoerri, as the main architect behind the *Topography*, also engages in such a pleasure of holding back, of drawing the reader in. Also, his and Williams’ very direct writing about sex, including the quite absurd aspects of it, displays a certain glee about the subject, reminding us of what Foucault’s identifies as one of the consequences of the repressive myth concerning sexuality: The fact that if one believes sex to be repressed, then “the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression.” Speaking about sex becomes something that “smacks of revolt, of promised freedom.”²⁵³

Spoerri’s objective approach to the personal, via technical media, also hints at an awareness of an external authority “looking in” and subsequent self-policing – a fear of being “caught” in intimate moments making the artist disappear into partial anonymity. According to Foucault, surveillance and self-policing were vital element in the production of docile bodies in regimes of discipline: By knowingly being the subject of surveillance, a person inscribes this knowledge into him- or herself and adjusts his or hers behavior accordingly.²⁵⁴ Viewed in this light, the “portrait” of Spoerri’s life doesn’t arise from a projection of subjectivity into the work; rather it arises as the negation of this subjectivity faced with the promise of exposure inherent in the archival form. The generative principle of the *Topography*, discussed in the previous chapter, stipulates that the packet of condom – as well as every other object on the table – had to be included in the map and explained in terms of the associations that arose from it; Spoerri couldn’t decide to omit the object itself from the *Topography* without breaking his own rules any more than he could refrain from relating its appearance or the story related to it. Even though the *Topography* does include some entries where very little information have been attached to the items, this do in fact seems to be objects to which Spoerri found little to add rather than instances where he willfully withheld information – such as the large screw that Spoerri writes “says something to me, but not

²⁵¹ Ibid.

²⁵² Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 45.

²⁵³ Ibid, 6 – 7.

²⁵⁴ Ibid. 202-203.

enough for me to remember what.”²⁵⁵ This is what Wolfgang Ernst talks of when he speaks of the archive as being guided by its own technicality: what information ends up in the archive is inscribed in its technical structure.

The paradox of the *Topography* is that Spoerri set *himself* up for surveillance. By submitting to the rules of the archive, Spoerri engages in a kind of self-surveillance, similar to the tendency Ina Blom identifies in works such as Ben Vautier’s text-based paintings from the early 1960s and On Kawara’s meticulous record-keeping of his own activities later in the same decade. In these works, the intensive attention to the self is “constantly cut off from specific psychological or biographical content that could be associated with the artist-subject in question”²⁵⁶ – not unlike the depersonalized tone of the *Topography*. According to Blom, these works gave visible form to a type of self-control that is central to non-coercive modes of power: because the surveillance isn’t conducted by external agents, it indicates the individuals’ impulse to make their actions correspond not only to “to the real or imagined values of relevant others; It also indicates individuals’ attention to their actions and thoughts when constituting themselves as subjects of their conduct.”²⁵⁷ Like the works of Vautier and Kawara, the *Topography* simultaneously point to external techniques for regulating the behavior of individuals – evoked by the legal and administrative formats put into play by these works, such as the schema, clocks, signatures, stamps, or, in the case of the *Topography*, technical recording devices put to use in the service of the archive – as well as the internalization of norms and expectations and subsequent self-policing.²⁵⁸ As such they are situated at the shift between two different power formations: while disciplinary society – the precursor to a society ruled by biopower – was originally constituted around procedures through which the body was literally put under surveillance and confined, Foucault viewed these as the first relatively crude experiments in an ongoing process of perfecting and refining such mechanisms, leading to a situation where the disciplinary imperatives have become internalized and individuals are made more directly responsible for their own efficient or profitable utilization within various social arrangements.²⁵⁹

What emerges from a close reading of the entry for object no. 36, then, is a connection with a wider set of question formulated by the post-war avant-garde concerning the projection of subjectivity and the artists’ own life in works of art. The technical handling

²⁵⁵ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 113.

²⁵⁶ Ina Blom, *On the Style Site: Art, Sociality and Media Culture* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2007), 51.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁵⁹ Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 73.

of personal and sexual matter in Spoerri's notes emphasizes how he, like many others, chose to withhold subjectivity when dealing with intimate subject matter, pointing to an uneasy awareness of a "soft" mode of power rigged towards the control of the individual. Rather than displaying the artist-subject that created the work, sex, personal relationships and other intimate details become merely more data integrated into the *Topography* by means of its technical principle of accumulating information. In the following section, I'll discuss how this mode of integrating life and art relates to Dick Higgins' concept of intermedia. I'll also consider how the inherent instability and anti-visibility of both intermedia and the *Topography* relates to modern biopower's dependence on an attentive subject, and the role media play in both securing and unraveling this type of subject.

