

CREATING THE HIGH SCHOOL YEARBOOK: THE ARCHON IN ACTION

INTRODUCTION

The publication of a high school annual, or yearbook, is a tradition in most secondary schools in the United States. The yearbook exists as a physical document designed to represent a year in the life of an educational institution to its constituents. The creation, distribution and activation of this document correspond to the power of the archive defined in Jacques Derrida's work *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. In many ways the yearbook demonstrates the role of the Derrida's archon from the early stages of its design to its nostalgic preservation by those who receive it.

THE YEARBOOK AS ARCHIVE

In a lecture given on the 5th of June, 1994 at Sigmund Freud's home and museum in London, Jacques Derrida outlined his core description of the archive. His Derridian analysis began with the words themselves, expanding the meaning of archive to simultaneously address commencement and commandment. The archive as a principle holds the power of beginnings or bringing things into being (ontology) and the power of naming (nomology) where social order is exercised. Derrida's description of the archive goes on to discuss the archon, the individual who implements social order through defining what elements become part of the archive. The insights presented in Derrida's lecture provide a framework for the analysis of the high school yearbook as archive.¹

¹ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) p1.

From its inception the yearbook's primary goal is to archive a year at an academic institution. Once produced the printed book functions as a document that categorizes the year to the audience of the institution itself. Primarily distributed to participants in the institution, the book becomes a part of the school's history and is added to a long line of previous years' publications that help to define the school's past. The printed volume's easily accessible pages provide documentation to future generations about a discrete amount of time in the institution's past.

Derrida's notion of the archon permeates the production and distribution of the yearbook to the student body. The staff that creates the book defines a theme or direction that informs decisions as to what occurrences in the academic year will become part of the more permanent printed pages of

the yearbook. The yearbook theme creates a conceptual framework that includes or excludes certain visual or textual content as defined by the student staff and the limits imposed by the institution's administration. In defining these filters the student archons flex their power as archons to include or exclude information that ultimately defines the institution to future generations. This act demonstrates the simultaneous bringing into being and naming as discussed by Derrida. From the theme of the publication to the choice of content on individual pages, a small group of students determine how the institution will be represented to the larger audience of the school itself.

Rituals that surround the distribution of the yearbook expand the role of the students as archon from the small yearbook staff to the student body as a whole. At distribution students individualize their copy of the publication. In an act of invited defacement, each book changes and evolves as individual students take the reductive student produced archive of the institution and makes it their own by selectively choosing their peers to write, doodle, and scribble individualized messages into their copy of the publication. This empowers each student to become the archon of his or her personal archive. They then determine what individuals become part of their archive within their own copy of the publication and define their historic presence in their peers' yearbook through their playful writings. Each distributed yearbook becomes a specific instance of an independent archive differentiated from all others.

In a final stage of storage the book becomes an individual keepsake, generally maintained within each student's collection of books. The yearbook also finds its way into the institutions official archive where it adds to the collective history of the school. In each of these instances the book awaits activation at a later time and acts as a way to define a specific moment in institutional or personal history. In its later reactivation, the archive changes based on lost memories, further developed relationships with certain individuals contained in the book and other life experiences. A new viewing filter informed by a change in time causes the publication to hold nostalgia and transformed content.

A CASE STUDY: THE CHARGER MUSEUM

The examination of an actual case study at the Albuquerque Academy in 2005 demonstrates the process of active archiving, the role of the student archon and the additional challenges of creating interesting designs in a production oriented realm of prescriptive design practices.

When faced with the task of designing the yearbook for the fiftieth year anniversary of the Albuquerque Academy, the students addressed the challenge of acknowledging the deep history of



[image 1] Charger Museum Gallery Plan

the institution while creating a publication that reflected their contemporary interests and passions. The historical implications of their tasks instantly forced them into an acute awareness of how their design role could impact not only the history of the school itself; but the existing archive of experiences captured within fifty years of yearbook publications. Within the modern space of their cognizance of their place in history, the students actively addressed the power that they wielded as the interpreters of information to the institution. This strong understanding of their role as archons created an exciting energy that permeated a publication alive with historical precedent and innovative ideas.

