



# ARCHIVO PAPERS

JOURNAL OF PHOTOGRAPHY AND VISUAL CULTURE

ISSN (Online) 2184-9218

## RESTORING HISTORY, RECREATING THE PAST: THE USE OF ARCHIVES IN PERFORMANCE-LECTURES BY CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS

Gabriela Sá

### To cite this article:

Sá, Gabriela. "Restoring History, Recreating the Past: The Use of Archives in Performance-lectures by Contemporary Artists." *Archivo Papers* 5 (30 June 2025): 103–21. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15756852>.

Published online: 30 June 2025.

Link to this article [↗](#)

Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)

© *Archivo Papers* / Archivio Press, 2025



Archivo Papers Journal is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

## ARTICLE

# RESTORING HISTORY, RECREATING THE PAST THE USE OF ARCHIVES IN PERFORMANCE-LECTURES BY CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS

GABRIELA SÁ *PPGArtes, Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), Brazil*

## I

A woman steps onto the stage and takes hold of the microphone. Beside her, images are projected onto a screen as she talks about the development of aerial imaging technologies and the political and historical representation of the Middle East.

## II

In another scene, a different woman stands behind a pulpit. The audience watches as she unravels a narrative that weaves together minerals, ufology, and the journey of a Swiss geographer through Brazil's hinterlands.

## III

In a different country, a third woman sits behind a desk covered with books, photographs, and political pamphlets – objects not new, but from 50 years ago. She brings them to the table to talk about Portugal's dictatorship and the revolutionary process that took place afterwards.

\* \* \*

What connects these three women, one might ask. They are artists, they are telling stories intertwining words and images, and they draw their narratives from archives. In their own subjective ways, each of them conducts what could be seen as a lecture. However, they are not speaking at an academic conference or a scientific gathering, but in a slightly different context, an artistic one.

Researching for my PhD, I encountered the work of these three women while seeking for artists that could resonate with what I am investigating as both a researcher and an artist myself: a possible performative dimension of the archive. Now, they are part of a constellation I have been mapping, and in this essay, I wish to present a few of the many connections that could be drawn between them, with the understanding that they gravitate towards a practice that could be named as performance-lecture.

But “how to transform a lecture into a performance?” asks performer and researcher Marco Catalão, “just start doubting what the speaker says,” he concludes.<sup>1</sup> For Catalão, the performance-lecture allows artists to challenge the characterization of art as non-discursive by incorporating elements commonly used in academic lectures. These are then dismantled and reassembled alongside features typically dismissed under the belief in objectivity—often associated with scientific discourse. What is traditionally viewed as a site for knowledge transmission and the construction of an allegedly truth is, then, pervaded with ironic comments, ambiguities, paradoxes, illogical observations, imaginative roles, irrational thoughts, and mystifying reflections, transforming the critical space of a lecture also into a performative one.

The idea of the lecture as a form of artwork emerged in the early 1960s, when European and American avant-garde artists started to defy the concept of a masterpiece by focusing on the process of creation instead. Nonetheless, the performance-lecture should not be seen as mere artist talk, even if it includes reflections on a work in progress, or a previous project. It is the work itself that is being created on stage, as the artist is talking—and much of what he/she is talking about was discovered through a deep act of research, independently of what topic the artist is lecturing about. On that account, as researcher Daniel Ladnar underscores, a performance-lecture should not be seen as “less legitimate” or a “false attempt” at presenting and creating knowledge compared to traditional lectures.<sup>2</sup> Their formal dimension with scenic and narrative aspects allows a critique of traditional knowledge production as confined to academia. In this regard, a performance-lecture has not only aesthetic results, but also political and epistemological effects,<sup>3</sup> since research and art are done with the same intent and the showing of its results is inseparable from the work itself.

Not coincidentally, this form of artistic work has been given many names—such as lecture-performance; performative conference; performed essay; essay performance and lecture demonstration. The absence of a definitive concept likely stems from its hybrid nature, existing somewhere between academia and the art

field. For this essay, I chose to use the term “performance-lecture”, even though much of the still scarce literature on this form of artistic work refers to it as a “lecture performance”.<sup>4</sup> If the term “performance” in “lecture performance” could merely foreground the performativity inherent in any lecture, as Ladnar suggests,<sup>5</sup> by employing the term “performance-lecture” instead, I aim to emphasise the artistic approach to the lecture that is given by artists who engage with academic traits and research elements in their artwork. Regardless, as Ladnar points out, “to stress the aesthetic or artistic elements of a lecture performance cannot in turn mean disregarding its discursive or theoretical elements.”<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, it is important to acknowledge both the artistic and intellectual dimensions of this form. This in-betweenness of the performance-lecture is one of the characteristics that makes it such an open and flexible form allowing for each artist to determine how to conduct it, blurring the boundaries between academic norms and criteria while incorporating artistic traits of a performance. In doing so, artists engage with both aesthetic and discursive elements, in an often self-referential manner, and that most of the time addresses the audience directly. Some of those elements are characteristic of an academic lecture, such as the use of a microphone, the pulpit or stage, even the projection of images using PowerPoint. During the lecture, the artist stands in front of an audience in a pedagogical setting, occupying a place traditionally reserved for an authority on the subject matter, and for curator Andrea Tarsia, it is precisely “the pedagogical framework of the lecture [that can be seen] as its starting point, not as a means of interpreting art, but as a medium of art in itself.”<sup>7</sup>

Still, as mentioned, this is hardly a new form of art, having its roots tracing back to works such as the conceptual lectures of John Cage, the classes of Joseph Beuys or the essays and performances of Robert Morris.<sup>8</sup> While each of these artists—and many contemporary figures like Walid Raad, Rabih Mroué, Andrea Fraser, and Xavier Le Roy—had uniquely appropriated from the lecture form, the distinctive quality of the works I aim to analyse in this essay lies in how each of the three artists introduced in this prelude performs their lectures. They do so not only through the spoken word, but also, by actively engaging with archival materials.

