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## INTRODUCTION

# ARCHIVES AND CONTEMPORARY ART A MATTER OF INDIVIDUALITY

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## INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary scenario, a trend unites the interests of artists and scholars: the archive. Within the inclusive field of artistic and academic research, the archive assumes a dual identity: on the one hand, it serves as a productive model that provides artists with a structure in which to develop their creative ideas, offering a language capable of articulating narratives and systems of meaning. On the other hand, the archive retains its historical significance, continuing to provide scholars with the materials necessary to write the history of the arts and artistic practices.

The archive is, therefore, a place of intersection, thoroughly explored by contemporary artists and academic literature; so thoroughly that, to avoid dispersing the archive subject into interpretations that do not adhere to its historical essence, it is necessary to take a step back and reflect with new methods on both the meaning of historical research conducted in archives and the meaning of archival art.

How can we attempt to bring the 'art archive' – understood here broadly as archival art and artist archives – back to a coherent definition? This volume proposes to seek it in those experiences of study and artistic practice that maintain the epistemological approach which is typical of the archive as a place where history is invented.

## ARTISTS' ARCHIVES

At the inaugural conference of the 36th Congrès du Comité International d'Histoire de l'Art - CIHA 2024,<sup>1</sup> Orhan Pamuk recalled the key points of *A Modest Manifesto for Museums*, published in 2012 on the website of the Masumiyet Müzesi in Istanbul<sup>2</sup> and presented at the opening of the General Conference of Museums organised in Milan by the International Council of Museums in July 2016.<sup>3</sup>

As is well known, the document encourages a radical and ideal rethinking of museums, so that they become capable of 'speaking for individuals', as the history of countries and communities is already commemorated by the world's leading national heritage institutions. According to Pamuk, museums can only fulfil their role of deeply analysing human culture by resizing and reshaping their narrative on a human scale, as if the museum were a home rather than a monument, a place where human culture can express itself rather than be represented.

Although these theories initially explained the museological significance of the Museum of Innocence, which was created alongside his novel, Pamuk intends the *Manifesto* as a general proposal for revising the form and tasks of museums. This belief is even more striking given that the writer reaffirmed it less than two years after the new definition of a museum was announced, which ICOM achieved through a massive mediation effort (Prague 2022). Indeed, it is possible to agree that, despite being more open to conceiving the social community as a rich and complex set of publics with different interests, sensibilities and access capabilities, the ICOM definition still hides the individual in a more generic and all-encompassing concept, lacking the specificity that Pamuk has sought so far in the role of the museum.

Perhaps in response to this persistent vagueness, during the conference, the writer cited the French visual artist Christian Boltanski and the Swiss painter and dancer Daniel Spoerri as examples of an artistic practice that tells stories of real or imaginary individuals through the collection, ordering and display of objects directly connected to the lives of those subjects or communities of subjects, just as it happens in the Istanbul Museum.

Between the late 1980s and early 1990s, after having handled *Inventories*, Boltanski worked on the series *Archives*, *Monuments*, *Réserves*, continuing the work of cataloguing and displaying objects linked to the uniqueness of different individuals.<sup>4</sup> The installations in this project consisted of photographic portraits, containers and objects that depicted the lives of ordinary, unknown women and men, whom the artist valued simply for being human beings with a story to tell. Powerful examples of this endeavour are the pieces now kept at MoMA (*The Storehouse*, 1988)<sup>5</sup> and the Tate Gallery (*The Reserve of Dead Swiss*, 1990).<sup>6</sup>

Around the same time, Daniel Spoerri continued to create and exhibit his *tableaux-pièges*, which he had first conceived during the *Nouveau Réalisme* phase.<sup>7</sup> In the *Palettes d'artistes* series, Spoerri's artist friends' work tools (Erik Dietmann, Ugo Dossi, Marcel Duchamp, Katharina Duwen, Karl Gerstner, Julian Schnabel) were 'trapped' (namely the English translation of the French word "*piège*") in the artwork

by being fixed to a shelf to summarise in a single image a collection of brushes, paints, cigarettes and other materials through which the individual experience of the artists involved had been realised.<sup>8</sup>

In Pamuk's view, works of art as personal collections and, more generally, heritage as a collection of testimonies of a life or individual experiences, are the ideal model for every contemporary museum. Although these conceptions still seem revolutionary in contemporary museology, archives—places for preserving heritage and processing historical memory *par excellence*, together with museums and libraries—have been embracing the demands of individuality for more than a century.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, the creation of 'author archives' is a phenomenon that began in Europe between the 19th and 20th centuries, when public libraries and museums acquired numerous private archives belonging to writers, artists, and intellectuals to form the documentary heritage of nation-states.<sup>10</sup> Similar events also impacted non-European Western countries and their nation-building. Since then, parallel to the emergence of History as an academic discipline, archives, far from being mere repositories of documents, have been the forge of national memory almost everywhere in the world, collecting, organising and making accessible documents and other materials that reveal something about the lives, culture and knowledge of their owners, even when told from a biased perspective or an authority perspective.<sup>11</sup> This is even more evident in the structure of archives and museums established during the colonial era, which, as widely commented in contemporary literature, sought to propagandise the history of power in opposition to the history of identities outside the Empire.<sup>12</sup>

