

Memory burns

Professor Patricia Hayes
*DST/NRF SARChI Chair in Visual History &
Theory, Centre for Humanities Research*



*Protest with placard
'This is also ours'.
RIM-UWC-Mayibuye Archive*

All the materials generated were for campaign purposes and ongoing documentation would feed into the next action. They were not necessarily created with posterity in mind. For this reason, they are even more interesting. Some touch on the most vulnerable lives, like those rendered almost invisible by the Bantustan system. As Farge puts it, they offer “traces by the thousands”. She adds:

The archival document is a tear in the fabric of time, an unplanned glimpse offered into an unexpected event. In it, everything is focused on a few instants in the lives of ordinary people, people who were rarely visited by history, unless they happened to form a crowd and make what would later be called history.

What we call the archive was never compiled as such. Moreover, across different histories, we are dealing with the problem that “The poor did not write, or wrote very little, about their own lives”. When people produced the documents or media that can now be found in the Mayibuye archives, this was not with an eye toward history, but coming from the urgency of their own times. They arise from situations, and from routines. Obvious routines are the minutes taken at regular organisational meetings in different parts of the country, and in countries with anti-apartheid organisations driving specific campaigns and responding to events in South Africa. Another regular routine, for instance, was the weekly meeting of the Afrapix photographic collective to determine which photographs would make their way out of the country from its member photographers, whose identities were often suppressed under the emergency regulations. This means that sometimes the photographs going to IDAF and eventually into the Mayibuye collections cannot be traced to a particular photographer without careful retrospective inquiry.

In this way the archive forces the reader to engage with it in very challenging ways. Farge speaks of being captivated by the archive, of “the sensation of having finally caught hold of the real”, and a “profound feeling of tearing away a veil”. This vivid impression that might carry more intensity than truth requires a response at different levels. It needs interpretive tools and craft to decipher these materials, which is the ground of the humanities disciplines.

The archive of contact

Among the photograph collections at Mayibuye, especially from IDAF, are numerous contact sheets. The contact sheet was part of the toolkit of the photographer in the time of analogue photography. The contact sheet is an assembly, the vertical layering of horizontal lines of film so that one synoptic glance can show what is represented in a roll of processed negative film that holds 36 frames. If the strips are placed in the correct order, you can see the number of each frame in the right order from one to 36, which represents the sequence in which the photos were taken.

The contact sheets in the Mayibuye collections are different from most others, which would usually show frame by frame how a photographer marks out a sequence of shots at one scene or moves between scenes as they unfold. This usually gives us a linear trajectory of what the photographer took and the order in which he or she did so. As this Mayibuye contact sheet (Figure 2) demonstrates, it is a different kind of frame-by-frame coverage. In the contact sheet some even appear upside-down, and the items jump from frame to frame. Edges of headlines and print from newspapers appear. This is because these are the different items needing to be included in the IDAF collection to be made available for building an argument about apartheid, and for solidarity and support work.

This represents a grouping of the daily international and local journalism about South Africa. Today we would probably scan the newspapers, or simply access them online. But nowhere in today's digital culture do we have this tradition of assembly, the compression of 36 frames (or scans) into one synoptic frame, also revealing which frames were selected for further action. That is what the numbering written by hand on the contact sheet represented: which frames were selected to be printed up and used for further purposes. We can trace the decisions made that might contribute to political action. We can also trace what other photographs can be seen in the collection, and thus we are put in contact with a much wider net of items archived, all through this contact sheet.

References

- Arlette Farge. *The Allure of the Archive*. New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 2013.
Georges Didi-Huberman. *Bark*. Cambridge MA, The MIT Press, 2017.
Georges Didi-Huberman. *Memory Burns*. Exhibition, Beijing, OCAT Institute, 2015.
Howard Caygill. 'A Year of Resistance'. Interview by Josefine Wikström, 07.04.16 at kunstskritik.com/archive/caygill. Accessed on 8 April 2020.
Howard Caygill, *On Resistance: A Philosophy of Defiance*. London, Bloomsbury Academic.