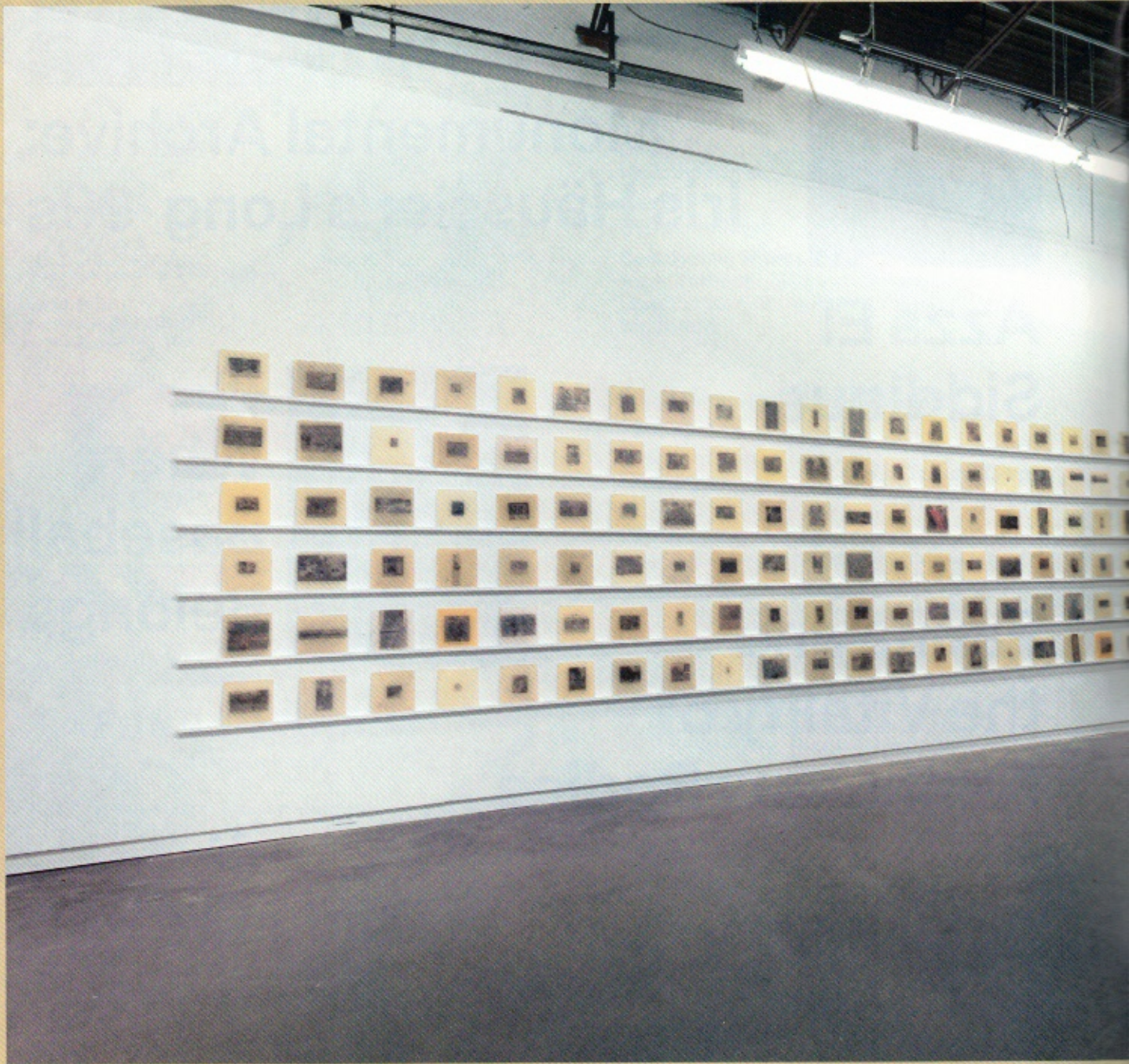


# Monumental Archive



# Iris Häussler's Long '90s

by Angel Callander



The 1990s have been on my mind for a while. In 2014, National Geographic released *The '90s: The Last Great Decade?* The docuseries framed this period as the boom before the bust when anything seemed possible; at one point, a then relatively unknown Tucker Carlson intones, “the 90s were a vacation from history.” Back in 1989, Francis Fukuyama, writing in the pages of *The National Interest*, had proposed a more permanent break. This was the beginning of the End of History, brought about by the close of the Cold War and the triumph of Western liberalism over socialism. With the struggle for the future of human society now resolved, he claimed, there would never be another grand contest of ideologies on a global scale, no further fundamental change to the superstructure — we had reached the “end point of mankind’s ideological evolution.”<sup>1</sup>

**Images:**

Iris Häussler *Archivio Milano*, 1991, 2021, installation view, Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto. Courtesy of the artist and Daniel Faria Gallery.

