Interview between Fabienne Hess (FH) and Neil Lebeter (NL), Curator of the University of Edinburgh Art Collection.

NL. Very few people have had the kind of oversight on the University's collections in the way that you have – dealing with the mass rather than the specific. What observations did you have seeing such a mass of material and history in one go?

FH. Most strikingly I had this sensation of being overwhelmed. This has not stopped, even though I have worked with these images for almost 5 months. However, I knew this was going to be the case and intentionally confronted myself with this mass of images in order to see what happens. What will I see? What will interest me? I knew I wouldn't fully get past the sensation of being overwhelmed but I was curious to see what happens in the process of trying and to give the audience of the exhibition a chance to do so too.

One of the first impressions when looking at the digital archive is the consistently high quality of the photography. Each item has been photographed as if it was a still life, evenly lit and with great focus. Because the images are so detailed one can zoom into them and experience textures and details more than one could with the naked eye. This also reveals how well each item has been preserved.

Another observation is the absurdity of some of the content. How did that small scribble form the middle ages get into the archive? How have all these drawings of horse teeth survived over one century? Certainly there are plenty of reasons for archiving each item but because I am dealing with everything, I don't have the time to find answers for these questions. So I just enjoy the occasionally bizarre moments.

Looking at these images has been quite challenging. I say "looking" but it's more like a wrestle or an attempt at taming them. Just getting them all together required concentration and organisational skill, also from the side of the University. They all came from different places, there were faults and errors, questions and absences, discussions on copyright etc. Looking at them wasn't simple either. One needs patience and focus to scroll through thousands of pages of medieval manuscripts without feeling exasperated. Because I am an outsider to the archive many of them are pretty unintelligible – but as mentioned above that doesn't diminish the fascination. Dealing with these images reminds me of surfing the internet, of this feeling of knowing there is always more around than one can grasp, of being easily distracted, of being surrounded by alien and random information.

I tried to bring all the images onto one surface, to treat them without hierarchy. This has given me a sense of the overall colour and texture of the archive. It's so beige! That mostly comes from the ageing paper of the manuscripts. The second biggest group are black and white glass slides that were collected around a century ago – these add more contrast and depth. However, altogether it looks like sand or any other beige grainy texture – even though the quality of the images is so great. This means that moment we turn to the archive we are in this particular visual environment. It radiates a sense of authenticity and authority, and we might feel that instinctively when we encounter a similar visual quality outside of the archive. Think about craft beer labels or any other food packaging that involves craft paper – they certainly tap into that. Mostly I wonder how the future archives will look like now that the white of a pdf will stay white and the RGB spectrum reproduced by screens will only get brighter and the resolution sharper.

There is also the element of change and growth. New images are added, others are transferred to different sites, or taken down. Every time one thinks one has got a little bit of a grasp on it – it's changed again.

NL. Did you notice any unusual trends within the collections – colour, form, narrative?

FH. I didn't particularly look for trends, but accidentally stumbled over groups of images that had a similar formal quality. That happened just while i was scrolling through them. The first images I started to notice were the blank pages. Beautifully photographed, with sometimes just a trace of an image shining through from the other pages. The many book covers bearing no information also sprang into my eye, they look like solid coloured rectangles. Another cluster of images I noticed were the marbled end-papers of the Shakespearian manuscripts. The more I scrolled through the images the more I saw: stripy zebra forms, red dots, triangles, a certain kind of blue, etc. I tagged the images as I went along and later grouped them together. As time passed I looked at the images with these formal categories in mind which made me see more and more of them. It's an never ending story, and it transferred sometimes into real life too, I would start noticing that kind of zebra texture in someone's clothing etc.

However, they really weren't the focus, they are almost a side effect of dealing with these images. In that though, I do think that they are very interesting. These groups of images are personal to me, and everyone would see something different if they were to spend time with the archive in the way I did. These basic formal groupings – triangle, blue, blank, monochrome – were the only thing my brain could register within that sense of being overwhelmed by information. Diving into the real content of the images and objects of the archive, into their story and how they came to be part of the archive –would have been too much to take in. So all I could do is brush the images formal surfaces and register something I didn't have to understand or research – something I could just *see*. It's the kind of seeing that doesn't ask any questions, the seeing that we use to look at a sunset or to draw a chair in accurate perspective. This does raise the question, whether the way we look at images today – digitally, with an avalanche always at hand – promotes that kind of seeing.

NL. The digitising process in effect is an attempt to simplify and streamline the process of accessing the collection- yet you almost flip this on its head by applying a labour intensive process to how you work with these images. This seems to be a recurring theme in your work- can you pinpoint what drives you to work in this way?