4.3 The *Topography* and intermedia

The question of integrating real life in art is, of course, at the center of the *Topography*. The indexical map of Spoerri's objects on the table – "the arbitrary debris left over from his process of living," in the words of the dust jacket for the 1966 edition – and the quasi-scholarly attempts to give them meaning through description and stories are indeed "an insistence that art be connected directly to life."²⁶⁰ This insistence ties in with a wider intellectual and artistic trend in the 1960s, when a veritable resurgence of interest in the everyday life took place: Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*, in which Barthes performs semiological readings of everyday items such as detergents, plastic and the new Citroën, was published in 1957 and became widely influential; in 1961 the second volume of Henri Lefebvre's *The Critique of Everyday Life* was published, further developing Lefebvre's argument of everyday life as the site where capitalism reproduced itself and the subsequent need of for revolutionizing everyday life; Jean Baudrillard's 1968 *The System of Objects* was an attempt to create a Marxist taxonomy of the object-world of 1960s everyday life. Both Lefebvre and Baudrillard became important influences on the Situationists group (consisting of both artists and intellectuals), whose anti-capitalist and anti-consumerist stance called for the liberation of everyday life.²⁶¹ The New Realist group, with whom Spoerri was closely associated through the 1960s, similarly underscored the importance of everyday life, advocating a direct appropriation of everyday objects in art.

²⁶⁰ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, (1966). A short, undated note from Spoerri to Dick Higgins makes both Higgins' identity as the author of this text and Spoerri's agreement with the message evident: "Dick your 'blurb' on the jacket is really (sic) very good – why aren't you a art critic, and why didn't you signed it – It is one of the best critics I ever read." Folder "Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri," Sohm Archive.

²⁶¹ See Carrick, *Nouveau Réalisme, 1960s France, and the Neo-avant-garde*, 74 – 75.

In the *Topography*, this appropriation takes a more indirect form than in Spoerri's previously discussed snare-pictures. The objects on his table are not glued down and presented as a three-dimensional photograph; instead they are indexically traced and presented as a map. At the same time, the principle on which the *Topography* is based stipulates that not only the objects but also stories relating to these objects are to be included in the work. This opens up the work to a new level of engagement with real life, generating descriptions, anecdotes and associations from the life of the anecdoters. And similar to how the technical media evoked in the *Topography* are marked by their ability to register "everything," not separating the trivial from the important, so the principle guiding the production of the work is apparently not concerned with whether or not the information it generates is particularly interesting or not. In the entry for object no. 36, as we have seen, the serial number of a packet of condoms is given equal attention as the use this condom was put to. In footnote after footnote, the anecdoters chime in with more or less interesting stories and associations. Dieter Roth jokes that "In Switzerland "Parisians" are condoms, because condoms there are "Parisians"²⁶²; Emmett Williams quotes an archaeologist charge of an archaeological excavation; the conversation between Spoerri and Filliou tells of two unlikely precursors to the kinetic art of Jean Tinguely. Thus the *Topography* is entrenched in the matters of real life in a number of ways: it records the everyday object on Spoerri's table; it generates information and stories more or less relevant to these objects through the process of anecdoting and re-anecdoting; and it engages the anecdoters in a real-life collaborative process: from Robert Filliou helping Spoerri with his French in the first edition of the *Topography*, to the re-anecdoting done by Emmett Williams and Dieter Roth.

This will to cross the boundaries separating art and life – which was vital to avant-garde art production in the 1960s – can't be viewed separately from the issue raised in the previous chapter, namely the dismantling of barriers between different art forms and media in postwar art. The important role played by Spoerri's editor Dick Higgins in this process can be illustrated by the following PS included in a letter Higgins wrote to Spoerri shortly after the publication of the 1966 edition of the *Topography*:

"The response to my little essays has been SPECTACULAR!!! We got forty letters last week about the first, "Intermedia," and the Xeroxes of the manuscripts that I sent out of the other two have been zooming around like Marine bombers. I've had six invites to speak in the last two weeks. Which is not my scene at all, but maybe I can stir up interest in a decent production that way."²⁶³

²⁶² Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*. (1995), 131.

²⁶³ Letter from Dick Higgins to Daniel Spoerri, dated February 1966, "Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri."

