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ARTICLE

ARCHIVE, RECORD AND POWER

THE ARCHIVE AS A PRODUCTIVE SPACE OF CONFLICT

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Abstract

The archive has long been a recurring theme in contemporary art, yet it was not until the early 21st century that a prominent shift towards considering artworks “as archives” emerged. The archive, both as an institution and a metaphor, has assumed a central role not only in cultural discourse but also in creative practices, intersecting with significant social events. Digitisation has further expanded storage possibilities, facilitating unprecedented information mobility across various cultural and social spheres. More recently, curators of global biennials have also considered the archive as a productive space of conflict, creating an open framework in which the archive enables the creation of new relationships. This illustrates how spaces of knowledge can be devised, developed, and designed. Hence, this new concept of “the productive archive” is crucial, revealing itself as a space where documents and testimonies serve as a platform for productive dispute and struggle.

Keywords: Archive, Conflict, Anarchiving, Document, Datafication, Collective Memory

Archival organisation serves as a fundamental symbolic framework through which we structure our lives and comprehend the past, present, and future. Van Alphen, in his text “Productive Archiving,”¹ delves into various challenges of archival organisation, particularly three issues often overlooked: the question of inclusion or exclusion, the loss of individuality, and loss of specificity. Van Alphen argues that the value of artistic archives lies in their assumption that archival organisation is a basic symbolic mode through which we organise our lives, past, present, and future. Artistic archives offer speculative and unexpected ways of ordering, selecting, and narrating specific information, while also enabling new archival connections and arrangements.

The concept of the archive is not a new theme in contemporary art. However, it was not until the early 21st century that a significant shift towards viewing the works of art “as archives” emerged. The archive, both as an institution and a metaphor, has become central not only to cultural discourse but also to creative practices, intersecting with significant social events. Digitisation has further expanded storage possibilities, introducing a level of information mobility previously unknown in various cultural and social spheres.

The “archival turn,” as highlighted by researcher Cheryl Simon during the Symposium “Following the Archival Turn: Photography, the Museum and the Archive”² held in Chicago, is defined as a phenomenon that encompasses both artistic production and curatorial activity, and includes photographs and artefacts of historical as well as present-day significance. Drawing from the ideas of Walter Benjamin and Michel Foucault regarding the notion of the archive, Simon interprets the archival turn as a discursive element—a space of cultural power and social transformation that marks the linguistic orientation of postmodernity and links the archival turn to museum criticism.

In this context, in which different events, exhibitions, symposia and publications³ reinforce the need for new interdisciplinary projects on the cultural and historical significance of the archive, Hal Foster’s contribution in the text “An Archival Impulse”⁴ is noteworthy. Foster introduces the concept of the “archival impulse,” which encapsulates the current moment with a strong theoretical foundation. He emphasizes the significance of the archive as a key concept in contemporary art discourse. According to Foster, artists engaged with the archive work with found images, objects, and texts, often favouring the installation format, as seen in the work of Douglas Gordon. Others pose postmodern questions about originality and authorship, as exemplified by the collaborative project of Pierre Huyghe and Phillipe Parreno (*No Ghost*). Another group alludes to platforms and stations, delving into the rhetoric of internet interactivity, as evidenced by Thomas Hirschhorn’s work. Foster suggests that one could speak of an architecture of the archive, as seen in Hirschhorn’s kiosks, which evoke branching processes, alluding to Deleuzian rhizome theory. Hirschhorn indeed vindicates the laboratory, warehouse, and studio space as venues for creating environments conducive to movement and boundless thought.⁵

In all these cases, archives serve not merely as receptacles for finished works but as platforms for ongoing projects. That is why they should be regarded as sites of preliminary production, places that can function as works in progress, repositories of failed visions of the past, settings for alternative social relations, or arenas for exploring alternative futures. This perspective aligns with Foster's notion of the shift from the non-place of the archive to the non-place of utopian possibilities. In essence, practitioners in archival art are often drawn to unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects that may offer new starting points.⁶