In the early brainstorming sessions that are typically bogged down with concerns about discovering a theme, the students were relieved to instantly have the fifty-year anniversary as their primary focus. After a considered analysis of the previous year's yearbooks and a meeting with the school archivist, the students quickly settled on the theme of creating a museum dedicated to the school. Through summer workshops they soon envisioned a type of virtual architecture where they designed a building

to house their collection of both historic and contemporary memories [see image 1]. The museum acted as a place where they conceptually felt they could both preserve and exhibit the ideas they chose to archive. The choice to include both historic and contemporary content, as well as the redefining of the school's architecture, expresses core elements of Derrida's archive. The students' system is both "institutive and conservative. Revolutionary and traditional."²

² Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) p7.

The designing of virtual architecture provided an interesting 'location' for archiving the institution. Within the walls of their museum they had both public and private spaces, including the 'basement' where past exhibits were held and the public galleries that housed exhibits representing the present year. This also made way for transient spaces that held traveling exhibits such as the senior class who were matriculating to college. The conceptual structure of the museum also introduced the issue of translating their three-dimensional ideas to the two-dimensional realm of the printed page.

The early stages of the design determined a strong relationship with the role of the archive. Not only would the students be arranging the yearbook filter of museum exhibitions, they established an archive nested within the museum where they would selectively filter information from previous yearbooks for inclusion in the 'basement' section of the book. In their reliance on the printed page as archival material they would realize the importance of inscription as outlined by Derrida in the Exergue of *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Though Derrida challenged this form due to the presence of e-mail, he recognized the role of inscription both as print as a structure that influences archival meaning and as circumcision that severs initial meaning to make it a literal element in the archive.³

³ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) p18/20.

A look at the printed pages of the yearbook provide an understanding of both the historical archive of previous yearbooks and the contemporary filtering of the school year into the framework of the museum. In translating the three-dimensional architecture into the plane of the two-dimensional page the students used the western construct of perspective distance and used a mix of axonometric and perspectival representations [see image 2].