## BIRDS, PLANES AND CAMERAS

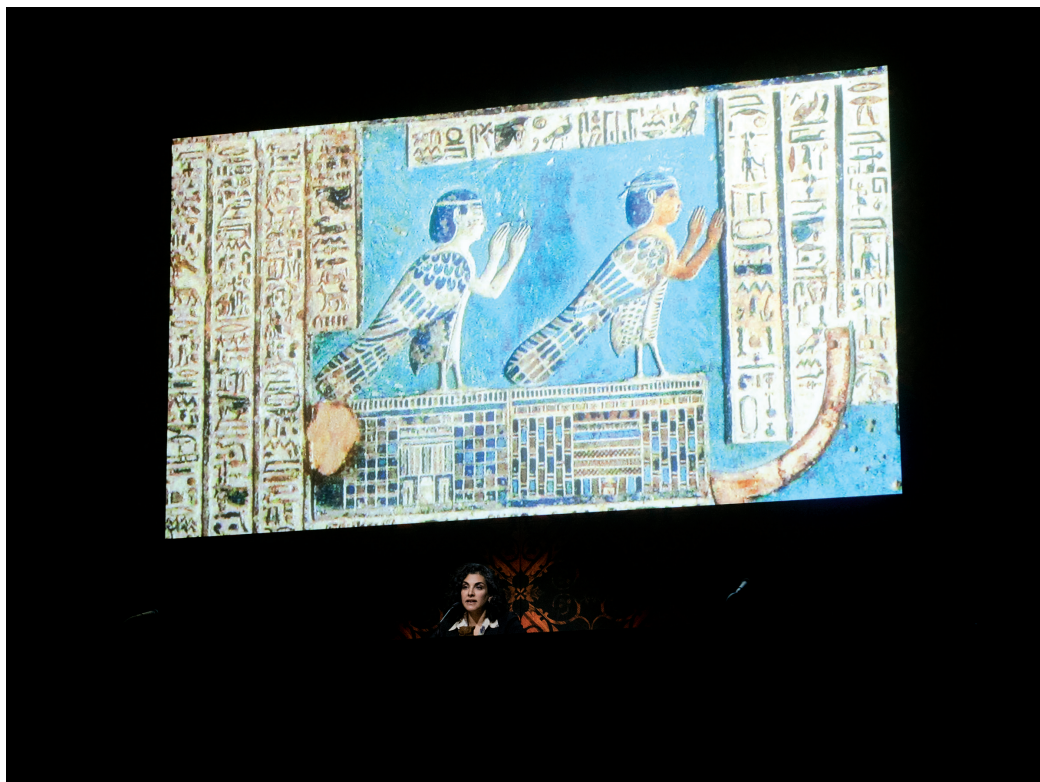
The first artist in this constellation is Heba Y. Amin, an Egyptian artist, researcher and professor based in Berlin who frequently employs the form of the performance-lecture in her works. In *The General's Stork* (2016-ongoing), Amin tells the audience a story about a bird mistaken for a spy in Egypt in 2013—an anecdote that sounds made up, but it is just the starting point for her investigation.

The stork, as the artist explains, was found by civilians who believed a tracking device implanted by scientists studying its migration patterns was actually a form of espionage technology. The bird was detained and imprisoned until the misunderstanding was cleared up. However, the story went viral and led Amin to



research further not only into Egypt's history, but into the development of aerial mapping technology, land surveillance, and how these technologies create a new visual paradigm influencing politics and power structures, particularly in the Middle East.

But the stork that led Amin to question the origin of such a state of paranoia also pointed her to another stork, one that was owned by a British general many



**Figure 1.**

Heba Y. Amin, "The General's Stork" at Spielart Festival: Global Angst (curated by Julian Warner) in Munich, Oct 31, 2021. Performed in collaboration with Simon James Phillips. Photo courtesy of Pricilla Grubo.



**Figure 2.**

Heba Y. Amin, "The General's Stork I", 2020 (archival color print, 80 x 100cm). Courtesy of the artist.

years ago. In 1917, General Allenby commanded the Ottoman Turks to surrender the city of Jerusalem, by deploying aeroplanes that released pamphlets from the sky, referencing a religious prophecy.<sup>9</sup> What history doesn't tell is that these bird-like machines and their message frightened the Turks into surrender, as they believed that they might lose the city to a "man of Allah", or a "son of God". After discovering Allenby's role in official Middle East history, Amin uncovered footage of the general casually strolling through the gardens of his villa in Cairo with his pet stork, images that seem as surreal and absurd as the story of a spy stork itself [Figure 2].

While storks and other non-human elements may seem to occupy a central role in the narrative Amin is crafting, her work ultimately redirects our attention to the human actors behind imperial and military power. The focus on the stork as a spy—conspiratorial and sensationalised—or as an eccentric pet does not divert attention away from what truly matters: a critique of how such narratives are constructed to obscure human responsibility. By foregrounding elements of paranoia and absurdity, Amin exposes the mechanisms through which, time and again, hegemonic narratives—including media coverage or government propaganda—deflects scrutiny from the ways humans wield power, control territory and shape history in the Middle East. During her lecture, Amin states that

it is this precise relationship [between the General and his stork] that defines the absurdity of this story, the thread that unites the sequence of events. It relays the surreal way in which history is written and highlights the details that often get left out and are eventually forgotten and erased from history, the fantasies and the truths that we hold on to. The regime of truth and the power of narrative.<sup>10</sup>

As the Egyptian artist deepened her investigation into the connections between the two storks, she adopted an investigative and speculative approach that led her to explore the development of aerial image-capturing technologies, having as a starting point the "pigeon-cam". Patented by a German apothecary in 1908, this camera, attached to a bird and activated by a timing mechanism, marked a milestone in capturing elevated perspectives without the need of the human presence—creating images from the bird's perspective, or a "divine point of view", as some referred to it. Following this line of research, Amin also encountered the archive of Eric and Edith Watson, a couple residing from 1898 to 1946 in an American colony in former Palestine's territory, who created a collection of over 2,000 photographic slides. These images constituted some of the earliest aerial images documenting the region's landscape. In her performance-lecture, Amin weaves together these "technological documents" with a critique of expanding surveillance modes in the Middle East, transforming the lecture into a space to question the political implications of visual data production and the forms of knowledge embedded in such images [Figures 3 and 4].

