

A photograph of a bookshelf filled with books. The books are arranged in a way that creates a sense of depth and perspective. The spines of the books are visible, showing various colors and textures. The title 'FOUND' is overlaid in the center in a large, white, serif font. Below it, the author's name 'ULRIK WECK' is written in a smaller, white, sans-serif font.

# FOUND

ULRIK WECK



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# A book can tell a story, but can a piece<sup>of</sup> wood?

(Im)material history and aestheticization  
in Ulrik Weck's *Found* series

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In Walter Benjamin's essay 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' there is a famous passage about the angel of history. Benjamin pictures the angel as the figure in Paul Klee's *Angelus Novum* (1920) and delivers a vivid description of how the angel stands with his wings spread out, face turned towards the past. The angel perceives a chain of events, and he sees the pile of wreckage upon wreckage, that is hurled in front of his feet, that keeps piling up. According to Benjamin, the angel would like to stay and make things right, but cannot as his wings have caught a storm blowing from Paradise so violent he cannot close them. And this storm, Benjamin finally points out, is what we call progress.

In Ulrik Weck's series *Found* (initiated in 2006 and still ongoing), the Benjaminian assertion that so-called progress always entails destruction is blatantly apparent. But the observation is given an affirmative twist. For in the works of the series, the debris of history unfolding has risen and come back with a vengeance.

But what do these fragments and pieces want? And why have they chosen to come back in the shape of books? Do they mean to tell us something – about the past, the future, or perhaps the current state of affairs?

Archiving entails both a remembering and forgetting of certain things, as Jacques Derrida has pointed out. This is also apparent in Weck's works, where material culture, turned contemporary refuse, is retrieved from oblivion and put into play anew, with an acute eye for its inherent energies and aesthetic potentialities, but also the forces and contemporary antagonisms the discarded fragments can be used to actualize. The Greek root of the word 'archive' as 'commencement' is invoked, when doors, tabletops, cabinets, sheets of wood, even shelves - the material support of the archive as a medium - are collected, cut up, included, and robbed of their utility in an 'archival impulse' with underlying hints of hoarding and autosarcophagy. This operation seems to echo both Gordon Matta-Clark's building cuts and Lawrence Weiner's square wall removals, but also brings to mind unbuilding and the poetic recycling of Nouveau Réalisme.

The openheartedly clumsy mimesis of Weck's faux books tricks no one, and this grants the viewer the upper hand of the work when first encountering it. But up close the flat surface of a found piece of foil-laminated particle board seems to sneer while flaunting its solidity and holding its tongue, preventing us from flipping and seeing as much as a single page. We cannot read these books, rather they appear to silence discourse, yet provoke a number of narratives - thus it makes sense that some of the works are untitled. One is free to say anything one wants about them it seems, and yet forced to listen to their speech, that appears to emanate from the depths of history.

In other works by Weck, such as the series *Territorial Totem* (2009), such material utterances are far more outspoken. Here pieces of concrete with traces of graffiti on them, found on the sites of demolished housing projects in Copenhagen, are stacked tall on plinths, in allusion to an almost Brancusian phallicism, and thereby made to speak across cultural narratives of tribalism, art historical modernism, and the precarious life of marginalized groups within society. The works of the *Found* series, on the other hand, are so subdued, understated, and unmonumental, that one wonders if what they muse on is the historicity of ordinary life and perception, the material relation as such, or perhaps the very notion of *the thing* - a concept whose etymological roots also refer to a 'gathering' and a 'deliberation' (on a matter under discussion).

#### OUTMODED MATERIALITIES

While archives and libraries basically accumulate objects (books, binders, folders etc.), it is not the objects they contain that are interesting or of importance per se, but rather the information, the words they contain (excepting rare old manuscripts). Likewise, books, despite being objects, are generally considered mere vessels for communication, their function being to be read - a purely mental activity.

Around the time Weck started working on the *Found* series public archives in Denmark had digitized much of their inventory. Predictions were being made that the Gutenbergian age was finally coming to its end, and that in the near future the physical book would be supplanted by its dematerialized successors (the ebook, the pdf) to be used on portable electronic reading devices. It is easy to see these developments as mere extrapolations of the books paradoxical status as an object, but they are also part of another general impulse. Earlier, other currents



had pointed in the same direction - the dematerialization of the art object effectuated by the conceptual art practices of the 1960s and the proliferation of immaterial forms of labor under post-Fordism, for instance. But also the informationalization of the commodity under today's networked capitalism anticipated in, for instance, Jean Baudrillard's idea of *the political economy of the sign* from the early 1970s, that deems the attached information and connotations of a product more important than its physical traits - and thus, paradoxically, renders consumerist materialism immaterial.