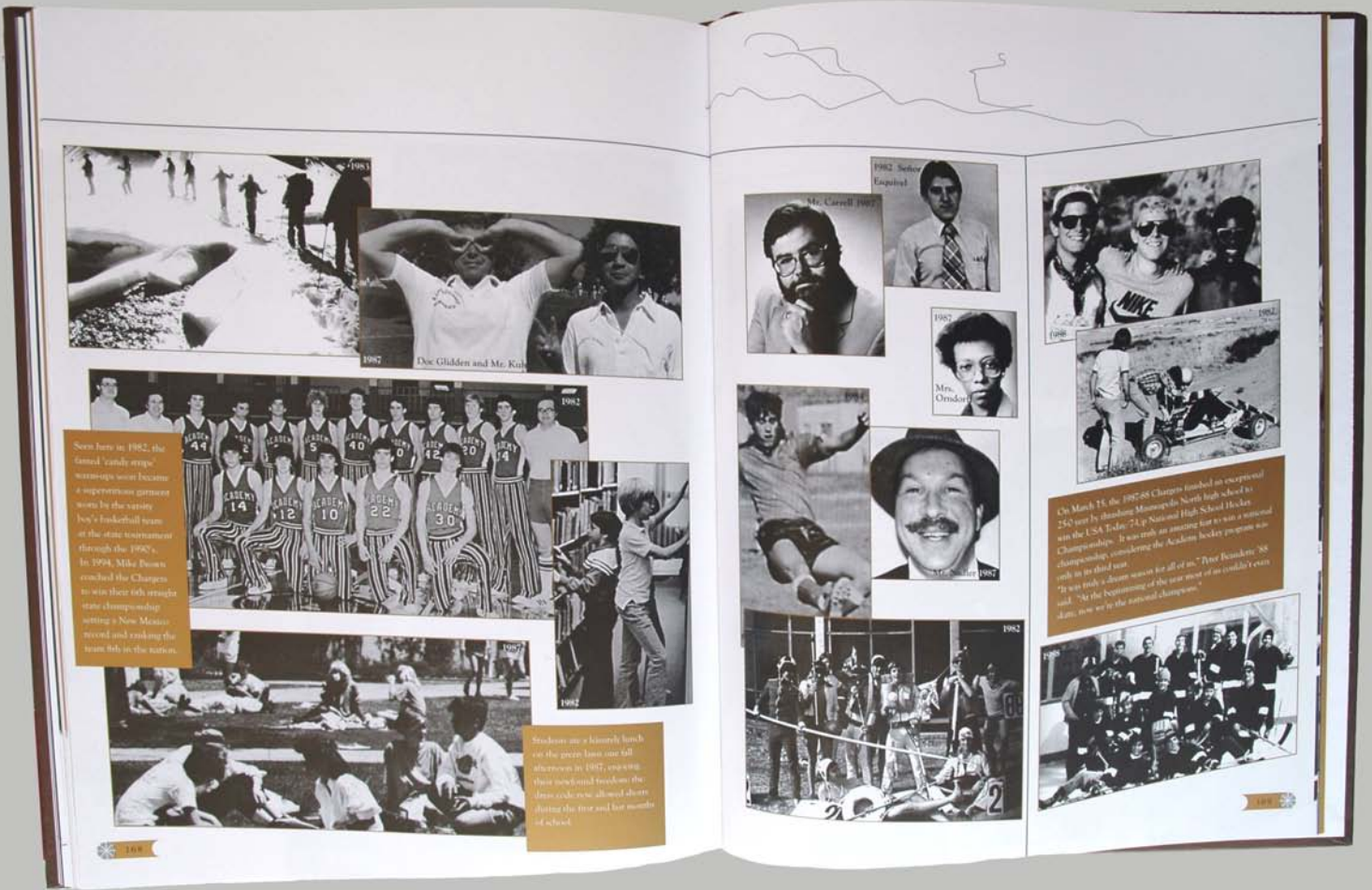
In the basement section of the yearbook [see image 3] the students created an archive of images from past yearbooks with descriptive texts. The selection of the past images was informed through an interest in school history, long-standing teachers, strange fashion trends and even farce. In the spread reproduced here, the students recognized a sporting accomplishment, paid homage to existing teachers and reproduced a false story about a school hockey team that never existed. The reaffirmation of this falsified event from 1988, through its placement amidst assumed true facts about the institution, demonstrates the power of the archive. The students honored the event further by continuing the



[image 2] A faculty page with axonometric spatial rendering and a virtual Calder in the foreground.

tradition. In the athletic section of the Charger Museum the students fabricated a cheer leading squad composed of current school members superimposed on historic pictures [see image 4]. Both of these acts clearly acknowledge the power wielded by the student archons to create 'truth' through the printed page and celebrate the combination of contemporary and historic events within the archive. An awareness of the 'truth' of the events also explores the specificity of the audience receiving the publication, where the contemporary students attending the institution would know of the lack of a cheer leading squad, but may not know of the historic precedent of the falsified hockey team which they may or may not be able to determine as true. In the later life of the publication, when it is reactivated after many years the relative 'truth' of these instances becomes even more blurred.