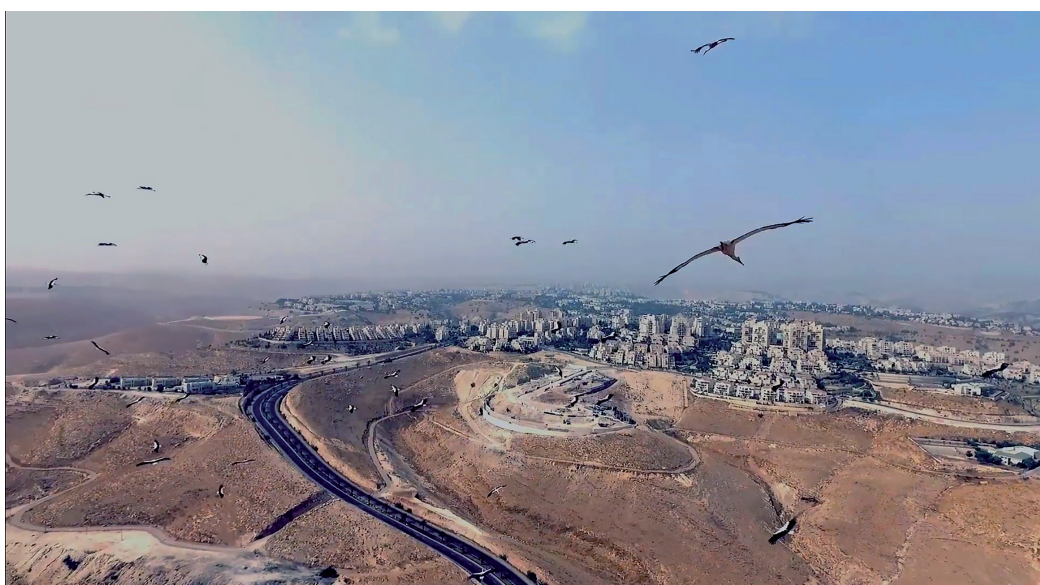
As Amin's lecture unfolds, we observe that the images produced with the aid of aerial cameras are imbued with the same colonial and imperial gaze that developed the technology itself. Her work evokes questions similar to those raised





**Figure 3.**

Heba Y. Amin, "As Birds Flying", 2016 (video still, 07:11 min). Courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 4.**

Heba Y. Amin, "As Birds Flying", 2016 (video still, 07:11 min). Courtesy of the artist.

by the writings of Ariella Azoulay, for whom not only the photographic medium became a colonial and imperialist tool, but has also produced historical documents and images that now demand our critical "unlearning" of this imperialistic framing.<sup>11</sup> The images that are brought to the public by Amin during her performance-lecture echo the intent of early photographic practices aligned with imperial aims: to satisfy an entrenched desire for knowledge through the dissection, surveying, categorising, and archiving of landscapes—a desire serving the purpose of exploration and control over territories and bodies resonating a colonial framework "which continues to be reenacted and implemented through image production".<sup>12</sup>

Amin, too, emphasises the need to question not only the images themselves but also the narratives we construct around them. In a conversation with professor Anthony Downey, the artist explains that she is not merely interested in displaying her archival discoveries, but rather, to reconceptualize them, consuming and regurgitating this material in new ways.<sup>13</sup> And as Downey observes, through

her performance-lecture, Amin is creating a story produced with an impressive amount of information, as she conveys this knowledge to her audience through a “performative interjection”<sup>14</sup> of herself into historical narratives. In this sense, the artist speculates on what was lost but also on what can be re-found, reframing stories that were forgotten or most likely written out of the history of the Middle East, and offering her audience a different point of view.<sup>15</sup>

This work prompts the Egyptian artist to create a space for questioning the political implications of visual data production and the narratives embedded in images like those created by drones and surveillance cameras. By using satire and irony as discursive strategies to address political issues that, as we know, extend beyond Egypt and the Middle East, Amin’s performance-lectures invite us to look beyond the boundaries of official history, challenging the dominance of hegemonic narratives. She subverts the conventional role of the lecturer, adopting a performative and transgressive stance as a narrator whose stories escape the strictures of dominant discourse, prompting us to rethink the belief system commonly attached to archives.

## CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THE SKY AND THE SOIL

At first glance, “mining” and “outer space” might seem like unrelated concepts. Yet, a closer look into these two instances and their connections becomes possible through “Extraordinary Mineral Stories”, a performance-lecture by Brazilian artist and researcher Mabe Bethônico that uncovers links between the sky and the soil, challenging our assumptions, and exploring complex ties between cosmic ambitions and terrestrial resources [Figure 5].



**Figure 5.**

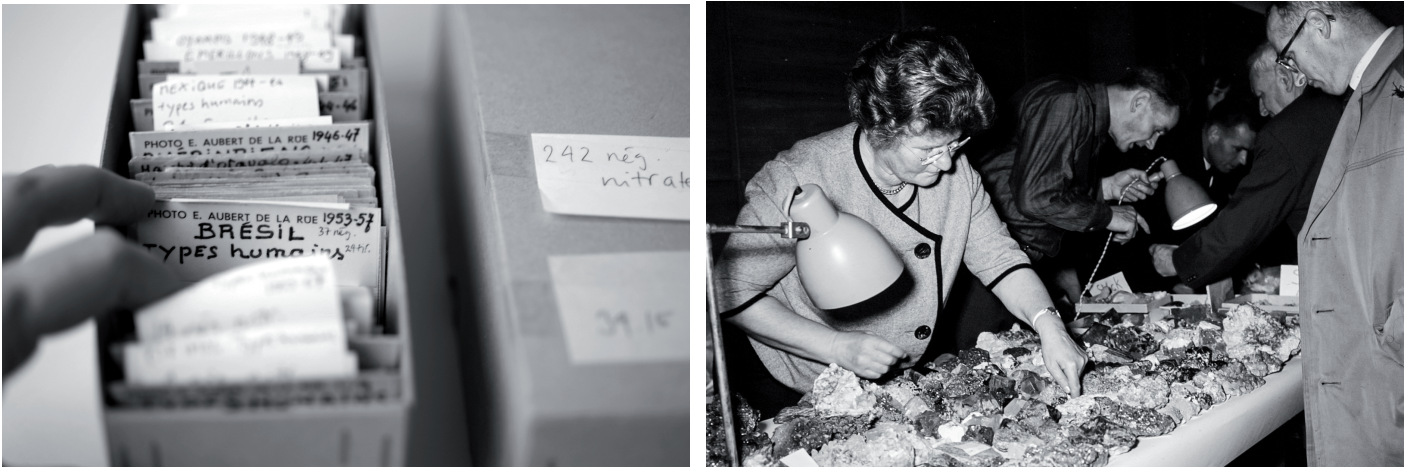
Mabe Bethônico, “Extraordinary Mineral Stories” at the 20th Festival de Arte Contemporânea Sesc\_Videobrasil, in Sesc Pompéia, São Paulo, September 2017. Photo courtesy of Everton Ballardín.