The essay referred to here is of course Higgins' famous elaboration on "intermedia" art, which he defined as art that "fall conceptually between media that are already known."²⁶⁴ "Intermedia" was published as a Something Else Newsletter in February 1966 and stressed the increasing irrelevance of art that rigidly conforms to one artistic medium. Duchamp's ready-mades, John Heartfield's photo collages, Robert Rauschenberg's combines, Robert Filliou and Emmett Williams' constructed poetry as well as Happenings are among the groups of works cited as exploring the field *between* different media.²⁶⁵ The "between" is important, as intermedia is not to be confused with "mixed media," which refers to works executed in more than one medium, with the distinctive character of each medium remaining intact. Rather "intermedia", according to Higgins, refers to the conceptual fusing of or working between different media.²⁶⁶ Happenings, for instance – the elaborate type of performance pioneered by Allan Kaprow and others in the late 1950s and 1960s, including a number of theatrical productions that were traditionally scripted and invited only limited audience interaction²⁶⁷ – situates itself in what Higgins calls "an uncharted land that lies between collage, music and the theater."²⁶⁸ But Higgins didn't just view intermedia as charting the space between artistic media; it equally operated in the space between art and life. In his first essay on intermedia, for instance, he points to the relatively unexplored field between the general area of art media and those of life media – like the intermedium between painting and shoes – while later suggesting that the compositions of John Cage and Phillip Corner explores the intermedia between music and philosophy.²⁶⁹ In the words of Ken Friedman: "If there cannot be a boundary between art and life, there cannot be boundaries between art forms and art forms."²⁷⁰ As such intermedia is an aspect of what Higgins identifies as postwar artists' attempt at dissolving the "art/life dichotomy" – that is, the notion that art and life are, or should be, separated. In a later essay Higgins points to the activities of Black Mountain College²⁷¹ as one of the signs of a postwar

²⁶⁴ Dick Higgins and Hannah Higgins, "Intermedia," in *Leonardo* Vol. 34, No. 1 (February 2002), 52

²⁶⁵ See Dick Higgins, "Intermedia," in *Something Else Newsletter*, Vol 1, Number 1, February 1966. http://www.primaryinformation.org/oldsite/SEP/Something-Else-Press_Newsletter_V1N1.pdf

²⁶⁶ Higgins, "Intermedia," in *Leonardo*, 52

²⁶⁷ See Noah Wardrip-Fruin, introduction to Allan Kaprow, "'Happenings' in the New York Scene," in *The New Media Reader*, ed. by Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2003), 83.

²⁶⁸ Higgins, "Intermedia," in *Something Else Newsletter*, u.p.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ Ken Friedman, "Fluxus and Company," in Friedman, *The Fluxus Reader*, 247.

²⁷¹ Black Mountain College was a progressive North Carolina college, founded in 1933, that believed that the study and practice of art were indispensable aspects of a student's education. Many of the school's teachers and students went on to become influential artists in their field, cementing the schools reputation as playing an important role in the history of the postwar avant-garde. John Cage was one of the artists that taught at the

“restlessness in the arts that wanted to go beyond simply the abstract vision of official art of the time and into some new form of realism – new interpenetrations with reality, not just an art reflecting the subjective vision of an artist but an art of interaction with external reality which could therefore perpetually renew itself.”²⁷²

The backdrop for this restlessness, alluded to in the essay, was the hegemonic position of modernist painting in the 1950s and 1960s, with abstract painters such as Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman being celebrated as the greatest artists of their generation. Indispensable to their institutional and commercial success were the widely influential writings of art critic Clement Greenberg, who championed a formalist approach to art that held the “purity” of the individual medium to be sacred.²⁷³ According to Greenberg, modernist painting’s supremacy could be derived from its cultivation of the formal aspects particular to painting: the flat surface, the shape of the support and the properties of the pigment. It had succeeded, in short, in eliminating “every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art.”²⁷⁴ Higgins’ essay on intermedia – and the artistic impulses it describes – formulates an opposition to such rigid formalism. In it, Higgins refers to how artists begun to “realize the fundamental irrelevance of Abstract Expressionism, which was the dominant mode at the time.”²⁷⁵

Before going further into how the *Topography* operate in the area between art and life, it’s useful to look at the interplay of media in the work, as exemplified by the entry for object no. 36. As mentioned, the outline of object no. 36 in the *Topography*’s map is a non-descript rectangle, making it impossible to identify what kind of object it actually is without the help of the accompanying note. This resonates with Spoerri’s intention, stated in conversation with Robert Filliou: “Without the outline the *Topography* wouldn’t make any sense, and without the text the outline wouldn’t make any sense.”²⁷⁶ Meaning, the map is the only thing holding the disparate collection of notes and footnotes together; at the same time, the map is impossible to decode without the written keys. In a letter to Dick Higgins during the proofreading stage of the 1966 edition of the *Topography*, Spoerri went as far as saying that for him it was “very important that the book is not a book but the explanation of a

school. See Black Mountain College Museum + Art Center, “Black Mountain College: A Brief History,” <http://www.blackmountaincollege.org/history/> (visited May 31, 2016.)