Photo: LF Documentation.

1 Francis Fukuyama, “The End of History?” *The National Interest* 16 (Summer 1989): 4.

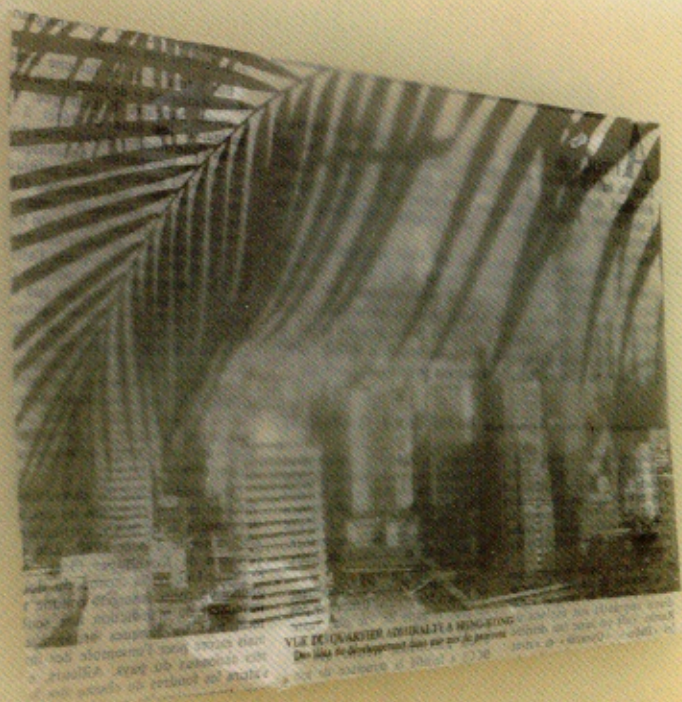
The recent proliferation of books, articles, and documentaries on this crucial period — from the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 to the emergence of a neoliberal technocratic hegemony in the early 90s — speaks to a nascent consciousness that something very profound happened with the end of the Cold War, something that, in major ways, we have not yet escaped. The 90s ushered in an era of not only idealism but also rage, chaos, and complacency as the boundaries between news, reality, and entertainment blurred.

Iris Häussler's *Archivio Milano 1991*, on view for the first time since 1992 at Daniel Faria Gallery this past spring, presciently sums up the structure and feeling of the 90s, predicting what would become a dominant sentiment of information overload and narrative fluidity. In this moment, television news was quickly staking a claim to its own visual codes and structures, which have ultimately reshaped our relationships to reality and formations of historical understanding. During the January 1991 Operation Desert Storm bombardment of Iraq and Kuwait, people all over the world were able to watch a war broadcast live for the first time. What started as an impulse to bear witness to world-shifting events as they unfolded has resulted in a stultifying of our ability and inherent desire to process meaningfully such occurrences.

In September 1991, Iris was in Milan scouting a location for her project *Pro Polis* (1993), in which she covered the entirety of a hotel room, including all furniture and textiles, in a thin layer of industrial wax — an homage to Italian sculptor Medardo Rosso. Having met the photographer and music producer Gianni Sassi by chance, she was invited to participate in the international poetry festival *Milano Poesia*, which he was curating. Over the course of a week-long residency, she worked in Spazio Ansaldo, a former industrial building, alongside other artists engaged in poetry, theatre, literature, and visual arts. With her project, *Archivio Milano 1991*, Iris catered to the space while also remaining true to her accustomed tools and materials.

Every morning during the week of the festival, she visited newspaper kiosks, choosing roughly a dozen

“What started as an impulse to bear witness to world-shifting events as they unfolded has resulted in a stultifying of our ability and inherent desire to process meaningfully such occurrences.”



VILLE DE CARACTERE MODERNE A WANGJIANG  
Des idées de développement dans une zone de paysage

international papers — the largest stack she could carry in her arms. The artist admits her choices were largely aesthetic, driven by a desire to create visual snapshots of the news coming in from around the world at the time. The results are a multilayered, global choreography performed by journalists covering particular stories, photographers choosing their angles, editors marking contact sheets in red grease pencil, vendors buying this or that paper to cater to their clientele, and finally Iris sitting on the floor of Spazio Ansaldo cutting out as many stories as she could each day.