The lecture was first presented in 2017 during the 20th Sesc\_VideoBrasil, an international festival of contemporary art held in São Paulo. Weaving historical facts and fiction through the use of literary books, sci-fi comics, illustrations, archival documents, photographs, and moving images, Bethônico shares with the audience stories like the tale of a thunderbolt shaped diamond, written by Harold Thompson Rich in 1931. The artist revisits this narrative, recounting to the public the story about a Russian prince who attempts to flee on a rocket after trying to steal a rare diamond from Americans geologists. Interestingly, at the time of Thompson Rich's writing, no human had ever flown in space, foreshadowing the race that would later unfold during the Cold War. Bethônico reminds the audience that it was only 29 years later that Yuri Gagarin, the Russian cosmonaut and the first human to journey into outer space, became a worldwide hero and, coincidentally or not, had a mineral named after him: the gagarinite.

Connections between the space and minerals repeatedly surface in the stories Bethônico tells. As her performance-lecture continues, she highlights how the growing and insistent thoughts on exploiting minerals and colonising other worlds go beyond science fiction. In another example, the artist relates the fall of meteorites in the hinterlands of Brazil—these falls, by the way, were frequent in Russia and one of the main fears of the troupe of Vostok 1, Gagarin's spaceship. In a narrative not commonly shared through the official history, we learn that the biggest and most famous meteorite that has ever fallen in Brazil, fell in the hinterlands of Bahia in 1784, and weighed more than 5 tons. Despite its size, Bahia's governor decided to arrange its transport to Salvador, the state's capital. During the transportation, the meteorite fell over its transportation cart and was stuck in a cliff located 180 metres from where it was originally found. It was only 100 years later that Brazil's former emperor, Dom Pedro II, learned of the existence of the meteorite and decided to move this huge rock to Rio de Janeiro, where it was welcomed by Princess Isabel and visited by Albert Einstein. Today, the state of Bahia asks for the return of the meteorite to the city in which it was found, claiming its historical and touristic value for a really poor region of Brazil.

As Mabe performs her lecture, she shares with the audience books excerpts, sci-fi comics cover pages, archival images, media clippings, maps, illustrations, fragments of diaries of explorers, photographs, and historical documents. For this project, Bethônico's research draws from various public and private collections, including the Maison d'Alleurs, a science fiction museum in Switzerland; the archives of Swiss geographer and geologist Edgard de La Rüe, who explored the Brazil's hinterlands; and even the archive of Billy Meier, a Swiss farmer who assembled one of the world's largest collection of UFO photographs. Indeed, Bethônico's inquiry went as far as photographs and mineral specimens that allegedly documented the existence of extraterrestrial life—and, for the artist, it does not seem a coincidence that many of the encounters between humans and outer space elements (being that aliens, their spaceships or mineral matter) happens in regions of active mining or sites known for rich mineral deposits [Figures 6 and 7].





**Figure 6. [Left]**  
Image of Aubert de la Rue's archive at the  
Ethnographic Museum of Geneva. Photo  
courtesy of the artist.

**Figure 7. [Right]**  
Image of Aubert de la Rue's archive at  
the Ethnographic Museum of Geneva.  
Courtesy of the artist.

Blurring the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, many of the stories that the artist shares with her audience sound like fiction. Yet, as her narrative unfolds, we realise that much of what is depicted in novels and sci-fi comics have its roots in real events. Rather than aiming to deceive her audience, the Brazilian artist reflects on the intertwined histories of mineralogy and resource exploitation, its political implications, technological advances, and humanity's vision of outer space—including future prospects to inhabit it, as if the sky were our next geological frontier. Bethônico's use of both spoken word and archival images creates a dialogue with the found materials, producing a piece in which "speech 'occupied the space' simultaneously with the projected photograph."<sup>16</sup>

In sharing these stories, the artist goes beyond merely displaying her findings to the public. In fact, having questioned how a typically visual space such as the exhibition gallery could be impregnated with narrativity, Bethônico ultimately seeks to reshape this environment through storytelling.<sup>17</sup> The form of the performance-lecture provided the answer, allowing her to create further from the installation with videos, photographs, and documents that remained in the white cube after the live event. After all, for Bethônico:

speech can serve as a means of reinscribing the document (...) as a staging of the document, functioning as a tool to awaken it from a dormant state, one could say. The work would be an invention about – or from – the remnants of archives, and it inevitably requires contextualisation, reminding us that what is being discussed is only a part of something that cannot be fully recovered. It is this potential territory for fiction which surrounds the document that triggers the creation of [my] works. It also serves as a counterpoint to silence and forgetting, providing a pretext for discursiveness.<sup>18</sup>

Narrativity, therefore, is more than a means of sharing the artist's processes, it is a foundational element of her work. Bethônico is not merely recounting past events, rather, she constructs new connections through her speech, reinscribing found images and documents within contexts distinct from their original purposes. This

“performative character”<sup>19</sup> in Bethônico’s lectures produces a story untethered from the documents’ origins or historical constraints. As extraordinary as they might sound, her stories are grounded in substantial research and their ties to mineralogy and technological advancement form an essential part of her pursuit. Bethônico’s approach aligns with John L. Austin’s speech act theory, which argues that “speech entails a transformative power.”<sup>20</sup> In this light, the spoken word in performance-lectures, as seen in Bethônico’s work, reveals how language functions not only as a form of representation but as an act itself.