Furthermore, as noted in the text "How the Art World Caught Archive Fever,"⁷ archival art appeals to the idea of the institution or museum as storehouse - a treasure trove of archives by definition - but, in addition, many museum curators have played significant roles in shaping the discourse surrounding the uses of the archive in the work of contemporary artists. Okwui Enwezor, in the spirit of showing how archival documents, information, collection, and data-driven visual analysis can generate counter-archives and counter-narratives beyond master narratives, conceived the exhibition "Archive Fever. Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art" (2008).⁸ The exhibition served as a platform for bringing together various modes of artistic production, linking photography and film documents conceived as critical tools within the seemingly neutral framework of the archival system.

Far from the conventional perception of the archive as a dim, musty place filled of drawers and historical artefacts, Enwezor argues that the archive is an active discursive system. Therefore, archival works—whether photographic, filmic, or object-based (Christian Boltanski, Tacita Dean, Stan Douglas, Harun Farocki, Hans-Peter Feldmann, Jef Geys, Félix González Torres, Craigie Horsfield, Zoe Leonard, Sherrie Levine, Glen Ligon, Robert Morris, Walid Raad, Thomas Ruff, Anri Sala, Fazal Sheikh, Lorna Simpson, Eyal Sivan or Vivan Sundaram)—become synonyms for concepts like identity, memory, and history. They bridge the gap between past and present, virtual and real, endowing the photographic document with the aura of an anthropological artefact and the authority of a social instrument. The archive thus becomes a place where the connection between past and present resides in an ambiguous zone between action and image, document and monument.

More recently, curators of global biennials have also underscored the importance of historical archives in their exhibitions. The paradigm of the archive served Massimiliano Gioni in the exhibition "10,000 LIVES. The 8th Gwangju Biennale" (South Korea, 2010)⁹ to highlight the myriad intersections of archiving and practices addressing associative thinking and various forms of collections and taxonomies. The Gwangju Biennale included paradigmatic works within the archive, such as Dieter Roth's installation "Solo Szenen" (1997-1998), with 131 monitors stacked in a grid presenting the German artist's simultaneous and continuous footage in the last year of his life; Fischli & Weiss's installation "Visible World" (2000), which transforms the banality of three thousand snapshots into a kind of encyclopaedia view of a globalised gaze; Hans-Peter Feldmann's "9/12 Frontpage" (2001); and Mark Leckey's "Cinema-in-the-Round" (2006-2008), a meditation on the

transmission of images in the tradition of Aby Warburg.

Other global Biennials have also given prominence to the archive, as seen in the *17th Istanbul Biennial – Afterthoughts*, that in one of the eight sections in which the exhibition was structured, the one titled *Anarchiving* raised the question:

Can knowledge of the past be propagated without being institutionalised? Conventions of archiving tend to centralise intellectual resources, and make them fixed and authoritative. Another kind of archiving can generate open repositories that grow organically and unpredictably. In these initiatives, histories are activated, revised or contested through strategies of dispersal, play, translation, migration, fermentation and disintegration.¹⁰

Anarchiving was proposed as an alternative approach that, according to its curators, aimed to create open repositories that evolve organically and unpredictably, contrasting with conventions of the archive that tend to centralise intellectual resources, rendering them fixed and authoritarian. This perspective challenges established histories and narratives, aligning with strategies of dispersion, play, translation, migration, fermentation, and disintegration. This section featured works by Merve Elveren and Çagla Özbek, including “InTime /On Ground” (2022), an archive-installation with documents created by women from the Women’s Library and Information Centre in Turkey, and Marco Scotini’s “Disobedience Archive” [*Ders Bitti*], a project initiated in 2005 in collaboration with Can Altay, which will be further examined in this paper.