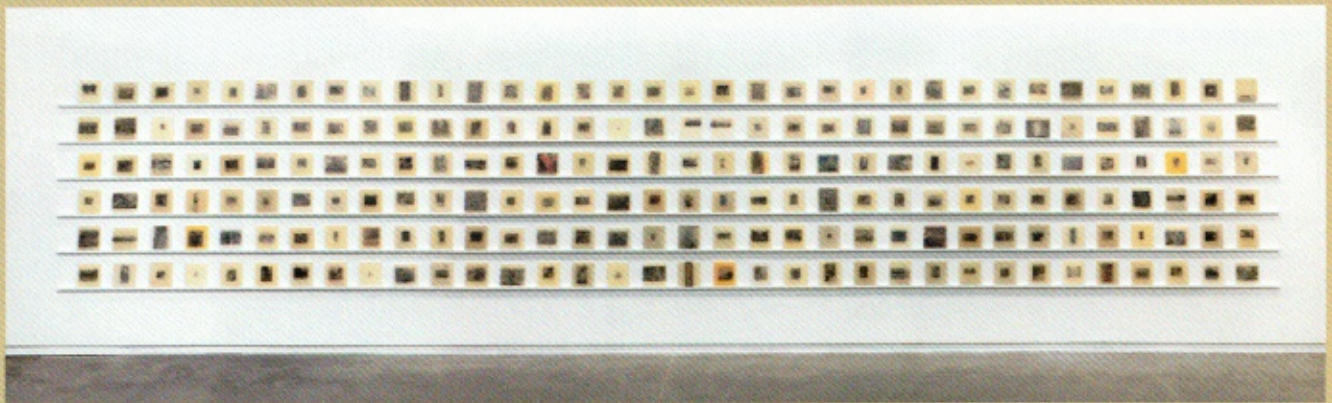
She encased more than five hundred clippings from those international newspapers in wax collected from candles in Bavarian pilgrimage churches. The wax makes the images foggy and indistinct, a process the artist likens to a kind of reverse darkroom. Stories and images overlap and obscure one another, diminishing their potential as specific and informative “news.” Iris’s use of these newspaper clippings recalls Sarah Charlesworth’s *Modern History* series (1977–79), but *Archivio Milano 1991* finds stronger aesthetic resonance with Gerhard Richter’s blurred photo-paintings, which the artist often based on press and newspaper images. For Richter, working with media already in circulation was a means of eliminating rather than adding to the world’s surfeit of pictures.

But Iris’s process of obscuring characters and narratives in *Archivio Milano* discloses something else, altering the authorial status of the news image by blending the real with the uncanny. The wax-cast clippings become time capsules that blur the visual language of the press and question its place in shaping history as well as the longevity of its impact in our current era. The work prophesies the *société du spectacle*’s turn toward news as immediate, excessive, transitory, cyclical, and impossible to escape — an endless bombardment of the mind that only intensified throughout the 90s and beyond. The towering scale of *Archivio Milano*, a selection of fewer than half of the casts made during *Milano Poesia* presented in six rows of thirty-four, anticipates this onslaught and its dulling of our collective acuity.

“... *Archivio Milano* discloses something else, altering the authorial status of the news image by blending the real with the uncanny.”

The set of conventions that defined the 90s but which have outlived that decade, bleeding into our present moment, is part of the post-Cold War political, cultural, and spiritual attitude following Eric Hobsbawm’s “short twentieth century” (1914–91) that British scholar Jeremy Gilbert calls “the long 90s.”<sup>2</sup> Gilbert’s theory attempts to describe a persistent, global phase of history begun by the collapse of the USSR and strengthened by the Washington Consensus and the creation of the World Trade Organization. Gilbert asserts that by pushing out the traditional Left and replacing it with the virtues of neoliberal centrism, would-be progressives have been completely politically, culturally, epistemologically, and emotionally entrenched within the mores and resolutions of an End of History worldview.

2 See Nadia Idle, Jeremy Gilbert and Keir Millburn, “#ACFM Trip 16: The Long ‘90s,” May 23, 2021, <https://novaramedia.com/2021/05/23/acfm-trip-16-the-long-90s/>, and Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age Of Extremes: A History Of The World, 1914–91* (New York: Vintage, 1996).



