

Art from the Archive

by Ferdinand de Jong and Elizabeth Harney

Over the last few decades, artists have increasingly been inspired by the archive as a site of engagement. Often attributed to the publication of *Archive Fever* by Jacques Derrida (1996), this turn to the archive has a longer history than is often acknowledged. Ever since Marcel Duchamp started experimenting with his *Boîte de 1914*, resulting in his *Boîte-en-valise* (1936), an interest had emerged in the implications of technological reproduction for art (Spieker 2008). When Dadaists coined their cut-up technology using printed images from popular media, the archive acquired its place in artistic practice and critical discourse. More recently, formidable questions have been asked about the role that art and artist could effectively play in society through the investigation and interrogation of our ever-expanding archives. Artists' practices now interrogate both the "idea" and "form" of the archive itself (Foster 2004).

What is it that makes the archive such an interesting object of academic analysis and artistic practice today? Apart from the fact that historians have always relied on the archive to authorize their stories about the past, it is not hard to see that, beyond such epistemological requirements, the publication of Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge* was critical in establishing the current interest in the archive. For Foucault, the archive consists of the unspoken rules that determine "what we can say" and how we can say it. Abstract as this idea may be, it defines the archive as an object of analysis that is both within and outside ourselves: "it is that which, outside ourselves, delimits us" (1972:147). The current interest in the archive is driven by a strong desire to examine the temporal and spatial mechanisms that have delivered us to a "posthistorical" moment of contemporaneity.

That this should be an interest amongst African artists should not surprise us. Having been subjected to the epistemic violence of anthropology, apartheid, and colonial rule, Africans are now struggling to define an African subjectivity that is not overdetermined by colonial knowledge and modes of representation. The first generation of nationalists and anticolonialists sought to redress the violence

of colonial forms of knowledge with utopian visions, calls for revolution, and rehabilitation (Fanon 2001, Nkrumah 1965, Ngugi 1986). Others such as V.Y. Mudimbe (1988) or Achille Mbembe (2010) have struggled to rethink African subjectivity and define a register that does not reduce the continent to eternal suffering or victimhood. Without succumbing to a fashionable Afro-optimism based on exploitation through resource extraction, the challenge to define an African future has remained.

In this context, contemporary artists have started to revisit the colonial archives (Demos 2013). Such returns are not gratuitous, but rather display serious engagements with the colonial past, present the possibility to intervene in that history, and sate the desire to imagine an alternative future. Returns to the archive enable artists to tack backwards and forwards in time and to address perceived problems in the present. In this special issue, articles examine some of these questions in the work of individual African artists as they intervene in archival collections or question the epistemologies that informed their making.

The colonial archive has now become a recurring subject of inquiry, offering possibilities for self-examination and reflection on the manner in which texts, photographs, posters, festivals, magazines, art, and other cultural forms held therein have come to define modern Africa. For example, a recent exhibition on South African photography argued that the archive of colonial photography not only produced a racial typology, but also "modern citizens" (Garb 2013). South African photographers such as Santu Mofokeng have explored the diversity of photo albums of South Africans "to tease out an often elusive sense of black complexity in racialized discourse" (Enwezor 1997:30–31; Dodd, this volume; see also Bajorek 2013). Thus the archive lends itself to an archaeological excavation of the self that does not exonerate those who exercised the gaze, but acknowledges its positivity.

The articles in this special issue examine the ways in which photography, video, and performance have shaped modern subjectivities and question how images and objects have

produced an archival memory. Artists such as George Adéagbo consider how the stability of such an archival memory is established and subsequently destabilize it through their performances and interventions. The complex process of assembling that informs his installations mirrors that which is pivotal to archival practice itself. By disassembling his installations at the end of his performance, he points to the provisionality of archival work and invites us to examine how we remember, archivally.

This, it should be emphasized, is a complex question that has been widely debated amongst Frankfurt School scholars and their predecessors Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer. In his analysis of Gerhard Richter's "Atlas," Benjamin Buchloh examines the unresolved tensions between their arguments in Richter's "archive" in which memory is conceived as "an archaeology of pictorial and photographic registers" each of which, Buchloh argues, "generates its proper psychic register of responses" (1999:140). It is indeed the potential of the archive to produce memory—in different registers—that is explored by the artists discussed in the articles presented here. Following on from Freud, it is the hidden, invisible, or latent mnemonic materials made manifest in the accessing of the archive that provides the archive its regenerative possibilities.