²⁷² Dick Higgins, “Life and Its Shadow: The Art/Life Dichotomy,” in *Sculpture Magazine* Vol. 16, No. 7 (September 1997), u.p. <http://www.sculpture.org/documents/scmag97/higgin/sm-higgn.shtml>

²⁷³ Gavin Butt, “‘America’ and its Discontent: Art and Politics 1945 – 60,” in Jones (ed), *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, 22.

²⁷⁴ Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *Art in Theory 1900 – 2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, 2. ed. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 775.

²⁷⁵ Higgins, “Intermedia,” in *Something Else Newsletter*, u.p.

²⁷⁶ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 80.

drawing.”²⁷⁷ This co-dependency between the map and the written text is the most profound example of different media being intrinsically linked in the *Topography*, but by no means the only one. For instance, the footnote to object no. 36 that consists of a conversation between Daniel Spoerri and Robert Filliou relies both on the medium of the tape recorder and written language. The conversation, as discussed in chapter 3, faithfully represents a realistic speaking pattern – including pauses and incomplete sentences – thus displaying the tape recorder’s ability to “snare” reality.²⁷⁸ At the same time it relies on the 26 letters of the alphabet in order to communicate with the reader in the format of a book.

In addition to the outline and the notes and footnotes, the entry for object no. 36 features an element that has gone un-discussed so far in this thesis: Topor’s drawings of the objects. The drawing for object no. 36 is a simple, pen-drawn sketch of the packet of condoms, the product name “Blausiegel” barely visible below the opening flap. The drawings were introduced in the 1966 edition and omitted from the Dieter Roth’s German translation in 1968, probably due to lack of space. They are the only elements in the book displaying “personal handwriting,” and as such a break with the more “technical” approach of the map and the notes. However, as a glimpse into the process leading up to the publication of the 1966 edition reveals, Spoerri and his editor Higgins saw the drawings as a reinforcement of the quasi-scholarly atmosphere of the book, rather than an introduction of artistic subjectivity to the project. Higgins initial proposal of including photographs of the original objects was set aside, partly due to the fact that Spoerri had given or thrown away most of them and partly because Spoerri only wanted to include “half-relevant” illustrations for each entry. “I like your basic idea very much, of using half-relevant [sic] material, in an almost-stupid way,” Higgins wrote in a letter to Spoerri, before making the following suggestion:

“And I would like to suggest something that should be both economical and artistically very effective: - why not use what we call “line drawings” – no dictionary gives the French or German of the term. These are tiny little drawings, black and white, such as you see in children’s dictionaries, elementary grammars, and so forth (...). Each would portray a basic figure of what you were describing – a table, a cup, etc., and each could have under it, in tiny tiny letters, the word which it represented, “table”, “cup”, etc. This would increase the scholarly atmosphere and be very beautiful and “stupid” in a clear way.”²⁷⁹

Spoerri suggested that his friend Roland Topor should do these drawings, which ended up in the 1966 edition without the suggested captions. The “half-relevancy” of Topor’s drawings is

²⁷⁷ Letter from Spoerri to Higgins, dated November 1965, “Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri.”

²⁷⁸ Spoerri calls the conversation “excerpts from a conversation snared on magnetic tape.” Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 125.

²⁷⁹ Letter from Higgins to Spoerri, dated July 2 1965, “Dick Higgins correspondence: Daniel Spoerri.”

evident in the fact that he didn't use the (largely unavailable) original items as models. Rather he did very quick sketches based on the map and Spoerri's descriptions, the result being that the drawings didn't always match the original object.²⁸⁰

What all this amounts to, is that in order to make sense of the objects of the *Topography*, the readers need to synthesize the information given through the map, the text and the drawing in order to "complete" the work. Although not a radical fusing of media, the *Topography* brings different media together in a pattern of co-dependency and blurred lines, in which the reader is encouraged to play an active part. Writing on Fluxus literature, Roy F. Allen, points to how the mixing of conventionally separated media utilizes more of the faculties of the respondent; the demand on the reader to "synthesize in a more substantial way all the parts," guaranteed "more active participation."²⁸¹ As thesis has already shown, the depersonalized tone of Spoerri's writing can be viewed as a strategy for making room for the reader's own engagement in the work. It's intermedia character can be seen as working towards the same aim.