Markus Miessen and Yann Chateigné, in their text “The Archive as a Productive Space of Conflict,” inquire about the processes that enable archives to become productive. Conventional archives typically define themselves through the accumulation of specific material that conforms to existing orders or narratives, rarely altering their structure. In contrast, the “conflict archive” operates within an open framework, actively transforming and fostering new and unexpected relationships, demonstrating how knowledge spaces can be conceptualised, developed, and designed. This underscores the significance of this new concept—“the productive archive”—, where documents and testimonies open up a stage for productive dispute and struggle. It allows for an understanding of archival practice from feminist, queer, postcolonial, and decolonial perspectives, emphasizing affective responsibilities in archival practice, the materiality of digital archives, ethical challenges of archiving sensitive material, advocacy for and with marginalised and vulnerable communities, and the relevance of archives for human rights and social justice.¹¹

Similarly, in Susan Pell’s essay “Radicalizing the Politics of the Archive,”¹² she explores the social construction of archival power through research on community archives, particularly activist archives. Pell distinguishes between “autonomous archives” and “radical archives,” highlighting how artists are increasingly appropriating archival material not only to visualise the relationship

between art and research but also to examine the connections between archiving, knowledge production, and political practices. The politics of the archive focus on its relationship to information and the production of knowledge. The critical work that emerges from the archive and cultural studies ensures criteria of credibility, authority, and truth. “Activist archives”, such as the 56th Infoshop Archive and the Southwark Notes Archive Group, both in London, advocate for the inclusion of marginalised groups, expanding access to documents, and disseminating information more broadly and innovatively.¹³

In the text “Uncertain Archives. Critical Keywords for Big Data,” uncertainty is regarded as intrinsic to archival practices. The archive, as a site of knowledge, is fraught with unknowns, errors, and vulnerabilities, which persist in big data archives and are exacerbated by their vast scale. We argue that the inherent uncertainty of archives is reinforced by the rise of ‘datafication’, which aligns with neoliberal systems of global governance, authoritarian regimes, and the widespread dispossession resulting from wars and climate change. In this global context, uncertainty serves as a disruptive force complicit with power, rather than opposing it. Furthermore, archival practice could benefit from perspectives derived from feminist, queer, postcolonial, and decolonial studies (though these issues will not be addressed in this text). Such perspectives would highlight affective responsibilities in archival practice, the ethical challenges associated with archiving sensitive material, the imperative to advocate for and with marginalised and vulnerable communities, and the significance of archives in promoting human rights and social justice.¹⁴

FROM THEORY TO ARTISTIC PRACTICE

This theoretical framework serves as the foundation for this article, operating under the premise that archives have historically been and remain contentious sites imbued with power, knowledge, risk, and potential. The archive functions as a “social instrument” for collective memory, with its central characteristic being the “ideology of the trace” (akin to Foucault’s concept of the utterance)—the imprint left somewhere within the social fabric. Similar questions have been raised in other contexts, such as the exhibition project “The Whole Life: Archives and Reality” (Dresden, 2019), as reflected in its catalogue:

In archives, historical and contemporary realities condense and overlap. It is here that ideological and material realities from different eras meet and that archived knowledge profoundly shapes the present. *The Whole Life: Archives and Reality* asks what roles the archive and its objects play in the major transformations of the present, and what this means in turn for the structure of the archive, its users, its technologies, and its forms of knowledge production. What can archives give to contemporary society?¹⁵

MUNTADAS: *On Translation and The File Room*

Numerous artists employ speculative strategies to challenge and surpass the logics of the archive, through a variety of speculative approaches to rewrite obscured histories and narratives. Examples include works by Antoni Muntadas (“On Translation”, 1997-), Pedro G. Romero (“Archivo F.X”, 1999-), Daniel G. Andújar (“Postcapital Archive”, 1989-2001), Francesc Abad (“Camp de la Bota”, 2004, “Bloc W.B”, 2006), Walid Raad (“The Atlas Group”, 1989-2004), Alfredo Jaar (“Marx Lounge”, 2010 and “One Million German Passports”, 2023), Steve McQueen (“End Credits”, 2012-2022), Akram Zaatari (“Time Capsule Kassel”, 2012), Stefanos Tsivopoulos (“Precarious Archive”, 2015), Tania El Khoury (“The Search of Power”, 2018) or Marco Scotini, (“Disobedience Archive” [*Ders Bitti*], 2005-).