## A DIFFERENT TAKE ON SHOW-AND-TELL

In elementary schools, it is common for children to engage in an activity called “show-and-tell”, a practice in which they are supposed to bring an object to class and share a story about it. They need to “show” their chosen item and “tell” their audience—fellow classmates and teachers—the reasons why they picked it in the first place. This storytelling exercise, popular since the 1940s, serves to develop communication and public speaking skills, as well as critical thinking and empathy. It is precisely the act of telling a story from an object, an image, or even a song, that seems to underlie the performances-lectures of the final artist in the constellation drawn for this essay.

With a distinct approach when compared to the previous two artists but still working with the importance of remembering and discussing what has not been told by official History, Portuguese artist Joana Craveiro creates her *Living*

**Figure 8.**

Mabe Bethônico, “Extraordinary Mineral Stories” (installation view: 22 photographs [22x15cm each], facsimile of clippings from Billy Meier and FIGU archive, flyer and video). Courtesy of the artist.

*Museum of Small and Forgotten Memories*. First presented in 2014, Craveiro's solo project consists of seven performance-lectures, including a prologue and a post-performance discussion with the audience, lasting approximately six hours. Her work stems from an extensive research process incorporating oral testimonies, autobiographical memories and historical documents, books, newspaper clippings, political speeches, family albums, found photographs, vinyl records, and memorabilia. With this material, the artist challenges the dominant narratives around Portugal's dictatorship and the lengthy revolutionary process that followed it. It was the prolonged duration of this period, in fact, that led Craveiro to investigate further and delve deeper into her country's history and the memories of its people.

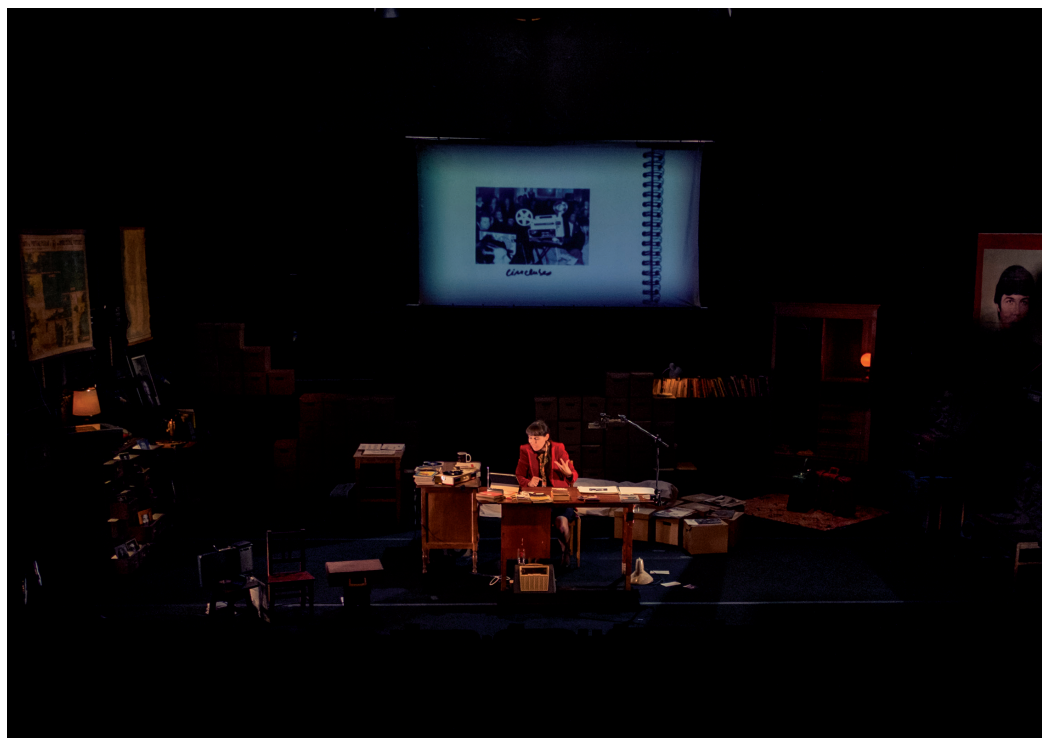
During her performance-lectures, the artist invites the audience to visit this "Living Museum", and, as if guiding them into a tour, starts to share small memories that have been obscured by history altogether. Unlike the standard elements in traditional academic lectures, Craveiro's lectures have more scenic and theatrical aspects: she changes clothes, and carefully explores the stage constructed with archival boxes, suitcases, a file cabinet, a radio, and other objects. She also brings into the scene the materiality of documents, records, photographs, poems, books, and even the red flower which symbolises Portugal's revolution. Those findings are layered on a table as the artist uses a live projection system created with a camera which captures the objects in real time and projects them onto a screen behind her. This allows the audience to follow along as she works—it is almost as if a memory album was being assembled at the same moment of the performance, with the additions of photographs, notes, book covers and fragments of documents.

The physical presence of found images, texts, and objects is a deliberate choice made by the artist that enhances the archival material's evidentiary effect. It is almost as if, by displaying her findings, Craveiro establishes a tone for her audience: *this much is true*. But is it, though? Isn't Craveiro's role as the archivist of this small, ephemeral, and live museum already woven with fiction? As she performs the collected testimonies, memories, and stories she heard, layering archives upon archives, can anyone say that what she presents is purely factual? "This investigation continues in order to render the invisible visible,"<sup>21</sup> she asserts between each act, and that much is true.

In this perspective, Craveiro's archivist desk becomes a "worktable" or a "montage table", much like the one envisioned by art historian and philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman, who discusses a method for engaging with archives.<sup>22</sup> In her performance-lectures, this table transforms into a platform for revisiting and discussing an alternative history. During the performance, from time to time, the artist moves around it, retrieving archival boxes, placing music records on a turntable, selecting different books to read a passage out loud, and interacting with miniatures and other objects that relate to the stories she is telling [Figures 9 and 10]. As Didi-Huberman posits:



We cannot close the question [of indetermination] by projecting all of history into an unimaginable absolute. We cannot close it by casting the archive aside as a “lesser image” or an “image without imagination”. An image without imagination is quite simply an image that one didn’t spend the time to work on. For imagination is work: that *work time of images* acting ceaselessly one upon the other by collision or fusion, by ruptures or metamorphoses – all of these acting on our own activity of knowledge and thought. To know, one must therefore *imagine for oneself*: the speculative *work table* does not go without an imaginative *montage table*.<sup>23</sup>



**Figure 9.**

Joana Craveiro, “A Living Museum of Small and Forgotten Memories” at Municipal Theatre São Luiz, in Lisbon, 2017. Photo courtesy of Estelle Valente.