Although in a very different form from contemporary art, which is more interested in the archives of ordinary women and men than those of widely known human beings, the secularisation of personal archives has demonstrated that even national history can be explored in depth starting from individual storylines, local voices, and issues arising on the State's periphery. This depends on the shape of the archive and how split up its contents are, which fosters specialised and detailed research rather than broad research. The archive—both when it exists and when it is lost, erased or destroyed—is a place for digging deeper, as it holds specific and fragmentary evidence of history. The history of archives can be affected by interruptions, reactivations, demolitions, relocations, and continuity is not always a distinguishing feature. Among the many multifaceted approaches to archival materials, however, the specificity of the sources remains a constant component.

So far, the archive has been evolving into new forms. However, it still closely relates to the ancient task of framing historical memory, even if betraying a different *Zeitgeist*. In particular, the 'art archive' settlement, which includes personal archives of artists, critics, collectors, and art dealers, is internationally scattered by being purchased and kept in museums, libraries, and art foundations.<sup>13</sup> In the same way that personal archives from the 19th and 20th centuries can offer useful sources for writing national history, artist archives can help build or enrich the general history of art through biographical information and data about the art system the owner was involved in gleaned from these collections.

While specific reflection on the artist archives as mines of raw materials for producing art was already initiated in the early 2000s at the Tate Gallery, through two insightful conferences, in the current panorama of museology and contemporary art historiography, artists' archives have recently taken on a privileged position owing to their suitability to unveil what is still untold about the art of the present or the recent past.<sup>14</sup> Compared to institutional archives, artists' archives hold some important specificities because they often house items already endowed with artistic regard, capable of creating authentic taxonomies of contemporary art. According to some archival studies, the artist's archive can sometimes be attributed a historiographic importance equal to that of a *catalogue raisonné* (annotated catalogue) of the owner's works of art.<sup>15</sup> Their significance for the history of art history emerges even when, as often happens, the archive is collected *a posteriori*, usually—but not always—after the author's death. Effectively, many organisations have been active for several years, assisting contemporary artists in creating an archive to be left for public use.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to shedding new light on the conservation practices of papers and artefacts, studies on artists' archives are invaluable to understand and rewrite the history of contemporary art based on unpublished sources such as documents, letters, photographs, works of art, video and sound recordings, and personal memories. The outcomes their fruition opens to can be disparate: they allow reinterpreting from a non-normative perspective the historical development of art, and make it possible to disseminate and so to directly understand the historical meaning of a massive amount of sources still concealed in boxes, folders, and shelves, as were much of those published and commented so far within the genre of 'documentary history'.<sup>17</sup>

This is something that both scholars and artists are aware of, as Pamuk's examples show. It is no coincidence that, just as Boltanski and Spoerri were working on their archival art inspired by the artistic tradition of the previous two decades, theories about the archival turn were taking off.

## ARCHIVAL ART

Notwithstanding some studies have appropriately framed even earlier experiences that can be considered initial forms of 'archival art', in the 1960s conceptual art and post-structuralist studies unwittingly cooperated in defining distinct and intentional aesthetic and formal constraints for creatively reworking the aims and forms of the Archive.<sup>18</sup> This sort of standardisation came out not just in the use of similar creative tools and materials—like photographs and written sources, installations and post-production, montage and cataloguing, atlases and displays—but first and foremost in the sharing of a conceptual and cultural context.<sup>19</sup> In his book *L'Archéologie du savoir*, Michel Foucault attributed to archives a symbolic meaning for the first time, interpreting them as an epistemological metaphor to explain how historical and philosophical knowledge and linguistic thought in general are

structured.<sup>20</sup> In other words, according to Foucault, the archive is a concept that describes the set of rules, structures, and institutions that make it possible for knowledge to be transmitted and function in a given era through language.

At the same time, and using different means, artists began to shape the archive into a productive model for expressing creative concepts and interpreting the socio-cultural sphere in which they operated. It suffices to recall that the renowned American artist Joseph Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* was exhibited for the first time at the Museum of Modern Art of New York in 1965: the author did not create the work, but composed it by combining written, photographic and material representations of the object, thus exhibiting a small archive of found objects that reflected on the latest achievements of Semiotics.<sup>21</sup> What literature refers to as the 'archival turn', considered a breakthrough that peaked between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s, could be traced back to this period.