In the case of “The File Room” by Antoni Muntadas (1994), the work unfolds across both the physical dimension of the archive (symbolised by the black boxes—containers reminiscent of Kafkaesque imagery, each illuminated by a single light bulb) and its metaphorical resonance (exploring the archive’s significance and its connection to censorship). “The File Room” activates the interplay between archive and censorship within the virtual, interactive, and multimedia realm of the web. The installation debuted in 1994 at the Chicago Municipal Exhibition Center, known as Chicago Cultural Centre. Positioned on the centre’s first floor, Muntadas constructed an enclosed structure (an ‘environment’) with 138 black metal files, housing 552 archive cabinets and seven Macintosh computers equipped with Mosaic, a hypertext software that connects video, audio, and textual information linked to a central data memory-archive. Each terminal provided access to various censorship cases (400 on the opening day) categorised by geographical origin (country), historical period (spanning 1500 years from Socrates’ trial when he was found guilty of corruption in 399 BC, to 1994), type of censorship (religious, ideological, etc.), and expressive media (music, painting, sculpture, film, etc.). A computer placed in the centre of the room allowed visitors to input their own censorship cases into the main memory. This setup leveraged the incipient interactivity of the Internet as a medium for voice and memory, contrasting with repressive censorship and prompting reflections on the private versus the public and the individual versus the collective.

Originally, the installation served two essential purposes: firstly, as a metaphor and visual device to perceptually introduce the project’s true subject—cultural censorship shaped by political, social, historical, technological, and even geographical contexts; and secondly, as a means of accessing the Internet, which was not widely available in the early 1990s. Access to the Internet then differed from the present-day scenario, where widespread connectivity is facilitated by institutions, city councils, universities, and individuals. The development of the Internet and the incessant accessibility to it has played an important role in this. In retrospect, these two roles have grown distant, remote. But the project’s political, social, and cultural intentions remain relevant, especially in the post-9/11 era marked by heightened fear, paranoia, and political manipulation of individual freedoms.¹⁶

Similar to other social sculptures, “The File Room,” situated metaphorically within an archetypal space reminiscent of Kafka’s claustrophobic settings, transports the viewer into a fourth dimension—the space and time of the Internet. This dimension alludes to the function of the past and the use of the present, anchoring “The File Room” in an uncertain temporal realm and an unresolved conceptual landscape, questioning who wields power, what their objectives are, and whom they protect.¹⁷

STEFANOS TSIVOPOULOS: *The Precarious Archive*

The “Precarious Archive” (2016) is an ongoing project by Stefanos Tsivopoulos, centred on a collection of 99 written documents and images sourced from ten years of research across various public and private archival institutions, press offices, and newspapers in Greece. Spanning a 40-year period from 1963 to 2002, the visual material captures significant events during the Cold War in Greece, including episodes such as the Truman Doctrine, the Greek Military Dictatorship, and the Marxist guerrilla war known as 17 November, among others. This collection is presented in three languages: Greek, German, and English.

Essentially, Tsivopoulos’ work delves into the past, drawing from collective and individual memory and engaging with discourse in the public domain. His methods have much in common with those of the historian, involving exhaustive archival research to uncover material traces of the past, unearth visual resources, written and oral testimonies, and employ an interdisciplinary comparative approach to investigate the subject matter. “The Precarious Archive” comprises two main components: a) the archive as a physical and conceptual presentation, and b) the performer as a continuous action that activates and interacts with the archive and the audience. Documents are arranged on a circular table alongside an overhead projector, with performers exclusively responsible for activating them. Constantly in motion, these performers change images and engage with both the archive and the audience: a way of using live art as a means of keeping history alive.