The different media and media technologies in the *Topography*, then, point to a sphere beyond the work itself – both by recording and referring to real life and by inviting readers to take part in the making of the work. In a 1997 essay Higgins pinpoints how the two aspects are intrinsically linked:

"The artist has removed something from the world of non-art and has matched it to his or her horizons of what it might be, the viewer has seen it and perhaps compared it to his or her own expectations, has fused these things into a whole and then has, perhaps, learned enough from the experience that the viewer's horizon has itself been modified to account for the experience. Of course any such approach places the audience in an active position as regards the identity of the work. One cannot passively sit still and be moved by it, one cannot be the cool scientist and examine its linguistic structure since the references of the work are too ambivalent and flexible to be put into a simple this-means-that formulation."²⁸²

This fusion of art and life and the multiple possible meanings it produces clearly resonates with the contingent aspect of the *Topography*' generative principle, as well as with a wide variety of artworks of the same period – notably works by Fluxus artists. The quintessential Fluxus format, the Event,²⁸³ can serve as an example. Originally conceived by George

²⁸⁰ In an appendix added to the 1966 edition, Topor notes which of the drawings that doesn't resemble the object. On his drawing of object no. 16, for instance, he notes: "Bizarre object evoking anything but a container of glue. In fact, it evokes nothing." Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 223.

²⁸¹ Allen, "Fluxus and Literature," 74.

²⁸² Higgins, "Life and its Shadow," u.p.

²⁸³ As Hannah Higgins writes, "two formats have played important roles at all locations and in all subgroups of Fluxus artists: the Event performance and the Fluxkit multiple. Invented by Fluxus, these constitute the common

Brecht, and later adopted by virtually every Fluxus artist, Events are minimal performance pieces, typed up as written instructions that can be performed not only by the artist or other artists, but also by any potential reader.²⁸⁴ The typed instruction – the Event score – typically calls for the performance of an everyday task, such the score for Alison Knowles’

Proposition (1961): “Make a salad.” Another famous example is Brecht’s *Word Event* (1961), which simply reads “Exit.” The extreme minimalism of the piece leaves almost everything up for individual interpretation. For instance, the Fluxus festival *Festum Flexorum Fluxus*, held in Düsseldorf in Germany in 1962, staged a performance *Word Event* in which the performers turned off all the lights and left, leaving the audience alone in the auditorium.²⁸⁵ But the work could equally have been performed by making the audience leave, or by pointing to a door or some other exit. Indeed, as Ina Blom points out, *Word Event* is “realized” by any exit sign or exit action throughout the world.²⁸⁶ And, crucially, the performance of *Word Event*, like all Events, can take place in the mind of the reader: to imagine what such a piece could look like is also to perform it. Like the *Topography*’s principle of anecdoting and re-anecdoting a selection of everyday items, the Event becomes a principle for generating an ultimately unpredictable set of outcomes, deeply rooted in matters of life.

Also, like the Event – and indeed most Fluxus art works – the *Topography* calls for an engagement with art that goes beyond the purely visual – another notable break from Greenberg, who famously insisted that visual art should “confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience.”²⁸⁷ As mentioned in chapter 2, the very first explanation Spoerri gives as to the idea behind the *Topography* is related to his work on the book *L’Optique modern*, published as a Fluxus edition in 1963:

”In case it might be helpful in understanding this experiment, I should state that it was after constructing a pair of eyeglasses equipped with needles to poke the eyes out that I felt the urge to recreate objects through the memory instead of actually displaying them.”²⁸⁸

The statement is at first a bit puzzling, seeing as the notes in the *Topography* in no way describes the objects the way one would imagine a person with no eyesight would have done.

denominator of Fluxus practice, although Fluxus artists have also explored other formats, such as music and graphic and painted work.” Hannah Higgins, *Fluxus Experience*, 11 – 12.

²⁸⁴ See Dezeuze, “The 1960s: A Decade Out-of-Bounds,” 45.

²⁸⁵ Owen Smith, “Developing a Fluxable Forum: Early Performance and Publishing,” in Friedman, *The Fluxus Reader*, 4 – 5.

²⁸⁶ Blom, “Boredom and Oblivion,” in Friedman, *The Fluxus Reader*, 71.

²⁸⁷ Greenberg, “Modern Painting,” 777.

²⁸⁸ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 23.