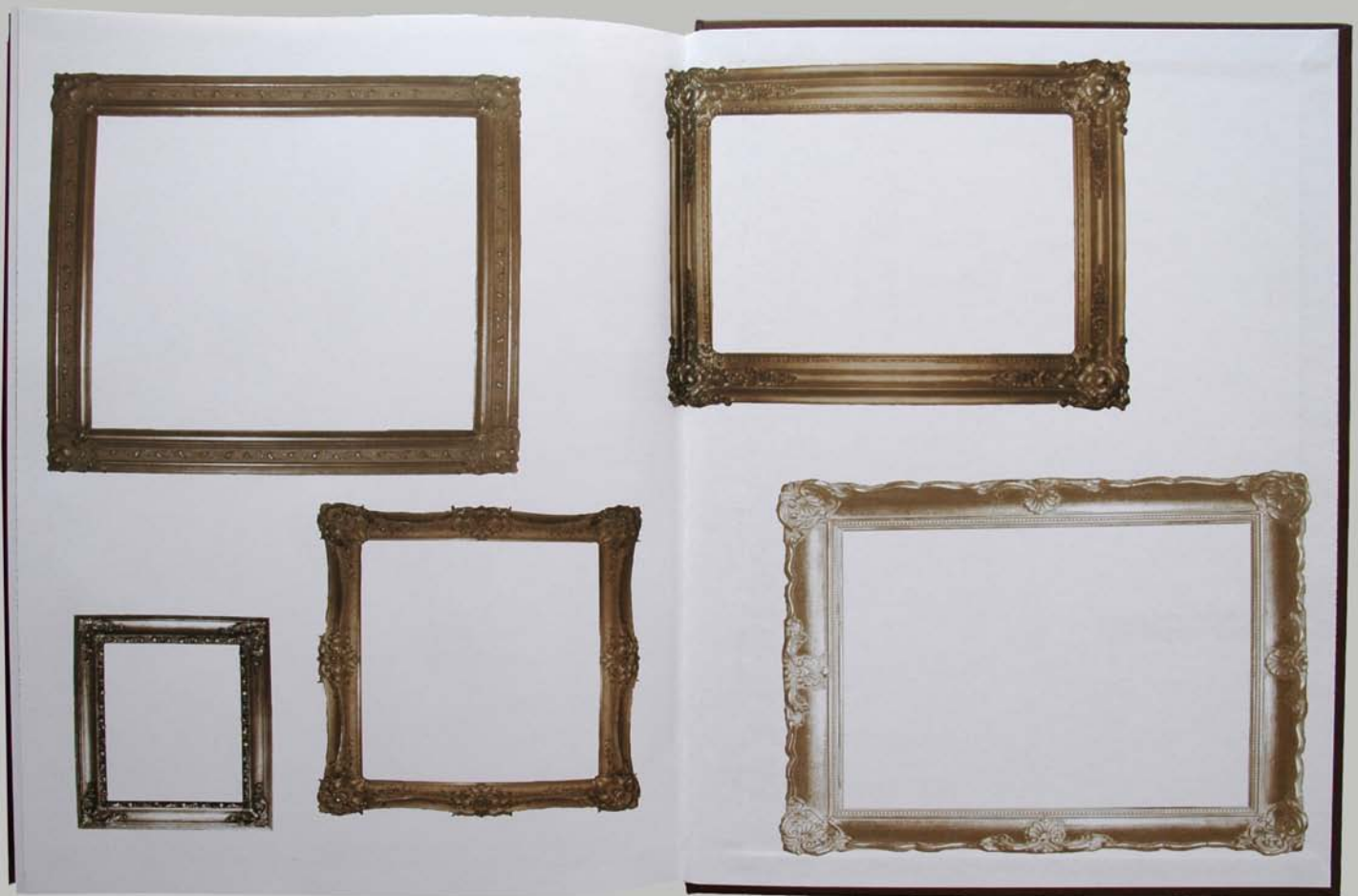
Through an awareness of their own role as archons, the students also focused on creating a space for the publication's recipients to individualize their copy of the book. This individualization allows the end user to play an active role in the defining of his or her own personal history. Where previous models



[image 3] A basement archive spread with axonometric view from below.