Around the mid-1990s, when the first edition of *Mal d'archive* by Jacques Derrida was available to be read both in French and English,<sup>22</sup> the historical and social value of Archives attracted an unprecedented attention of theorists and scholars in the field of Art History, who launched a broad and multidisciplinary reflection on the many aspects of that ancient cultural institution. The debate quickly spread and evolved as a pristine concern, since it was looked at through a fresh approach, other than the established knowledge of archives in the nineteenth-century connotation.

It is unnecessary to explore the many theoretical implications of Derrida's essay in the philosophical and psychoanalytical fields. It is impossible here to discuss his theories on the human psyche's archival structure or the concrete effect that the archiving and museumisation of Freud's documentary heritage would have had on psychoanalytic theory.<sup>23</sup> Instead, it is helpful to analyse how these observations were developed in the realm of art-historical studies and practices.

Between 1998 and 1999, an exhibition entitled *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art* was presented at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Centre of New York and the Henry Art Gallery in Seattle. This event allowed Ingrid Schaffner to explore further her analysis of archival art, which she had begun to outline in a short article published in the summer of 1995.<sup>24</sup> Schaffner and the other authors contributing to the catalogue attempted an initial systematic survey of the phenomenon and provided some preliminary definitions to classify the archival art of the previous three generations as a homogeneous avant-garde based not on the simple storage of objects, but on the transformation of archival materials—themselves bearers of history—into artistic materials or even proper artworks.

Looking at the activities underway in Europe and America, Hal Foster subsequently identified a "notion of artistic practice" that united many contemporary artists despite the differences in their subjects.<sup>25</sup> What inspired the archival art analysed by Foster was the creation of historical information through the post-production of archival materials found or selected by artists. Beyond the modes of creation and outcomes of these practices, what is even more important here is the

general process that, according to Foster, makes contemporary art an archival art form: "The work in question is archival since it not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well, and does so in a way that underscores the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private."<sup>26</sup> In short, archival art is not confined to replicating a formal model; it does not merely adopt the archive as a layout for exhibitions and artistic operations, but also embraces the archive's historicist logic concerning the implications of meaning and knowledge that it entails.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, it is possible to say that archival art was first conceived in art theory as a visual language with a syntax and semantics that go beyond the domain of artistic practice and touch on the sphere of archiving, expanding outside aesthetic research to produce culture or knowledge. The archival artworks derived from this springboard are not representations, assemblages or showcases of items, but rather intricate narratives that emerge from a system of relationships between objects and images selected and exhibited by the artist, such as the monument-like works created by the Swiss artist Thomas Hirschhorn in the late 1990s and early 2000s, cited by Foster.<sup>28</sup> In other words, archival art should not be considered as mere storage of objects, but as a meaningful scheme, made up through the selective nature of archiving.

Contemporary artistic practices still take up the inventions of such a long-established art tradition by using the Archive form to classify, which means both list and catalogue, and reinterpret the World.<sup>29</sup> A vast bibliography of historical-artistic and critical analysis that appeared from the mid-2000s up to today places at its core this worldwide tendency, undertaken by artists to create or show actual and fictitious archives for autobiographical, political, and critical purposes.<sup>30</sup>

Just being performed, archival art has, therefore, substantially contributed, in the last few years, to the articulation of an historiography focused on the Archive and the various artistic declinations of the theme. The list of scientific publications, exhibition catalogues, and artists' writings is today extraordinarily vast and nevertheless still increasing and challenging, to the extent of spawning the need to deepen the analysis of the limits of the archiving practices, the counter-archiving, and the not-archivable, and to address other pressing issues for contemporary society, such as political resistance, gender equality and climate challenges.<sup>31</sup>

## AIMS OF THIS VOLUME

Despite this enduring rise of archival art theories, attempts to identify a possible definition of this practice have always proved challenging for critics, who are understandably intimidated by the relentless evolution of artistic languages and the uncontrolled proliferation of reference literature, of which this contribution is also part.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, this ongoing debate demonstrates that literature on archival art is not only a specific genre within general art history but also a separate branch of research devoted to critically examining this phenomenon, which should



now strive for further conceptual stability. There is no question of establishing a taxonomy able to differentiate archival art intrinsically, but instead of understanding its identity within a broad profile, articulated yet recognisable.

To reduce all this to a research question: how could this history of artistic studies and practices proceed without running the risk of inflating the concept of the archival? In other words, how can we interpret productive archival art today? Are there general, replicable criteria to recognise and distinguish it from countless cases of 'serial art' or unproductive archiving passed off as archival art?<sup>33</sup>

Several authors have already considered the evolution of the archival art language over the last twenty years, pondering many key issues.<sup>34</sup> The purpose of this volume is to contribute to identifying a paradigm of archival art by analysing what is now happening both in contemporary artistic studies and practices. Foster's pioneering observations on the one hand, and Pamuk's more recent insights on the other, which seem to encompass and resume the whole contemporary history of archival art, implicitly suggest that two criteria should be considered.<sup>35</sup> First, there is individuality, which is the ability of archival art to create authentic, specific, and subjective stories, even when the work refers not to a single person or actual events, but at least to a coherent narrative order, a thesis, or a declarative purpose. Secondly, there is its epistemological value, which is its ability to convey knowledge through artistic expressions involving ordering, listing, repetition, reproduction, accumulation and collection.