However the intention becomes clearer in a later footnote where Spoerri speaks of the idea behind the work:

"Here on the wall, the snare-pictures ... everything is spectacular and visible to the maximum, you see bread, you see things that stand out, volumes, all kinds of things that extend beyond the shape, and all that, but in the other, in the outline, it would be completely different..."²⁸⁹

The *Topography*, then, presents an opportunity to explore alternatives to purely visual perception. The limited visual information about the objects needs to be complemented by the information given in the footnote as well as in the drawings, thus transferring the responsibility for the completion of the work to the mind of the reader – which, again, is a consequence of the work's intermedia character.

An interesting aspect of this element of the *Topography* is the link between the ability to synthesize elements and to pay attention – to properly engage in the work – and the role attention plays in societies guided by non-coercive modes of power. In his book *Suspension of Perception*, Jonathan Crary points to how, in the late nineteenth century, the capacity to synthetically bind perceptions into a functional whole – a vital element in attentive behavior – was viewed as a part of psychic normality and how, conversely, the failure or malfunction of this capacity became linked to psychosis or other mental pathologies.²⁹⁰ Crary traces how ideas about perception and attention were transformed in the late nineteenth century and how the managing of attention and the securing of attentive subject became vital elements for an emerging capitalism that demanded adaptability in its work force while at the same time depending on and vying for the attention of consumers. "What is important to institutional power, since the late nineteenth century, is simply that perception function in a way that insures a subject is productive, manageable, and predictable, and is able to be socially integrated and adaptive," he writes.²⁹¹ Within this system, media – especially cinema and later television and the personal computer – becomes systems for the management of attention and by extension the operation of non-coercive forms of power.²⁹² According to Crary, the production of attentive subject points to the reconfiguration of the disciplinary society into a society of control – that is, a society where the individuals have internalized the disciplinary imperatives.²⁹³ As noted in the previous section of this chapter, the *Topography* points to both sides of this shift, by simultaneously evoking external techniques for regulating

²⁸⁹ Ibid. 79 – 80.

²⁹⁰ Crary, *Suspensions of Perception*, 15 – 16.

²⁹¹ Ibid. 4

²⁹² Ibid. 71.

²⁹³ Ibid. 73

the behavior of individuals – the technical recording devices put to use in the service of the archive – and the internalization of norms and expectations and subsequent self-policing. Extended to include the production of attentive subjects as central element to modern biopower, the intermedia character of the *Topography*, and the imperative placed on the reader to synthesize information from different media in order to complete the work, can be viewed as symptomatic for a society that relies on the continued engagement and attention of its subjects.

However, the *Topography* doesn't simply demand an attentive engagement with the work – it also undercuts this attention. In the previous chapter, I argued that the generative principle on which the *Topography* is based on evoke the archive's mechanism of inclusion (or exclusion) while at the same time subverting it through an potentially endless accumulation of material that holds little relevance beyond the specific context of the work itself. This threat of "information overload" not only puts pressure on the archive as a material structure; it also affects the reader that is supposed to process this information. When reading the *Topography*, one is constantly cut off and redirected to footnotes that lead to more footnotes, leading to more footnotes etc. Small wonder that, after having read an entry, one often forgets what the actual object was. The generative principle of the *Topography*, then, simultaneously undercuts its own authority as an archive and its demand on the readers' attention. As such it mirrors Crary's argument that attentiveness needs to be thought of as existing on a continuum with distraction – the fact that any form of sustained attention is "haunted by the possibility of its own excess. . . . In any number of ways, attention inevitably reaches a threshold at which it breaks down."²⁹⁴ In the simplest sense, this applies to instances where we try to look or listen to anything for too long, which inevitably leads to distraction. But it is also ingrained in modern societies based on attentive behavior as a mode of non-coercive power. Part of the capitalist logic, according to Crary, is that we accept rapidly switching our attention from one thing to another – a demand that simultaneously erodes the very basis of disciplinary attentiveness. The economic system that emerged in the late nineteenth century – and whose logic held true through the twentieth century – thus became a regime of "reciprocal attentiveness and distraction."²⁹⁵ The *Topography's* undermining of visibility and engaging of a broader range of the human sensory apparatus thus point to the modern dilemma of attention: that the same system that is dependent on an attentive subject generates its own potential for distraction.

²⁹⁴ Ibid. 46 – 47.

²⁹⁵ Ibid, 29 – 30.