**Figure 10.**

Joana Craveiro, “A Living Museum of Small and Forgotten Memories” at Municipal Theatre São Luiz, in Lisbon, 2017. Photo courtesy of Estelle Valente.

During her performance-lectures, Craveiro engages precisely in this imaginative work, speculating and constructing alternative stories from the archives she has found. She also shares her own family memories—from the forbidden books in her parent’s library to her grandfather’s deviant taste for Russian radio broadcasts—often using irony to reveal that the Portuguese dictatorship’s impact extends far beyond what official history cares to tell. As she interviewed her family members, and ordinary citizens, Craveiro recognised the need to not only question the archive, but also to collect new memories that would otherwise be lost. Bringing these voices to the stage, the artist weaves a new narrative around historical events and interrogates “the rhetoric of reconciliation that is based upon oblivion and erasure, proposing instead a new approach to reconciliation based upon the communal act of remembering through performance—as opposed to silencing the memories.”<sup>24</sup>

Unlike the performance-lectures of Amin and Bethônico, there is a collective aspect of Craveiro’s work that does not pass unnoticed. This is evident in the ephemeral community she gathers during her nearly seven-hour performance—dining together, singing old protest songs, and engaging in open discussions that follow the lecture. Here, the audience is invited to share their own memories and experiences regarding the Portuguese dictatorship and revolutionary period. This co-presence and active participation embody a key characteristic of contemporary performance art, and it is through this openness that Craveiro’s work becomes a space where new memories, insights, and stories emerge with each iteration.<sup>25</sup> Her performance-lectures thus become more than a site for knowledge transmission, as the academic lecture tends to be, but as a space for knowledge production. By inverting the role of lecturer and audience, Craveiro creates what can be described as an “autopoietic feedback loop between actors and spectators.”<sup>26</sup>

## ARCHIVES, NARRATIVES AND PERFORMANCE

In *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance* (2013), editors Gunhild Borggreen and Rune Gade emphasise the critical role of performative art practices in rethinking the ontology and nature of the archive. It is through performances within archives, as they point out, that the very notion of what an archive is can be expanded “from the idea of a physical storage space that preserves objects and documents to virtual archives of data collection accessed through computer screens, collective memory engaged in reinterpretations of history, or political dimensions of archives invested with issues of accessibility and power.”<sup>27</sup> Notably, it is not only performances within archives but also performances with archives that prompt a critical reassessment of what archives mean—and how conventional views and the common sense constructed around such materials shape our engagement with found images, documents, and objects.

By intertwining archival research with performance, artists create works that disrupt the traditional view of archives as static records of the past, claiming instead a dynamic and transformative quality for this sort of material in their works. In these circumstances, not only are the artists performing—evolving from passive records or mere illustrations of the stories being told into active agents within the narrative—or mere illustrations of the stories that are being told, to active agents within the narrative. Revisiting the common themes associated with the archive—memory, history, discourse, power, narrative, knowledge, the past, and the future are just a few of them—it is essential to remember, as philosopher Achille Mbembe reflects, that both the historian and the archivist occupy a strategic position in shaping what can be seen as an instituting imaginary surrounding archives. In *The Power of the Archive and its Limits*, Mbembe asserts: “the final destination of the archive is therefore always situated outside its own materiality, in the story that it makes possible.”<sup>28</sup> Taking this into consideration, to fully grasp the performance-lectures created by Amin, Bethônico, and Craveiro requires an understanding that they are not simply reading from the archives of official history, but actively reading a (different) story *with* the archives.

Ultimately, the belief that archives can fully reveal “what really happened” is an illusion. As Walter Benjamin suggests in his thesis *On the Concept of History*, “articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it ‘the way it really was’.” It means *appropriating a memory* as it flashes up in a moment of danger.”<sup>29</sup> If we take a quick look at the common dictionary, *to articulate* means to approximate, to connect or express in words, while *to appropriate* means to take something for one’s own use, often without permission. Isn’t this what the three artists are doing as they reflect on the official history and the gaps they find in the archive? Aren’t the stories that they are sharing with their audiences being told after they appropriate from memories that are not fully their own to begin with? Couldn’t we say that they are articulating the past in order to provide a different reading of history?

To believe that a purely objective awareness of the past can be drawn from historical facts is, in truth, to ignore and overlook the mechanisms of validation and exclusion that these so-called facts undergo. In a Foucauldian reading of the archive, Mbembe remind us that it “is primarily the product of a judgement, the result of the exercise of a specific power and authority, which involves placing certain documents in an archive at the same time as others are discarded.”<sup>30</sup> In that perspective, to believe in a fully objective and neutral history is also to ignore the inherent ambiguity of each and every act of human remembrance, which necessarily encompasses the realms of memory, language, and narration.

Given this framework, these three artists are not just staging performance-lectures with archival materials, but they are also engaging in a “performative narrative”, a concept I borrow from Argentinian literature professor Graciella Ravetti.<sup>31</sup> This narrative form is built through “texts in which certain literary traces share the nature of performance, resorting to the meaning of this term [performative] in a broad sense, encompassing both the scenic and social political spheres.”<sup>32</sup> While Ravetti

is concerned with the examination of literary texts, adopting her perspective to understand the performance-lectures conducted by Amin, Bethônico, and Craveiro might highlight how their works intersect images and discursiveness. As these artists are engaged in a writing process for the composition of their performance pieces, they draw from their research to shed light into the dynamics of archival production, which forms the foundation of hegemonic narratives and the writing of official history. By performing their texts, as Ravetti notes, “the figure of the author and that of the narrator are potentialised in the allegorical gesture which is always a movement of interpretation.”<sup>33</sup> This approach allows the artists to create works where narration itself becomes its foundational characteristic.

Certainly, many other examples could contribute to this discussion, given the enduring “allure of the archives” for artists.<sup>34</sup> Yet what stands out in the works of Heba Y. Amin, Mabe Bethônico, and Joana Craveiro is their unique approach to weaving together found documents, obscured stories, and forgotten memories of countries that had endured colonial pasts, dictatorships and power struggles that reflect until today. Each of these three artists interprets these materials, seeking context and articulating new connections through their narratives. In doing so, they highlight that archives are no neutral records but rather framing of events—fragments that captures only partial glimpses of what truly happened.