To select a very few convincing examples of this pattern, we might mention Georges Adéagbo's *L'explorateur et les explorateurs devant l'histoire de l'exploration...!-Le théâtre du monde...!*, held in 2002 at documenta 11, Platform 5, which recounts the colonial history through the display of meaningful objects; *Oceanomania*, the installation-opera for the Musée Océanographique in Monaco created in 2011 by Mark Dion, which combines the needs of a permanent installation with the history of early modern Central and Northern European collecting; Zoe Leonard's photographic collection entitled *Analogue*, exhibited in the summer of 2015 at MoMA, which explores one aspect of the technical, material and social history of photography through a photographic inventory.<sup>36</sup>

Because repetition, collections, and lists are across most contemporary art practices, many scholars believe that the archival model is now integrated into contemporary art as a style, a language, and a way of communicating.<sup>37</sup> In an inspiring and entirely agreeable statement, Ernst van Alphen said:

'Archival artworks' probe the possibilities of what art is and can do. But also, the other way around, they explore and challenge the principles on which archival organizations are built. Such an exploration of the archive through art is timely. The reason for the current relevance of an exploration of "archival thinking" is a generally cultural one. Whereas the role of narrative is declining, the role of archive, in a variety of forms, is increasing. [...] The archive has become the dominant symbolic and cultural form.<sup>38</sup>



However, acknowledging the generalised use of the archival model in contemporary art does not necessarily mean generalising the concept of archival art, which, as mentioned earlier, is a recognisable artistic trend because, rather than being a mere instrumentalisation or passive replication of the archival model, it derives from a discernible artistic and cultural tradition: it is utterly modern, driven by conceptual and structuralist ideas, shaped by the development of technologies for archiving objects and documents, and inevitably linked to the 19th- and 20th-century history of the archive institution, as a place where History, Stories, and Memory in general, whether real or fictional, historical or literary, are created.<sup>39</sup> Actually, because of how this archival model spreads so easily and the risk that everything could be seen as archival art, theoretical research should try to give it a framework, develop a method to identify it, and save its subject from getting lost.

As Van Alphen has already pointed out in the same book, photography is one of the artistic media that most incisively guides the contemporary trend in archival art: thanks to their formal characteristics, photographs are both artworks and documents.<sup>40</sup> This volume examines the intertwined developments of archival art and contemporary art historiography from various perspectives by placing technical images and other expressions of contemporary visual culture at the centre of its analysis.

*An Archival Impulse: Twenty Years Later* by Rita Cêpa opens the volume by looking at how far contemporary art has come from Hal Foster's seminal ideas over the last two decades. The author questions how archival art practices today have become so reliant on new technologies and how, as a result, we need to update our critical approach to archival art, considering these developments.

Costanza Caraffa combines a reflection on contemporary art with an in-depth study of the photographic archive and its role as a think tank for both artists and art historians. Her investigation zooms in on the research and artistic creation recently carried out at the Photothek of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, which she has been directing for many years, to show how art can reinterpret the role of archives in the contemporary era.

Francesca Zanella focused on a similar topic, which is the relationship between archives, contemporary art practice, and historiography, highlighting how archival art today is approaching archives with new critical tools that let both scholars and artists challenge the principles of objectivity, provenance, consistency, and authority that are traditionally associated with archival institutions. The 'After-Archive' is a living archive that can be used in new ways to produce historiography and knowledge, in line with the many cultural demands of the contemporary world.

Massimo Maiorino, by contrast, adopts a viewpoint on the contemporary that starts from some historical assumptions. The author addresses the relationship between the processes of objects and artworks accumulation that spontaneously occur in modern and contemporary artists' ateliers and the art archive formation. His argument relies entirely on a critical, historical and philosophical interpretation of this relationship, which he explores to encourage reflection on other crucial issues in contemporary art theory, such as the modern roots of artists' archives

and their institution, the methods of displaying non-artistic archival materials, the procedures of sorting and cataloguing multi-media items coming from artists' ateliers and archives.

Gabriela Sá shifts the focus away from the archive and analyses the use of archival materials—photographs, films, letters, diaries, documents—in the performance-lectures of three contemporary artists who use them to offer a non-hegemonic account of history, thus a different image of collective memory. Heba Y. Amin, Mabe Bethônico and Joana Craveiro become artist-historiographers: they highlight the performative potential of archival materials and transform them into artistic materials.

By hinging the problem on a historical fact, Defne Oruç holds together the themes of ontology of photographic images, photographic documentation, preservation of visual documents and their historical and creative reinterpretation. *Mediating the Past Making (in) the Present* addresses the pogrom of 6 and 7 September 1955 across the Turkish Republic through photographic images taken during those days and confiscated by the government until the beginning of 2000, with the ambition of creating a photographic archive capable of finally telling the impartial version of that tragic event.