While this conclusion is derived from the technical structure of the *Topography*, the ambivalence Spoerri voiced concerning the potential endlessness of the work, as discussed in the previous chapter, also applies to the works' undercutting of the readers' attention. To allow footnotes and potential distraction to enter the work was undoubtedly important to Spoerri's idea about the development of the *Topography*, as he saw how the game he had set up to account for the objects on his table "snowballed," potentially making the *Topography* grow "as big as the Grand Larousse..."²⁹⁶ The toying with the readers' attention span was an important part of this game, as proven by the many strange detours both Spoerri and his co-anecdoters invites the reader in on in their footnotes. Yet, faced with the consequences of the game he had set up, Spoerri's enthusiasm was tested – notably when faced with the contributions of Dieter Roth. "He ruined it when he added a footnote to a footnote to a footnote, and then again added two more footnote," Spoerri complained in a later interview. "That way you completely lose track of where you are, and sooner or later you just throw the whole thing away."²⁹⁷ Like a modern society that both vies for and erodes the attention of the individual, Spoerri was, in a way, overtaken by his own system.

4.4 Conclusion

The *Topography* can, as I have previously argued, be understood as an archive structured to accommodate a potentially endless stream of information derived from the objects on Daniel Spoerri's blue table. This chapter has tried to trace how this archival approach and the use of the artists' own life as subject matter relates to matters of power and control in modern societies. The detached, depersonalized telling of stories about close personal friendship and the coy, evasive stance adopted by Spoerri, as well as his co-anecdoter Williams, when relating information about sex and sexual relations is consistent with a wider trend among the postwar avant-garde of approaching deeply personal themes – often centered on the body or sex and sexuality – in an objective manner. Rather than projecting their own subjectivity into the works, these artists looked on themselves and on sexual relations as if from the outside. In the *Topography*, this external point-of-view is underpinned and reinforced by the technical media evoked in the work – specifically these media's ability to register information without subjective filtering – and the archival format and its connotations to official power.

The apparent contradiction of choosing your own life and your own experiences as the starting point for your art, as Spoerri did, without disclosing any details of a truly intimate

²⁹⁶ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 18 – 19.

²⁹⁷ Spoerri in conversation with Sylvia Lorenz.

or personal nature, point to the type of non-coercive, “soft” power formation that, according to Foucault, is typical for modern societies. Rigged towards the control of the human body, the control of sex and the extracting of sexual confessions are key factors to this mode of power. The mapping of his own life that Spoerri engages in and the evasiveness and lack of personal details he discloses then become signs of attempts to evade this power, as well as displaying the kind of self-policing that comes from an awareness of being “watched.”

The dismantling of the barriers separating art and life inherent in this activity exists on a continuum with the *Topography*'s intermedia character. The discarding of the sanctity of specifically artistic media in the art production of the postwar avant-garde went hand in hand with an engagement in what lay beyond media, in matters of life and in the production of works of art that generated unpredictable outcomes. The *Topography* is a part of this tradition. Not only does the principle underpinning works and its multiple layers record everyday objects and generates stories lifted from the minds and lives of its writers; it also calls for the work to be “completed” beyond the material work itself and in the minds of the readers in a process of synthesizing information from different sources. This demand for attention is analogous to the way non-coercive power formations' function in modern, capitalist societies – at the same time, the random, unpredictable system of footnotes can be viewed as symptomatic for how attention is constantly threatened by distraction.

5 Concluding remarks

“Even if the author should succeed in ending this topography, the study of the no-longer-available blue table with breakfast time objects on it has become widespread enough that it is no longer possible to end it as a field of study, and, shortly, thousand dollar grants and doctoral degrees will be given to those who have specialized in studying it.”
– Dick Higgins²⁹⁸

This thesis has studied Daniel Spoerri’s *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, a book that, as the subtitle for the latest edition makes clear, was “done with the help of his very dear friend, Robert Filliou” and later “translated from the French, and further anecdoted at random by their very dear friend, Emmett Williams” before being “enriched with still further anecdotations by their very dear friend Dieter Roth.” I have argued that rather than being viewed simply as a collection of notes published as a book, the *Topography* should be understood as an archival work. Its most defining feature, I have claimed, is the principle on which it is based and through which its content is generated – that is, the principle of attaching stories, memories, and associations to the individual objects gathered on Daniel Spoerri’s table at a particular moment in time. This generative structure is analogous to the technical principles according to which information enters the archive or not. The actual content of the notes and footnotes generated through this principle are marked by their refusal to distinguish between the important from the un-important, to elevate amusing stories over dry descriptions, making them less characteristic than the process through which they are included in the *Topography* – a process that potentially could go on indefinitely, like an archive in continual growth.