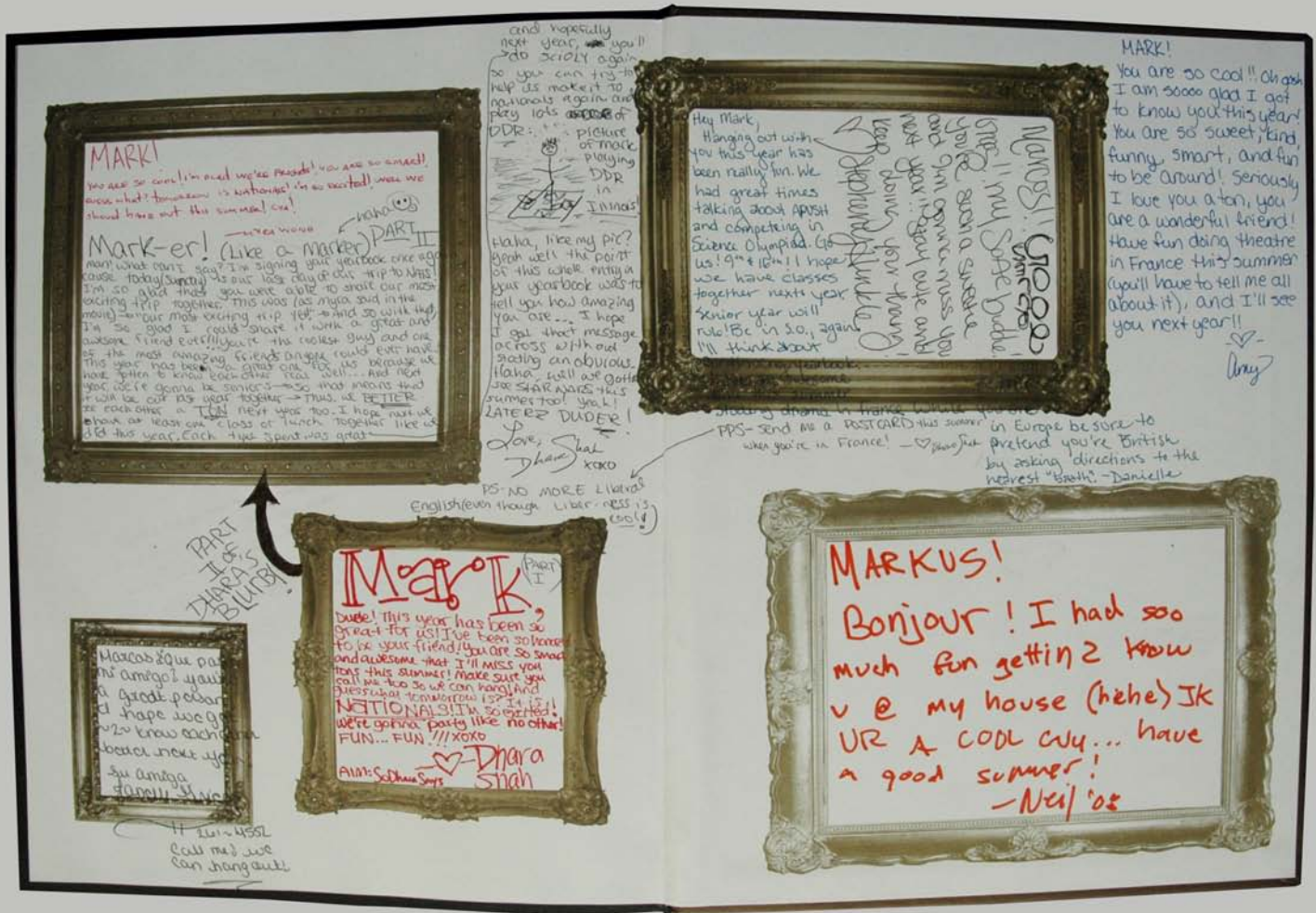
[image 4] An invented cheerleading squad placed in the sports section of the Charger Museum.