Nesli Gül's article uses archive files to make up a particular story. Her paper investigates the role of archives in writing the memory of visual artists from Turkey who have moved to the Netherlands since the 1960s. Focusing on migration and diasporic cultural exchange also means imagining a non-normative history of art, based on the study and dissemination of materials that are often difficult to access and yet represent a frequently overlooked part of contemporary cultural history.

As can be observed from these examples, the archive is adept at connecting itineraries across time and space, establishing pertinent connections between remote experiences, individual stories, and sources generated by different authorities. The theme of travel is also the subject of the article by David Lopes, which begins with the concept of 'combination' developed by Georges Didi-Huberman and based on Warburg's Mnemosyne model. Engaging with relevant literature, the author presents his artworks as a translation of the archive into an atlas to tell two biographies, that of his father and that of his grandmother, as two parallel lives, unfolding into two different times and two distinct geographies.

Annemarie Kok undertakes a kind of reverse exploration, shifting her attention from the object of contemporary art to the artist's activity, questioning the practices required to preserve ephemeral or, more generally, 'fluid' art. Updating reflections on the preservability of performative art that began in the 1960s, the author suggests new criteria for documentation and archiving suited to contemporary art's participatory and politically engaged manifestations, such as Dutch sculptor Tjebbe van Tijen.

Martina Denegri also attempts to address an issue closely linked to contemporary artistic practices, particularly the works of the duo Fadi Houmani and Ster Borgman, albeit from a different perspective. The author analyses *Moths*

*Dreaming of Electric Waters* to theorise the possibilities of 'rewilding' contemporary culture, that in the author's discourse is of restoring importance to feminist, inclusive, Indigenous and environmentalist issues, which together fuel the artistic, sociological and political debates of the present day. Through the bug metaphor, the author introduces an innovative proposal into the challenging and perhaps unsolvable argument of the decolonial archive/museum/heritage.

Addressing both the concept of fluidity in archival practices and the issue of museum decolonisation, Livia Dubon examines the museum representation of the heritage of the ISIAO archive in Rome. Much has already been written about the decolonisation of archives. However, the literature does not always provide a convincing explanation for how the structure of an archive formed through a history of colonisation can be transformed into a decolonised one without destroying its provenance history. Part of the historical significance of archives is inevitably determined by the social and political process that led to their creation. This means that, unless carefully projected and calibrated, a genuine decolonisation of archives can lead to a reckless and, in some cases, anti-historical or at least inappropriate deconstruction of heritage. Instead, in this case, the author employs the storytelling method for the decolonial description of archive heritage without censoring or mutilating the history of this heritage, but rather explaining it differently. While the use of storytelling in art museums can prove problematic in many cases due to the personalisation of the narrative at the expense of the historical objectivity of heritage materiality and iconographic meaning, storytelling for decolonisation is perhaps the most effective choice, given that the ambition of this approach is to personalise that history, taking away the colonisers' power of speech and restoring memory, identity and voice to colonised populations.

The visual essay by Linda Fregni Nagler, *How to Look at a Camera*, describes an artistic research project based on analysing an ideal archive of 'found photographs' that involves vernacular photography and images of non-Western cultures. The artist worked on a series of photographs belonging to the Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe (MK&G) in Hamburg, where the project was exhibited in 2023-2024, to understand the conflict between seeing and being seen that a photographic image can trigger. Taking the project description as a starting point, the artist intercepts the themes of visibility and invisibility in the photographic image and their implications in other realms of contemporary humanistic knowledge.

The volume ends with a portfolio feature by Indian artist Dayanita Singh. Singh has been reflecting on how photographic artworks are viewed for many years. Her projects always materialise as new and ever-changing exhibitions of photographic collections, set up in mobile structures that can be adapted to the size of the exhibition space, whether it be a museum, a gallery or even an unconventional exhibition venue. Both a photographer and a bookmaker, Singh has combined the structure and mission of the photographic archive and museum in her works of art: to preserve and exhibit photographs as works of art and, simultaneously, as documents of her professional history and her subjects' lives.

## CONCLUSIONS

The historical-epistemological approach is the most evident common element among the many forms of art and archival practices discussed in this volume. If, on the one hand, artists acknowledge and replicate the historical function of the archival model and, on the other, historians acknowledge and comment on the documentary significance of artists' archives, then artistic practice and art history merge into a comprehensive and varied theoretical framework which is nevertheless methodologically consistent.

From these studies, the individualising shift in museology promoted by Pamuk already appears to have been accomplished in the latest developments in archival art. When the artist's specific intent is clearly recognisable, contemporary art becomes a strong indicator of the desire for institutions responsible for preserving and disseminating memory to shift their focus to the individual, to people. If this is true, then art archives have become agents of historiography also within and through artistic practice. This achievement would lead to a conclusion that, despite everything, has always been evident: museums and archives are made up of people's stories to make up people's history.