FH. I am not sure I flipped the way of looking at a collection online on its head because I am not sure that that is so simple. How else would thousands of images never have been looked at? But I see that maybe from the outside my process seems labour intense and sometimes along the line there were parts that felt like that: putting together huge excel sheets or manually placing every image onto a digital canvas. These are the arduous moments that are probably inherent in most projects. But there are also these chunks of time when I do very repetitive small things for a long time, like looking at thousands of images, or, as I did for another project, spending 50 hours copying type onto a flimsy dust sheet with a permanent marker. These are enormously pleasurable processes for me, one could see them as a sort of meditation. One of the first artists that deeply impressed me as a teenager is Roman Opalka who had pledged his life to painting numbers onto a series of canvases. This is an extreme I am not even close to with my work but I relate to his commitment and to the feelings arising from this kind of work.

NL. Do you have a single favourite image from the collections?

FH. No I don't. But my favourites are probably the ones that no one has ever clicked on. Getting this information was complicated, it felt like recovering lost memory. Because google analytics only registers what has been clicked on we had to get the complete list of images from the server and then compare it with the list from google analytics. I have a soft spot for neglected and forgotten images which are the basis of most of my work. I usually find the "bottom of the list" more interesting and the challenge to gain access to it fascinating. There is a sense of permission to be able to use neglected images because no one else cares about them. Of course this is not true for this project but often in my other work.

NL. Some of the images were corrupted when they were emailed to you, yet you opted to use them as they came rather than ask for them to be resent. Can you discuss your interest in these corruptions?

FH. Sometimes we think of digital transfers as a seamless process and the digital copy as a clone. But as information travels and duplicates, it often gets marked by its journey just as analogue information does. These corrupted images talk about this but I also chose to work with them because they reveal this sensation of being overwhelmed. Scott – the digital developer on the University's side – actually tried to filter them out before sending the images to me but clearly the information he was transferring was too big, and they slipped through to me anyways. They add these rare little spots of colour to the sandy texture of the archive.

NL. Were you surprised by what emerged when you interrogated the number of views, or lack of, that some of the objects have had online?

FH. Yes, both, surprise and confirmation. For example, there was an beautiful image of a zebra no one had had a closer look at which surprised me – and many more intriguing images you can see in the exhibition on the "zero-hit" screen. But there are also some images that are one of hundreds of very similar ones which makes it harder for them to get attention, or they are on the back pages of the catalogue where it's harder to get to. On the top end, not that surprisingly, is one of the much treasured items of the collection, a Persian manuscripts form the 14th century. However, that is followed by some quite random ones, like this average looking illustration of a grouse. Why did that got so much attention?

I am not ready to interpret in detail the results of the online hits though – that would be another project. For now it's enough for me to reveal that information. My overall impression is that there are not that many views. For example, only roughly 2,300 images have been looked at more than 10 times. I am changing that with this exhibition.

NL. How did you go about stitching the images together in practice?

FH. The images arrived, organised in dozens of folders that were representative of their origin; for example, all the oriental manuscripts were in one folder. Firstly I undid that and threw the images together into one folder. (Because their file number is mirrored on the online catalogue I could easily trace back where they came from.) However, there was still a coherence because for example all the musical instruments would show up next to each other in the folder because their file names are a numerical sequence. Even changing the way the folder displays its content would not undo that, as the file sizes are similar and date and file-kinds are all the same. Once I determined the dimensions of how they were going to be displayed – in nine four meter long silk strips– I divided them into nine folders, making sure I broke up all the numerical sequences. Then I placed the contents of each folder as randomly as I could onto each of the nine canvases, one by one. Afterwards I exported these canvases into jepgs and sent them to print. (These last two steps really pushed my computer's RAM to its limits.) Firstly I wanted to arrange them with help of a data visualisation software but that didn't work because even though I fed the software random values for the placement of the images the result didn't look random. It's a bit like the optical and numerical centre, it's not quite the same.

NL. What was the most unusual image?

FH. I don't think I looked at the images in that way, judging them one against the other, evaluating them – so I can't tell...

NL. How would you describe your relationship to the archive now? Has your feelings towards it changed throughout the process?

FH. Even though there are still too many images, I feel familiar to a large chunk of them now. Especially the zero and a top hits, as well as the ones part of a sub-collections. Maybe if I spent another 5 months with the images I eventually would know each and every image. I wear an off-cut of the printed silk as a scarf :)