Understanding this dynamic of power and violence in archival production is essential to comprehend that archives and documents should not be simplistically seen as repositories of “truth”. It is necessary, as Ariella Azoulay proposes, “to undermine the status of the document as the ultimate validation of what happened.”<sup>35</sup> Instead, following Azoulay’s argument, they can be understood as objects of “potential history”. The notion of potentiality reintroduces the question of doubt, for if we begin to see archives as open to multiple interpretations rather than fixed in meaning, there is room to question the histories they tell—and, therefore, room for interpretation. If the archive is just a materialised form of potential history, then doubt becomes a productive force—one that challenges common sense, hegemonic discourses, and the authority of the archive itself. To doubt is to feel uncertain, but in the context of performance-lectures, as mentioned in the beginning of this essay, this uncertainty becomes a form of critical engagement. It opens space for the untold, the excluded, and the potential histories that have yet to emerge.

While Amin, Bethônico, and Craveiro emerge from distinct geographical contexts—Egypt, Brazil, and Portugal, respectively—their performance-lectures seem to gather together in a constellation that underscores the enduring impacts of colonial histories, authoritarian regimes, and power struggles on the present. Amin’s critique of surveillance technologies and the development of aerial imagery in the Middle East, Bethônico’s approach to mineral exploitation not only in Brazil but worldwide, and Craveiro’s reckoning with Portugal’s colonial past reveal how performance-lectures can serve as powerful tools for interrogating hegemonic narratives. As Ariella Azoulay *et al.* argue, “the task of the critic, artist, and intellectual working from within imperial discourses and institutions is to unlearn the archive’s

technology and think with the dispossessed toward an anti-imperialist project of emancipation.”<sup>36</sup> By bringing these artists together, this essay highlights not only the shared potential of performance-lectures to challenge archival authority but also the unique ways in which local histories resonate on a global scale.

As the artists present their performance-lectures, it is this interpretative movement—this engagement with potential histories through performative narratives—that takes the centre stage. While performing, they do not merely recount history, but actively restore and recreate the past, sharing with us what would otherwise be left out and remain excluded from official narratives. In this way, their work becomes a site of both critique and possibility, inviting audiences to question, reinterpret, and reimagine the stories we think we know.

## FUNDING

This work was supported in part by the Coordination of Superior Level Staff Improvement (CAPES – Brazil), Finance Code 001.

## REFERENCES

- AMIN, Heba Y. “The General’s Stork”. *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, no. 61–62 (2021a): 14–35. <https://doi.org/10.7146/nja.v30i61-62.127842>.
- AMIN, Heba Y. and Anthony Downey. “Drone Technologies and the Future of Surveillance in the Middle East: Heba Y. Amin & Anthony Downey in conversation”. (2021b). *The MIT Press Reader*. January 6, 2021. Accessed September 10, 2024, <https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/drone-technologies-future-of-surveillance-middle-east/>.
- AUSTIN, John Langshaw. *How to do Things with Words*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- AZOULAY, Ariella Aïsha. *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, London and New York: Verso, 2019.
- AZOULAY, Ariella Aïsha and Sohail Daulatzai; Arash Davari; Mamadou Diallo; Bouchra Khalili; Elleni Centime Zeleke. “Revolution and Rehearsal in the Global South: Unlearning the archive”. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 42, No. 2 (2022): 517–530. <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-9987996>.
- BENJAMIN, Walter. “On the Concept of History”. In *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006.
- BETHÔNICO, Mabe. *Mabe Bethônico | 20th Sesc\_Videobrasil Festival of Contemporary Art*, 2017a. Accessed July 10, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wffmBGU4u>.
- . “Perguntas para Mabe Bethônico. Respostas para Ana Pato”. *Anais do IV Seminário Internacional Arquivos de Museus e Pesquisa: a formação interdisciplinar do documentalista e do conservador*, São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo, MAC-USP, 2017b: 211-219.



- BETHÔNICO, Mabe and Radu Lilea. "Stones, Words, Images: a scale of memory and time." *Design/Arts/Culture*, 3, no.2, 80–88, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.12681/dac.32025>
- BORGGREEN, Gunhild, and Rune Gade, eds. *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2013.
- CALLAHAN, Sara. *Art + Archive: Understanding the Archival Turn in Contemporary Art*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022.
- CATALÃO, Marco. "Uma genealogia para a palestra-performance." *Urdimento* 1, no.28, (2017): 004-014. <https://doi.org/10.5965/1414573101282017004>.
- CRAVEIRO, Joana. "A Live/Living Museum of Small, Forgotten and Unwanted Memories. Performing Narratives, Testimonies and Archives of the Portuguese Dictatorship and Revolution." Doctoral dissertation, University of Roehampton, London, 2017.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "A Living Museum of Small, Forgotten and Unwanted Memories: Performing Oral Histories of the Portuguese Dictatorship and Revolution". In *Memory, subjectivities, and representation : approaches to oral history in Latin America, Portugal, and Spain*, edited by Benmayor, Rina, Cardenal de la Nuez, María Eugenia, and Pilar Domínguez, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.
- DOWNEY, Anthony. "Contingency, Dissonance and Performativity: Critical Archives and Knowledge Production in Contemporary Art" In *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, edited by Anthony Downey. London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2015.
- DIDI-HUBERMAN, Georges. *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*. Translated by Shanne B. Lillis, New York & London: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- FISCHER-LICHTE, Erika. *Estética do Performativo*. Translated by Manuela Gomes. Lisbon: Orfeu Negro, 2019.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The transformative power of performance: a new aesthetics*, Translated by Saskya Iris Jain. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- FRANK, Rike. "When Form Starts Talking: On Lecture-Performances." *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry* 33 (Summer 2013): 4–15. <https://doi.org/10.1086/672015>.
- FOUCAULT, Michel. *The Archaeology of Knowledge: And the Discourse on Language*. Translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith. New York: Vintage Books, 2010.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The order of discourse". In *Untying the text: A Post-structuralist reader*. Edited by Robert Young, 51–78. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.
- HAMMONDS, Chris, ed., *A Short History of Performance: Part II – The Lecture as a Work of Art*, London: Whitechapel, 2003.
- LADNAR, Daniel. "The Lecture Performance: Contexts of Lecturing and Performing." Doctoral dissertation, Aberystwyth University, 2013.
- MBEMBE, Achille. *Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive*. Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research/University of Witwatersrand, 2015.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits." In *Refiguring the Archive*, edited

by Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reice, and Razia Saleh, 19–26. Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media, 2002.