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1 The Comité International d'Histoire de l'Art is the oldest international organization of art history in the world. See the official website at <https://www.ciha.org/>. Accessed on 13 March 2025.

2 See full text at <https://www.masumiyetmuzesi.org/en/mani-festo>. Accessed on 13 March 2025.

3 Find out more on the conference at <https://www.icom-italia.org/conferenza-internazionale-milano-3-9-luglio-2016/#:~:text=La%2024a%20Conferenza%20Generale,di%20cui%20oltre%20400%20italiani>. Accessed on 13 March 2025.

4 In January 1973, Boltanski wrote a letter to 62 art, history and anthropology



museums around the world proposing that they display all the objects owned by a deceased local citizen, after they had been sorted, inventoried, photographed and listed in a catalogue designed for publication. The many exhibitions and publications that resulted from this initiative are now commonly referred to under the generic name *Inventories*. For example, between 2014 and 2015, Modern Art Oxford presented a retrospective exhibition dedicated to Boltanski's proposal realised in that museum. See: <https://www.modernartoxford.org.uk/whats-on/inventory-objects-belonging-young-man-oxford-christian-boltanski>. Accessed on 13 March 2025. With regard to publications, see Christian Boltanski, *Inventaire des objets ayant appartenu à une femme de Bois-Colombes*, (Centre National d'Art Contemporain, 1974); and *Inventaire des objets appartenant à un habitant d'Oxford précédé d'un avant propos et suivi de quelques réponses à ma proposition* (Westfälischer Kunstverein, 1974).

5 MoMA. "Christian Boltanski's *The Storehouse*". Accessed on 13 March 2025. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80857>.

6 Tate Gallery. "Christian Boltanski's *The Reserve of Dead Swiss*". Accessed on 13 March 2025. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/boltanski-the-reserve-of-dead-swiss-t06605>.

7 According to a definition provided on the artist's official website, tableaux-piège are: "Objects found by chance in situations of disorder or order are fixed to their support in exactly the position in which they are found. The only thing that changes is their position in relation to the observer: the result is declared a painting, the horizontal becomes vertical. Example: the remains of a breakfast are attached to the table and, together with the table, hung on the wall." See the webpage at [https://www.danielspoerri.org/web\\_daniel/italienisch\\_ds/werk\\_einzel/05\\_fallenbild.htm](https://www.danielspoerri.org/web_daniel/italienisch_ds/werk_einzel/05_fallenbild.htm). Accessed on 13 March 2025.

8 See some examples in the artist's website at [https://www.danielspoerri.org/web\\_daniel/englisch\\_ds/werk\\_einzel/32\\_paletten.htm](https://www.danielspoerri.org/web_daniel/englisch_ds/werk_einzel/32_paletten.htm). Accessed on 13 March 2025.

9 Paola D'Alconzo was among the foremost thinkers to reflect on a possible museology based on Pamuk's novel. See "Suggerimenti letterarie per una nuova museologia: Orhan Pamuk e il Museo dell'innocenza", in *Storia dell'arte come impegno civile. Scritti in onore di Marisa Dalai Emiliani*, edited by Angela Cipriani, Valter Curzi, and Paola Picardi, (Campisano, 2014), 62-71. Ernst van Alphen (ed.), *Productive Archiving. Artistic Strategies, Future Memories, and Fluid Identities*, (Valiz, 2023), 10-29, questions the concepts of individuality and specificity of archival classifications from a different perspective than the one taken here.

10 This theme is widely addressed in Annalisa Laganà, *Lettere d'artista. Invenzione di un patrimonio nell'Italia del nation-building*, (FedOA Press, 2024), 43-152.

11 See at least Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*, (C.H. Beck, 1999), 347-407, Irene Cotta and Rosalia Manno Tolu. *Archivi e storia nell'Europa del XIX secolo: Alle radici dell'identità culturale europea*, (Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, 2006), Costanza Caraffa and Tiziana Serena (Eds.), *Photo Archives and the Idea of Nation*, (De Gruyter, 2015). From a completely different point of view, Simone Osthoff, *Performing the Archive: the Transformation of the Archive in Contemporary Art from Repository of Documents to Art Medium*, (Atropos, 2009), 11, interprets archival art as 'a dynamic and generative production tool' resulting from an 'ontological change' from the institutional archive, which is considered unproductive and dormant.

12 See, for example, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, (Verso: 2019).

13 Alessandra Donati and Filippo Tibertelli de Pisis, *L'archivio d'artista. Principi, regole e buone pratiche*, (Johan&Levi. 2022), 9-11.