Even prior to the crumbling of the USSR and the purported end of history this instigated, Margaret Thatcher's crushing of a 1984 miners' strike marked the beginning of a worldwide decline of Left workers' movements. The cohort entering young adulthood during the mid to late 1980s — beneficiaries of the social welfare and powerful trade unions of the 1970s, real estate-based prosperity of the 1980s, and a wealth of new professional jobs in tech in the 1990s — internalized that traditional Left values, if aspirational, were redundant. Additionally, a fear set in that any attempt to activate these values could only lead to gulags, scarcity, marginality, and death.

It's worth noting that many of the major actors from the early 90s are either still active in today's global neoliberal technocracy or have merely handed over their seats to protégés. The intractable values of this dominating cohort, the ruling ideas of the ruling class, are antagonistic to an emerging young Left. They have played no small part in the insistence over the last few generations on the "centrist" position that traditional Left principles such as class struggle are a moot point and social gains and cultural liber-

alism are the best we can expect from progressive movements. This sort of stasis and inertia has characterized much of the last thirty years in both politics and culture — think of all the recent remakes and reboots — even while innovations in technology have created an illusion of progress. The persistent idioms, affective arrangements, and ideologues of the 90s insist that all our post-Cold War norms were and are incontrovertible.

Throughout the short twentieth century, the existence of the USSR acted as a catalyst for political and technological innovation in the West, spurring everything from expanded civil rights to moon landings. With no external geopolitical rival and no clear competition for the control of political and cultural power after 1991, capitalism was allowed to come into its own; Western countries and their client states increasingly bent their internal energies toward individual consumption expressed through postmodern explorations of identity powered by structural adjustment programs administered throughout the Global South. The neoliberal 90s inaugurated the fracture of all aspects of life into markets and the flattening of

everything into easily digestible packages denuded of their material, historical, and political significance.

As Jason Farago wrote for the BBC in 2015, one must look to the economics of the 1980s to understand the art of the 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Stock market speculation, excessive media spectacle, and a sharp increase in valuation for contemporary works of art led to an art market crash in 1991. In its wake, the question of what is valuable and why was on everyone's minds. Farago contrasts the debates over racial and gender equality animating artmaking in the early 90s with the influence of globalization, celebrity, and internet culture that crept in during the latter part of the decade, particularly through an ever-increasing number of art fairs and biennials. The creation of objects gave way to the facilitation of events, interactive encounters, and "experiences" under the moniker Relational Aesthetics, and art largely joined in on the proliferation of quick-turnover spectacles.

In a conversation with Iris this past November, she tells me about an art dealer in Los Angeles who ultimately declined to sell her work because it demanded an impossibly sustained regard. If average museum visitors in North America were willing to spend thirty seconds looking at an artwork, the dealer explained, for people in Los Angeles, it was more like three. We talk about the importance of duration to the act of witnessing. In contemplating the casts of *Archivio Milano*, the uncanniness of reality and its cultural transformation over the past thirty years opens a crack between what is real and what is visible. Phrases like "Old Guard comeback threatened," "gun-slinging villainy," and "She lives by the sword" peek backward and forward through maps of the Georgia-Russia border and images of protests, world leaders, and communist graffiti. The dizzying convergence of events and narratives that pervaded the 90s surface from even the most clouded fragments.

In *Archivio Milano 1991*, Iris created an archival monument to a pivotal moment in the making. On view today for the first time in almost thirty years, it is a fitting reminder of the deep and lasting impact of that moment on the political, cultural, psycholog-

ical, and affective aspects of the present. During our conversation, Iris tells me the work was not intended to be political but she is happy for me to put it in that context. She says she is tempted to view it through the lens of the past, and in a way so am I — though with the recognition that this past feels less like a bygone era than one that has crucially perforated the veil of history to become coterminous with the present and, potentially, the future. As Farago asks, "What if the 90s, far from being ancient history, are actually still going on?"<sup>4</sup> The 90s continue to cast a long, sulking, and omnipresent shadow. Maybe one day a renewed sense of the future can banish it for good.

*Angel Callander is a writer, editor, and curator in Toronto, Ontario. Currently she is Assistant Editor at Peripheral Review. Her work can be found in Canadian Art, Public Parking, Femme Art Review, Supermarket Art Magazine, and Cross Process, as well as Interface Critique I (Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2016) and Architecture and the Smart City (Routledge, 2019).*

3 Jason Farago, "The '90s: The decade that never ended," *BBC Culture*, February 5, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20150205-the-1990s-never-ended>.

4 Farago, "The '90s: The decade that never ended."