PATO, Ana. "Negotiating the invisible". In *Mabe Bethônico: documents – making public the construction of memory*, edited by Ana Pato and Mabe Bethônico. Belo Horizonte: Videobrasil, 2017.

RAINER, Lucia. "On the Threshold of Knowing: Lectures and Performances in Art and Academia", 1st ed. transcript Verlag, 2017.

RAVETTI, Graciela. "Narrativas performáticas" In *Performance, exílio, fronteiras. Errâncias territoriais e textuais*, edited by Márcia Arbex and Graciela Ravetti, 46-68, Belo Horizonte: FALE/UFMG, 2002.

---

1 Marco Catalão, "Uma genealogia para a palestra-performance". *Urdimento* 1, no. 28 (2017): 6 (my translation). <https://doi.org/10.5965/1414573101282017004>.

2 Daniel Ladnar, "The Lecture Performance: Contexts of Lecturing and Performing". Doctoral dissertation, Aberystwyth University, 2013: 13.

3 Catalão, "Uma genealogia para a palestra-performance", 11.

4 Both Daniel Ladnar (2013) and Lucia Rainer (2017) had acknowledged the limited amount of in-depth studies of the performance-lecture. cf. Lucia Rainer. *On the Threshold of Knowing: Lectures and Performances in Art and Academia*. 1st ed. transcript Verlag, 2017.

5 Ladnar, "The Lecture Performance", 11.

6 Ibid., 12.

7 Andrea Tarsia, introduction to *A Short History of Performance: Part II – The Lecture as a Work of Art*, edited by Chris Hammonds. 2003: 5.

8 See Hammonds (2003); Ladnar (2013); Rainer (2017); Catalão (2017).

9 Like many scholars and inventors of flying and bird-like machines, Allenby also found inspiration in the biblical passage Isaiah 31:5: "As birds flying, so will the Lord of hosts defend Jerusalem; defending also he will deliver [it]; and passing over he will preserve [it]." Heba Amin, "The General's Stork". *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 30, no. 61-62 (2021a): 27. <https://doi.org/10.7146/nja.v30i61-62.127842>.

10 Ibid., 31.

11 Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. Verso, 2019.

12 Amin, "The General's Stork", 14.

13 Heba Y. Amin and Anthony Downey, "Drone Technologies and the Future of Surveillance in the Middle East: Heba Y. Amin & Anthony Downey in conversation". (2021b). *The MIT Press Reader*, January 6, 2021. For the launch of the book with the same name, Amin and Downey had an online talk that was recorded and transcribed in The MIT Press Reader.

14 Anthony Downey, "Drone Technologies and the Future of Surveillance in the Middle East," 2021b.

15 Ibid.

16 Mabe Bethônico, "Stones, Words, Images: a scale of memory and time". *Design/Arts/Culture Journal*, 3, no. 2, 2023: 85. <https://doi.org/10.12681/dac.32025>.

17 Mabe Bethônico, *Mabe Bethônico | 20th Sesc\_Videobrasil Festival of Contemporary Art*, 2017a.

18 Mabe Bethônico, "Perguntas para Mabe Bethônico. Respostas para Ana Pato". *Anais do IV Seminário Internacional Arquivos de Museus e Pesquisa: a formação interdisciplinar do documentalista e do conservador*. Universidade de São Paulo/MAC-USP, 2017b: 212 (my translation).

- 19 Ana Pato, "Negotiating the Invisible". In *Mabe Bethônico: documents – making public the construction of memory*, 2017, 7.
- 20 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The transformative power of performance: a new aesthetics*. Translated by Saskya Iris Jain. Routledge, 2008: 24.
- 21 Joana Craveiro, "A Live/Living Museum of Small, Forgotten and Unwanted Memories. Performing Narratives, Testimonies and Archives of the Portuguese Dictatorship and Revolution". Doctoral dissertation. University of Roehampton, 2017: 155.
- 22 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Imagens in Spite of All: four photographs from Auschwitz*. Translated by Shanne B. Lillis. University of Chicago Press, 2008.
- 23 Ibid., 116-119 (emphasis in the original).
- 24 Craveiro, "A Live/Living Museum of Small, Forgotten and Unwanted Memories," 37.
- 25 Craveiro shares some of this collective construction in her essay "A Living Museum of Small, Forgotten and Unwanted Memories: Performing Oral Histories of the Portuguese Dictatorship and Revolution", present in the book *Memory, subjectivities, and representation: approaches to oral history in Latin America, Portugal, and Spain*, edited by Benmayor, Rina, Cardenal de la Nuez, María Eugenia, and Pilar Domínguez. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016: 207-229.
- 26 Fischer-Lichte, *The transformative power of performance: a new aesthetics*, 41.
- 27 Gunhild Borggreen and Gade Rune, eds. *Performing Archives/Archives of Performance*. Museum Tusculanum Press, 2013: 9.
- 28 Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and its Limits". In *Refiguring the Archive*, edited by Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reice, and Razia Saleh. Springer Science+Business Media, 2002: 21.
- 29 Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" In *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Harvard University Press, 2006: 391 (emphasis added).
- 30 Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and its Limits", 20.
- 31 Graciela Ravetti, "Narrativas performáticas" In *Performance, exílio, fronteiras. Errâncias territoriais e textuais*, 2002.
- 32 Ibid., 46 (my translation).
- 33 Ibid., 55 (my translation).
- 34 Here I borrow the title *The Allure of the Archives* from French historian Arlette Farge's book. However, for an updated overview on the uses of archives by contemporary artists, see Sara Callahan, *Art+Archive: Understanding the archival turn in contemporary art*, 2023.
- 35 Ariela Azoullay et al., "Revolution and Rehearsal in the Global South" *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 517 Vol. 42, No. 2, 2022, 524.
- 36 Ibid., 517.