14 Donati and Tibertelli de Pisis, *L'archivio d'artista*. About the conferences in London at the Tate Britain, see the proceeds by Judy Vaknin, Karyn Stuckey, and Victoria Lane (eds.), *All This Stuff. Archiving the Artist*, (Libri Publishing, 2013); Patrice Marcilloux, *Les Ego-archives: traces documentaires et recherche de soi*, (PU, 2013). See also Helen Adkins (ed.), *Künstler Archiv: Neue Werke zu historischen Beständen*, (Walther König, 2005).

- 15 Concetta Damiani, *Gli archivi dell'arte. Gestione e rappresentazione tra analogico e digitale*, (Editrice Bibliografica, 2023), 15.
- 16 See the program CLL – Creating a Living Legacy held by the Johan Mitchell Foundation of New York in collaboration with the Arts&Business Council of Greater Boston, the Art Legacy Planning and Artist Estate Studio services. See also Loretta Würtenberger, *The Artists' Estate. A Handbook for Artists Executor, and Heirs* (Hatje Canz, 2016).
- 17 See at least Lionello Venturi (ed.), *Les Archives de l'Impressionnisme: Lettres de Renoir, Monet, Pissarro, Sisley et autres: Mémoires de Paul Durand-Ruel: Documents*, (Durand-Ruel éditeurs, 1939); Elizabeth Gilmore Holt (ed.), *A Documentary History of Art*, (Garden City, 1957-1966); Susan C. Larsen (ed.), "The American Abstract Artists: A Documentary History (1936-1941)", *Archives of American Art journal*, no. 14 (1974): 2-6; Robert W. Berger (ed.), *Public Access to Art in Paris: A Documentary History from the Middle Ages to 1800*, (Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1999); Jack Flam (ed.), *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, (University of California Press, 2003); Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis (eds.), *The Emergence of Modern Architecture: A Documentary History from 1000 to 1810*, (Routledge, 2004); Charles Merewether (ed.), *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art*, (The MIT Press, 2006); Sarah Burns, and John Davis (ed.), *American Art to 1900: A Documentary History*, (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2009); Alexander Alberro, and Blake, Stimson (eds.), *Institutional Critique: An Anthology of Artists' Writings*, (The MIT Press, 2011); Francesco Paolo Campione (ed.), *Novecento primitivo: L'arte e lo sguardo sull'altro*, (Electa, 2019); Antonio S. Rio Vázquez (ed.), *Andrés Fernández-Albalat arquitecto: Materiales de archivo: Obra coruñesa (1959-1999)*, (Fundación Luis Seoane, 2021).
- 18 Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy*, (The MIT Press, 2008), 51-129; Anna Maria Guasch, *Arte y archivo (1920-2010): Genealogías, tipologías y discontinuidades*, (Akal, 2011); Gabriella Giannachi, *Archiving Everything. Mapping the Everyday*, (MIT Press, 2016), 123-152; Ingrid Schaffner, "Deep Storage: On the Art of Archiving", *Frieze*, no. 23 (1995): 58-61; Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse", *October*, no. 110 (2004): 3.
- 19 Cristina Baldacci, *Archivi impossibili. Un'ossessione dell'arte contemporanea*, (Johan & Levi, 2016) focused mainly on the topic of the atlas, especially 97-115.
- 20 Michel Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir*, (Gallimard, 1969).
- 21 MoMA. "Joseph Kosuth, One and Three Chairs, 1965". Accessed on 7 April 2025. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81435>.
- 22 Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'archive. Une impression freudienne*, (Galilée, 1995) and Jacques Derrida and Eric Prenowitz, "Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression", *Diacritics*, no. 2 (1995): 9-63. This famous essay by Derrida is a transcription of the lecture he gave on 5 June 1994 in London, at an international conference entitled *Memory: The Question of Archives*.
- 23 Derrida states: "The technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future". See Derrida and Prenowitz, "Archive Fever", 17.
- 24 Ingrid Schaffner, *Deep Storage: Collecting, Storing, and Archiving in Art*, (Prestel Verlag, 1998). Ingrid Schaffner, "Deep Storage", 58-61. MoMA. "Deep Storage". Accessed on 27 March 2025. <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/4631>. Other archival art exhibitions from those years are listed in Baldacci, *Archivi impossibili*, 32-33.
- 25 Foster, "An Archival Impulse", 3.
- 26 Ivi., 5.
- 27 On the relationship between archival art and the theorisation of curating and its development, see the interesting insights by Sara Callahan, "When the Dust Has Settled: What Was the Archival Turn, and Is It Still Turning?", *Art Journal*, no. 83 (2024): 80.
- 28 Foster, "An Archival Impulse", 6-11.
- 29 Here, 'World' is understood as 'Reality.' The capital letter is used to distinguish this

meaning from its more common geographical use.

