23 conceptual art actions for performance in or using the Tate archive, London

matt martin
since food and drink are forbidden inside the archive

ask a famous artist to write to you using non-toxic ink on rice paper

deposit it into the archive

then make an appointment to consult the document

eat it then leave
since coats and bags are forbidden inside the archive, in case anyone tries to smuggle a document out, deposit as ephemera a large paper bag with the logo of an exhibition. Go to the archive and consult this item. Then leave with it. When challenged by security, you can show them that your bag is empty.
email the archives and make an appointment to view several conceptual artworks — the kind that consist of instructions for their own performance — on the day of your appointment. Stay at home; you have just made a conceptual visit.
submit to the archive a long series of requests for documents this list is secretly a musical score the items are chosen so that when archivists retrieve them the roller racking system’s sounds the turning of wheels and the squeaking of shelves along tracks and the percussive bumping of units into one another will play your tune
the normally cool climate in the archive fluctuates interrupted by moments of sweltering heat sometimes the hot period lasts for only a few minutes sometimes half an hour over the course of a month it becomes apparent that the hot interludes are dots and dashes in a morse code sentence spelling out the next instruction to be performed
treat the cloakroom as an archive choose from an index of visitors who have deposited coats and bags sign out a person’s possessions for research rifle through pockets and browse the books in their rucksack try to learn as much about them as possible
visit the archive and sign out a document of interest. Leave it on the desk and instead converse with the invigilating archivist. Ask them about whatever theme you would have used the item to investigate. Keep the archivist talking as long as you can. Surreptitiously record everything that evening. Type up their discourse the next day with a different document. Repeat until your dissertation is complete.
declare that whatever happens in the gallery on one particular day is all part of an artwork. At the end of this day collect every piece of A4 paper from recycling bins throughout the building. The crumpled ticket printouts, the partly completed activity trails, the minutes from meetings riddled with typos, the gallery assistants’ rotas. Bind them as a catalogue. Deposit it in the archive. Also sell copies at the gift shop.
change gallery signage so that visitors looking for a special exhibition are led to the archive instead they form a queue in front of the archive’s locked door let them in a few at a time to take turns watching footage on the archive’s computers the artwork they watch is livestreamed c.c.t.v. footage of the queue that they’ve just been in
borrow from the archive the audio recording of a conference about conceptual art. rig this up to play through the fire alarm system while the building evacuates there will be eloquent discourse about sol lewitt and christine kozlov interspersed every five seconds by wailing sirens.
turn every page in the archive into a microdot, destroy the originals, print the dots so that they fill the pages of a single hardback. Leave it on a randomly chosen shelf in the archive. Fill the rest of the shelves with books whose pages are blank. These other volumes are otherwise identical. Let there be no finding aid that can locate the one printed copy.
deposit with the archive a cassette in a new format that no one has seen before. Open a contest for engineers to design a device that could play it. Display all the entrants as an exhibition. The sound they all play is a recording of this instruction.
archive the artist herself as preparatory material for artworks — she sleeps on a mattress high on a shelf corresponding to her place in the filing system — visitors can request to access her for research but she honours the quiet of the reading room and will not answer questions — researchers must make do with inspecting the calluses where she holds her paintbrush or shining an ophthalmoscope into her eyes to measure how her vision might affect her landscapes
archive a pair of living sculptures artists who pose as their own works of art mummify them in their own paper documentation inter them in a mausoleum within the archive with all their personal effects as grave goods the digital catalogue entry reports rumours of a lethal curse researchers daring to enter the tomb die of fright when the mummies sit up in their sarcophagi and start singing
document a wooden sculpture by offering it to a swarm of wasps; their jaws will pulp it into paper for constructing their nest. Don protective clothing to write on the nest’s exterior all you can recall about the lost sculpture. Deposit the nest in the archive; the archivists must nurture the wasps as an integral part of this record.
the artwork consists of pedalling an exercise bike. This charges a battery which is the record of the performance. To consult it, one must sit watching a light-bulb lit by the battery until its power runs out. Then repeat the performance to recharge the documentation ready for the next visitor.
the artwork is a conceptual instruction to replace every piece in a gallery with copies of itself. The digital record of this item is a computer virus spreading through the archive database. It turns every entry into a document of this act.
the artwork is a flower garden to document it a beehive is set up the record thus produced and deposited in the archive is a jar of honey when someone wishes to access it an archivist must lead them with the jar to the gallery café so that the visitor can consult the document on a piece of toast
the artwork is a dance piece performed upon fresh snow with dancers’ footprints as documentation block by block the surface is levered up and carried on refrigerated trucks to the archive to be kept in a cold storage vault visitors are given parkas when they go to read it
the artwork is a performance in which objects are ritually deposited from a barge into the river outside the gallery as documentation this section of river is dammed off and water drained from it silt containing the sacred objects is then scooped up and moved to a room behind a submarine door in the archive the room sits between lines of low and high tide a tunnel is opened from the foreshore to this chamber at high tide the room is submerged at low tide readers may enter to consult the mud
mail to the archive one postcard per day purchased from the gallery’s gift shop on the back of each card are written instructions for how and where to display the depicted artwork in a proposed rehang archivists mount the postcards in the relevant positions inside a scale model of the gallery forming a parallel institution around which archive visitors’ gazes stroll
show every work in the gallery’s stores to an art critic use an m.r.i. scanner to map her brain activity while she behold them then destroy all the works and their archive apart from these brain scans when one of the pieces is needed for display hire another artist to create a work that will perfectly duplicate in the critic the same neural response
engrave a document into a tablet of plutonium-239 so lethally radioactive that it must be kept in a lead-lined vault under the gallery floor no one who consults the document can survive the experience the whole neighbourhood must evacuate first and the building with all its artworks be destroyed afterwards so long as the document is not consulted the archive stays lavishly funded throughout the element’s millennia-long half-life to prevent horrors occurring