[image 5] The back end-sheet with empty frames created for student signatures.

of the yearbook relied on the tradition of yearbook signing to fill pages intentionally left blank for such purposes, the Charger Museum created a framework that allowed the individual to become part of the museum. The student designers chose to print blank frames on the end-sheets and on additional pages inside the publication [see image 5]. This provided a visual structure and organization for the autographs and stories that could then become a part of the end user's own personal museum [see image 6]. Though simple in concept, this act further demonstrates the empowerment of the individual to define his or her own archive and reiterates the theme of inscription present in Derrida's analysis. The presence of these design elements within the Charger Museum show the strength of the original yearbook archive in its ability to invite new archons to reinvent and add to its content. The window-like images of the blank frames provide direct access into the archive itself. Beyond the insertion of signatures during distribution of the publication, there were even instances of students taking their own pictures and pasting them within the pages of the publication, using the printed frames as a placeholder for their own personal photography.



[image 6] Individual student archon activation of the empty frames.

PRESCRIPTIVE YEARBOOK DESIGN

In examining the yearbook as an archive, the strength of its existing visual language and the prescriptive design practices associated with it became an important issue.

A select few publishing houses dominate the yearbook industry in the United States. Given the framework of poorly funded institutions and yearbook advisers not educated in design or printing techniques, it is understandable that these publishing houses largely impact the creation of yearbooks. With strong marketing, the companies make promises of ease of use with technology, quick printing turn around times and elaborate 'designer' covers. The industry also continually pushes the use of as much 4-color printing as possible in order to increase their profits. This typically leads to poor image quality based on the large variables present within student photography, both at the time of the picture and during translation into electronic format. The technology offered often includes built-in design templates that can be installed in programs such as Quark and In-Design. The following example sheds



[image 7] A 4-color 2004 senior pages layout with multiple design templates intermixed.

light on the impact of color and design templates in contrast to the simplified 2-color version produced for the Academy's fiftieth year:

The 4-color 2004 senior page layout [see image 7] exhibits multiple issues associated with large print house production. The choice of 4-color emphasizes the variation in the quality of pictures captured by the students. While the professional mug shots appear rich in color the student candid photos range from slightly flat to pixelated and dark. Though intended to remain on the pages they were designed for, the templates provided by the print house encourage the mixing and matching of design elements. Taken from these templates the round photographs and rectangular text boxes with odd decorations do not correspond to the grid, nor the design sense of the senior mug shots. The only elements still present in terms of an overall design theme are the retention of font in some areas and the page titles located at the bottom of the page.



[image 8] A 2-color Charger Museum senior page spread using subtle axonometric layout.

In contrast to the 2004 senior page layout the Charger Museum yearbook uses only two colors throughout, maximizes visual impact through the use of metallic duotones and uses no pre-designed templates [see Image 8]. The senior portrait section uses the established perspectival construct present throughout the publication by placing simple wall lines at the edges of the page and placing the Charger statue on the 'floor'. The decorative frames and simple typography lend to its visual cohesiveness. The book maintains a unified feel throughout and challenges the student designer to think for themselves.

In the push away from the prescriptive design practices imposed by large print houses, the Charger Museum was produced locally. This significantly cut costs, especially as the large print houses are not set up for two color projects, and created new opportunities for education where access to the local press allowed the students to learn more clearly about production methods and see how their design decisions effected the final product. The presence of production restrictions, such as two color process,

paper choices and print run costs became more clearly defined and helped the students to discover different design solutions. The entire process of education acted to further empower the student archon to selectively define the outcome of the final printed pages.

CONCLUSION

The rich tradition of the high school yearbook provides a strong framework for exploring the importance of the archive. Its ability to reflect the active process of the archive in both its creation and distribution present it as a highly functional educational tool. Through the relative transparency of the yearbook's function, the student designer can discover an awareness of their own power as archons and in turn pass that on to their peers at distribution. The further empowerment of the students, through access to both alternatives to existing prescriptive design practices and extensive details of the printing process, allows for exciting potential in the realm of future yearbook designs. Integral to this process is the need for the yearbook to remain a printed document inviting hand-written individualization by its consumer. The instantly accessible format of the printed page, as opposed to the mediated experience of the screen or other technologies, retains its dominance as the place of the archive. Each new volume of the yearbook will continue to find itself tucked away in a personal collection, awaiting its fate of nostalgic reactivation.