Considering such developments, Weck's series also seems to link up with the Benjaminian concept of *the outmoded* as something which possesses a progressive potentiality. In Benjamin's writings, the outmoded refers to commodities that are no longer in fashion, the objects that have begun to be extinct, something which has just gone out of style and is not yet recirculated as retro. Many of the materials and objects, from which the sculptures are made, are outmoded in that sense, as they have been discarded solely on the grounds of aesthetic tastes - changing fashions and interior design trends - and not due to a loss of function. But also the book, which these materials are used to mimic, has become outmoded in a sense, or at least its physicality has - and that is the only aspect left of it in Weck's works. The key holes and cabinet handles, discernable on the slices, also redouble the theme of outmodedness by alluding to physical touch, the actions of the hand, and the kind of direct manipulation of objects, that is becoming rarer in labor these days. The series thus probes the otherness of matter today, perhaps lamenting or mourning earlier materialities or materiality as such, in a digital age that seems intent on breaking all limitations imposed on life by material circumstance, in a strive towards immateriality (which, ironically, is the state we all eventually obtain in death).

#### THE AESTHETICS AND POLITICS OF THE BOOK

The enlightenment library or book collection was primarily perceived as a means to gain knowledge of the world, but also erudition, formation, a refinement of tastes and the higher social status that came with knowledge and a good education. But do such ambitions still guide us today, or are other things at stake in the current politics of the book?

The last couple of decades have seen a general increase in what a number of cultural critics, sociologists, and philosophers refer to as *aesthetic consumption*. This development falls under the broader phenomena of *aestheticization* and *culturalization* within Western societies that refer to the increased urgency of actively constructing one's own identity through consumption and lifestyle, but also the pervasiveness of aesthetics in all spheres of life and the collusion of arts and commerce within the experience economy. These changes have also affected the cultural function of the book.

Many books stores have recently been redesigned as immersive environments, semipublic spaces with an atmosphere that seem a cross between the library, the community centre, and the domestic setting: a café but also a public event program featuring plays, lectures, concerts, and talks (Barnes and Noble and the Canadian equivalent Indigo Books are notable examples of restructurings in this vein). In the spectacle of the aesthetic economy the book's connotations of dust, concentration, and a slowness that used to contrast with the rapid pace and impulsivity



of consumerism, are eclipsed by these values. Thus it is no surprise to learn that, according to the Danish Competition and Consumer Authority, every third book is bought on an impulse, and that one in three new books bought are never read by the buyer. The book's ability to convey certain values and tastes of its owner has also become as vital a sales argument as its actual content. Despite the warning to never judge them by their covers, certain books signal cutting edge, while others exude an aura of immersion and contemplation that has become rare today and is therefore sought after as a valuable addition to one's personality - or perhaps just one's image.

#### MATERIAL HISTORY IN THE MAKING

It has been claimed that the intensified aestheticization of life within the last two decades has, once and for all, rendered ideas about art's autonomy obsolete, as practically all artistic means, techniques, and rationalities have by now been appropriated by the economy, and the avant-garde dream of merging art with life realized (albeit as a capitalist nightmare). Much of the criticism directed at the aestheticization tendency has, however, been aimed at a one-eyed focus on effects and form over content, that is claimed to be complicit in gradually eroding historical consciousness in society.

Until recently the book served as the most important means to gain access to the past, but in the 20<sup>th</sup> century the famous dictum 'a picture is worth a thousand words' seemed to ossify into fact, as history was broken down to images, not stories, as Walter Benjamin predicted. With the emergence of the reproducible imaging technologies, images at the same time, however, became free floating and lost their tether to material reality and authentic historical circumstances, and this has only intensified with the emergence of the digital technologies and the so-called 'pictorial turn' situated at the turn of the millenium. So where does that leave us today? Will the 21<sup>st</sup> century be broken down to just bits and bytes - will the angel of history eventually be displaced to the virtual domain?

Like photographs, the 'books' in Weck's works are 'slices of time and space'. They point towards historical techniques and modes of production, but also each index a later use, through their signs of wear and tear. The worn out handmade panel from the turn of the century juxtaposed with mass-produced IKEA laminates on the same shelf invoke a heterochronicity, a co-existence of times, through which history is made present in both a subjective and objective form: the fragments cause one to contemplate historical movements as well as to reminisce about childhood visits at one's grandma, who lived in a house with panels like these, or an old friend whose apartment had a door, that looked like that. Contrary to the spectacle of the *memory industries*, that have risen in recent years and capitalize on historical trauma in an experience economy setting, the tales told by Weck's assemblages revolve around the undramatic, sometimes even the poetics of the bland. They evoke accounts of everyday life and everydayness as a kind of latent substrate from which new possibilities, perhaps even subversive potentialities, may emerge, as described by authors including Henri Lefebvre and Maurice Blanchot, and worth remembering in an era without ideologies. In their own quiet but convincing way, they assert the importance of actively engaging with the future through the present, without forgetting the past.