30 Beatrice von Bismarck, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Hans Ulrich Obrist, (eds.), *Interarchive: Archivarische Praktiken und Handlungsräume im zeitgenössischen Kunstfeld*, (König, 2002); Sylvie Mokhtari (ed.), *Les Artistes contemporains et l'archive: Contemporary Artists and Archives - Interrogation sur le sens du temps et de la mémoire à l'ère de la numérisation: On the Meaning of Time and Memory in the Digital Age*, (PU Rennes, 2004); Foster, "An Archival Impulse"; Spieker, *The Big Archive*; Osthoff, *Performing the Archive*; Vaknin, Stuckey, and Lane, *All This Stuff*, Stefanie Schulte Strathaus, and Ulrich Ziemons, (eds.), *Living Archive: Archivarbeit als künstlerische und kuratorische Praxis der Gegenwart*, (B-Books, 2013); Ernst van Alphen, *Staging the Archive. Art and Photography in the Age of New Media*, (Reaktion Books, 2014); Hal Foster, "Archival", *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*, (Verso, 2015), 30-60; Baldacci, *Archivi impossibili*; Paul Clarke, Simon Jones, Nick Kaye, Johanna Linsley, (eds.), *Artists in the Archive: Creative and Curatorial Engagements with Documents of Art and Performance*, (Routledge, 2018); Sara Callahan, *Art + Archive. Understanding the Archival Turn in Contemporary Art*, (Manchester University Press, 2022); Van Alphen, *Productive Archiving*, to name but a handful.

31 Some of these issues are addressed, for example, in Van Alphen, *Productive Archiving*, and in other writings by the same author, published in Anthony Downey, (ed.), *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, (I. B. Tauris, 2015); Marco Scotini, *L'archiviabile: L'archivio contro la storia*, (Meltemi, 2022).

32 A crucial study for interpreting the meaning of archives in contemporary art criticism and practice is Sara Callahan's *Art + Archive*, to which this introduction and, more generally, this editorial project serve as a complement or counterpart. While Callahan successfully analyses the reasons why very disparate artistic practices have been defined as archival in recent years, this essay attempts to identify which of these maintain the epistemological approach that is typical of the archive as a place of invention of history.

33 For more details on the difference between productive and unproductive archiving, please refer to Van Alphen, *Staging the Archive*, 265-266 and Van Alphen, *Productive Archiving*, 10-29.

34 See at least Van Alphen, *Productive Archiving*; Callahan, *Art + Archive*; David Houston Jones, *Installation Art and the Practices of Archivalism*, (Routledge, 2016); Osthoff, *Performing the Archive*; Van Alphen, *Staging the Archive*; Baldacci, *Archivi impossibili*; Markus Knut Ebeling, Stephan Günzel, and Aleida Assmann, (eds.), *Archivologie: Theorien des Archivs in Wissenschaft, Medien und Künsten*, (Kadmos, 2009); Okwui Enwezor (ed.), *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, (Steidl/ICP, 2008); Jane Connarty and Josephine Lanyon (eds.), *Ghosting: The Role of the Archive Within Contemporary Artists' Film and Video*, (Picture This Moving Image, 2006); Mokhtari, *Les Artistes contemporains et l'archive*.

35 For a synopsis of the historiography of archival art, see Callahan, *Art + Archive*, 19-55.

36 Documenta. "documenta 11, Platform 5". Accessed on 11 April 2025. <https://www.documenta.de/en/retrospective/documenta11>. Musée Océanographique de Monaco. "Oceanomania by Mark Dion". <https://musee.oceano.org/en/museum-areas/oceanomania/>. MoMA. "Zoe Leonard: Analogue". Accessed on 11 April 2025. <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1477>.

37 Van Alphen, *Staging the Archive*, 7.

38 The upper case here emphasises the nuances that distinguish the three terms of "History", "Stories" and "Memory": all three represent the results of artistic or scientific work carried out in the archive, but can only be achieved by adopting different approaches to the sources and based on a differentiated selection of the sources themselves.

39 Van Alphen, *Staging the Archive*, 21-33. Many studies have been carried out on the documentary function of photography; among these, see at least Monica Bassanello, Ilaria

Turetta, and Simone Guerriero, (eds.), *Per un archivio fotografico dell'arte italiana: Vittorio Cini, la Fondazione Giorgio Cini e la Fratelli Alinari*, (Marsilio, 2022); Caraffa and Serena, *Photo Archives and the Idea of Nation*; Barbara Cinelli, and Antonello Frongia, (eds.), *Archivi fotografici e arte contemporanea in Italia: Indagare, interpretare, inventare*, (Scalpendi, 2019); Costanza Caraffa, (ed.), *Photographic Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History*, (Deutscher Kunstverlag GmbH, 2011); and in a broader way Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive", *October*, no. 39 (1986): 3-64.

**40** The book by Massimo Maiorino, Maria Giovanna Mancini, Francesca Zanella (eds.), *Archivi esposti. Teorie e pratiche dell'arte contemporanea*, (Quodlibet, 2022) is a significant addition to the historiography of the exhibition of archives and archival works.