The handing over of the *Topography* to other “anecdoters” wasn’t a part of Daniel Spoerri’s original plan for the work. However, the footnotes he added to his own notes in the first edition – as well as including Pierre Restany’s footnote to the title – set the course for the development the work went through over the next few years. Rather than grounding the objects in a stable set of references, they exemplify the destabilizing force of association and opens up the work to everything from anecdotes, stories and discussions among the anecdoters to literary allusion, odd fun-facts and semantic discussions. Emmett Williams and Dieter Roth simply followed Spoerri’s example when they went about re-anecdoting the work, further highlighting the potential endless-ness of the *Topography*. As this thesis has shown, there were in fact concrete plans to keep re-anecdoting the work, although none of the contributions gathered from Spoerri’s readers and colleagues made it to print.

²⁹⁸ Unpublished footnote to object no. 25, Folder AFr S, Daniel Spoerri Archives.

This playful, collaborative approach to the act of putting together a book should be viewed in the context of the blurring of the boundaries between different media – and between art and life – that took place in postwar art production. The proliferation of artists' books in the 1960s is a part of this development, completely overthrowing traditional notions about what a book could be. The *Topography* is a part of this tradition. The claim of this thesis is that Spoerri, by evoking technical media within the pages of a book and structuring it according to a technical principal of information gathering, Spoerri made an archival artist's book – an artist book that evoked the archive as a method for collecting and structuring information and storing it for prosperity.

The evoking of technical media also supported Spoerri's explicit wish for the *Topography* to be a depersonalized account of a random selection of objects, rather than a work that expressed subjective opinions and elevated the objects beyond their mundane ordinariness. Like Roland Topor wrote in his introduction for the 1990 reprint of the original *Topographie*, Spoerri's intention with the *Topography* was not to "paint a complaisant self-portrait of the artist shattered into 80 relics. Nor did he desire to flaunt his worldly connections or expose his private life." Instead, he was concerned with "exhausting the potential descriptions of a Parisian scene at a particular moment in time."²⁹⁹ This intention, together with the *Topography*'s commitment to chance, was perfectly married to the technical storage media that had been introduced in the second half of the nineteenth century. The typewriter's erasure of personal handwriting and photography and phonography's ability to indiscriminately record and store reality indexically correlates with Spoerri's predominantly depersonalized account of every single object on his table – from the breadcrumbs to the spool of thread.

These media also brings forth the similarities between the *Topography* and the bureaucratic archive of the nineteenth century. In the nineteenth-century, the media technologies evoked in the *Topography* contributed to a transformation in the thinking about and the structuring of the archive. Like the *Topography*, the quintessential archive of the nineteenth century reflected these media's ability to capture contingency, to arrest time and to record data in a non-hierarchical manner. At the same time, the self-reflexive character of Spoerri's work and its failure to disclose hardly anything of real significance ties in with archival art of the postwar period that engaged in a subverting of the truth-claims and

²⁹⁹ Spoerri, *An Anecdoted Topography of Chance* (1995), 21 – 22.

authority of the bureaucratic archive. The potential endless accumulation of more or less relevant information points to the fear of “information overload” that haunts the archive.

To construct an archive based on stories about yourself and your circle of acquaintances generated by your belongings might reasonably be considered a rather narcissistic project. However, the *Topography* is uniquely equipped to counter such claims. The belongings in question were not chosen due to their personal significance to Spoerri – rather they were a random selection of the debris of everyday life in all its banality; the notes generated by these objects are kept coolly informative to an almost boring extent; the additional stories triggered by them are similarly matter-of-fact descriptions of occurrences; the footnotes are as often as not random associations of small relevance to the thing in question. The *Topography*, then, succeeds in joining the dismantling of the separation between art and life – a crucial aspect of the art production of the postwar avant-garde – without Spoerri having to offer up any of his own most intimate secrets or memories in return. Life becomes something to be objectively recorded and integrated in art, replacing the projection of the artist’s own subjectivity into the works.

The mapping of his own life that Spoerri engages in through a format with strong connotations to official power – the archive – and the implicit presence of someone looking in on Spoerri’s activity can be viewed as symptomatic for a society that turns information about its individual inhabitants into tools of control over these individuals’ life and bodies. At the same time, the objective approach to even the most intimate subject matter in the *Topography* – such as sex – hints at an evasion of this control. Similarly, the need for the reader to combine information from different media sources in order to make a sense of the objects on Spoerri’s blue table – a consequence of the work’s intermedia character – echoes the way the soft mode of power in capitalist society is dependent upon attentive, information consuming subjects. Yet the very structure of the *Topography* simultaneously undercuts any kind prolonged attention, by constantly re-directing the reader to footnotes (often leading to yet more footnotes). The best one can hope for, then, is to find some pleasure in the act of being distracted.

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