Archival impulses have led artists to question how colonial knowledge has been produced, accumulated, and circulated. And as the authors herein attest, acts of archival mining may bring about epistemic restructuring, offering forms of "recovery" that address lost, silenced, or hidden histories. Ulf Vierke provides us with a close reading of Kenyan artist Sam Hopkins's interventions into the videotape collections housed in Iwalewahaus at Bayreuth University. Focusing his layered critique upon the institutional processes and intellectual mechanisms at work in the making of an archive, Hopkins questions its ultimate authority and veracity by engaging his audience in a performance that lays bare the

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hybrid and fluid state of archival knowledge production. Working with what he calls an “anarchic” archive, Vierke suggests another reading of the archive, by interventions like those of Hopkins, that is imaginative, fluid and generative—an ordered set of practices with rules but in the absence of hegemonic power.

Likewise, Érika Nimis’s research on the practices of four Algerian artists allows us to question the coordinates and texture of the archive and to recognize the critical role that contemporary artists might play in negotiating its salience for the present. Working around questions of silence and absence surrounding the Algerian War of Independence, Nimis discusses the challenges faced by artists who must work in the face of the broad cultural amnesia and latent postmemory that have resulted from anticolonial struggles. Taking the recuperative work of writer Assia Djebar as a model, Nimis positions the artists as “transmitters” of memory, siphons of forgotten or buried traumas, who attempt to reclaim and renarrate the challenges of the past in an effort to mitigate its wounds in the present.

In her study of the rhizomatic installations of Georges Adéagbo, Kerstin Schankweiler asks us to consider what constitutes the making of an archival object or subject. She highlights the means through which Adéagbo anticipates the gaze and performative potential of his audience to activate the power of his nonlinear, multitemporal, and global archival recovery projects. Adéagbo’s works point to the inherent temporality of the archive—its amassing of traces of past actions, its claims to duration and longevity in the face of constant shifts in temporal perspective, and its ultimate gift of time travel that allows us to harness images and objects from the past in the service of the present or future.

It is this process of activation that is initiated in the works of artists and community organizers discussed by Alexandra Dodd and Darren Newbury, both working on the history of South African photography. Acknowledging the prescience of Santu Mofokeng’s projection *Black Photo Album*, Dodd shows how the artist’s archival “restitution” of late nineteenth century studio portraits of educated, urban,

Christian Africans led to the construction of a critical counternarrative of black life in early South African modernity. Portraying the aspirations of these colonial-modern subjects before the dehumanizing narratives and practices of apartheid set in, these photographs speak of a history steeped in contradiction. The colonial subjects featured imagined and crafted their modernity through the borrowed trappings of the Victorian era. Dodd argues that Mofokeng’s work “reanimates” memories under threat of erasure and opens a “third space of pastness that has potency and charge in the present” (Dodd, this issue).

This reactivation process also lay at the heart of the exhibition of Bryan Heseltine’s photographs at the Homecoming Centre, District Six Museum in Cape Town, of which Darren Newbury writes. In his contribution to this issue, Newbury provides us with an intimate account of the processes at work when photographic archives are reconnected or relocated to source communities. Heseltine’s work in informal black settlements and townships at midcentury has led to an archiving of memories now largely overlooked within the post-apartheid political and social landscape. The reintroduction of these fragmented histories of now dispersed or forgotten communities further expands the possible coordinates of what might be considered an archive, for in this case it is that of a set of psychic maps and inhabitations writ large into the racialized city-space of modern South Africa.

Indeed, the essays in this special issue confirm that the archive is situated both within and without archival institutions. The city is one of those spaces that retain the traces of past and present struggles in its fabric (see the essays in De Jong and Murphy 2014). Through the process of archival recovery, the histories hidden in our archive can be redressed. Paraphrasing Foucault, we suggest that the archive is that what, within ourselves, enables us to address our present.

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