MARCO SCOTINI: *Disobedience Archive*

We also find Marco Scotini’s work presented at the Istanbul Biennial of 2022¹⁸ particularly relevant, namely the “Disobedience Archive” (2005-ongoing), featured within the *Anarchiving* section. Conceived as an amalgamation of anarchy and archive, *Anarchiving* represents a concept fostering open repositories that evolve organically and unpredictably, as opposed to the conventions of the archive, which often centralise intellectual resources and make them fixed and authoritarian.¹⁹ The installation displays audiovisual documents in various formats, arranged chaotically on tables and supports reminiscent of mobile blackboards. Devoid of descriptive texts, dates, or titles, the videos are interconnected as a multiple “international disobedience” that has many faces, languages, and contexts. As Marco Scotini contends:

Disobedience Archive is not an archaeological project, but rather an attempt to evaluate the dangerous drift of the current exhibition trend and to investigate possible subtractions from this regime.²⁰

This work prompts Scotini to formulate his concept of the “inarchivable” [unarchivable], which encompasses not only that exists outside the archive of the past because it is deemed unarchivable—a remnant, an unintegrated refusal—but also that which necessitates restoration to the realm of collective memory: eliminated exhibitions, disobedient bodies, banned books, repressive roles, and marginal cartographies existing on the border between the document and archive. The unarchivable could then coincide with the privileged terrain of this research, in which I try to give back to the past its possibility. In the mobile and indivisible terrain that separates the archivable from the unarchivable, our contemporary (ethico-political) game with temporality is played: of time against time and in favour of a time to come.²¹ Indeed, the “Disobedience Archive,” functioning as an itinerant and expanding video library devoid of a defined form, operates within an exhibition format akin to that of an archive. Here, all materials coexist on an equal plane, organised horizontally without hierarchy or adherence to institutional norms. Rather than presenting itself as a collection displayed in a specific location, it assumes the form of a counter-device or a toolbox adaptable to any setting. As Scotini asserts:

Disobedience Archive conveys a possible form of political action of the multitude, understood as a political subject as Paolo Virno understands it. A form without form, since this archival multiplicity can embody infinite forms and multiple possibilities. This idea of the archive will never be a repository of documents, because there is a quite different political agency. It functions as a critical device that explores, preserves and promotes the relations behind cultural production, social movements and political actions.²²

CONCLUSION

We might conclude by connecting the practices discussed above to the overarching concept of “counter-narrative,” viewing them as a series of research strategies employing experimental formats that illuminate the multifaceted links between archives and the social. In this context, Arjun Appadurai’s theories regarding the archive become relevant:

Foucault destroyed the innocence of the archive and forced us to ask about the designs through which all traces are produced. (...) Thus, after Foucault, we need a new way to look at the archive as a collective tool.²³

Appadurai further elaborates on Foucault’s insights, emphasizing:

Rather than being the tomb of the trace, the archive is more frequently the product of the anticipation of collective memory. [...] Archives [are] viewed as active and interactive tools for the construction of sustainable identities.²⁴

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- 1 Ernst Van Alphen, ed, *Productive Archiving: Artistic Strategies, Future Memoires, and Fluid Identities* (Amsterdam: Valiz: 2023).
 - 2 Cheryl Simon, "Introduction: Following the Archival Turn," *Visual Resources* 18, (2002):101-107.
 - 3 We are referring to the exhibition "Telling Histoires" (Munich: Kunstverein, 2003), as well as the symposia "What Does an Archive Do?" (Stockholm, Tensta Konsthall, 2016) and "Unleashing the Archive" (University of London, School of Advanced Study and the National Archives, 2004).
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- 9 The 8th Gwangju Biennale, titled "10,000 LIVES" (Massimiliano Gioni, ed.) draws its name from an epic by the Korean writer Ko Un. During his two-year imprisonment for his involvement in the Gwangju democratic uprising in 1980, Ko Un embarked on a thirty-year project to remember and depict all the people he encountered. Accessed May 15, 2023, <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201101/the-8th-gwangju-biennale-27057>
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- 14 Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, Daniela Agostinho, Annie Ring, Catherine D'Ignazio, Kristin Veel, *Uncertain Archives. Critical keywords for Big Data* (Boston: The MIT Press, 2021), 12.
- 15 "The Whole Life. Archives and Reality" (Dresden: Kunsthalle im Lipsiisbau, 2019), 5. In 2016, Egidio Marzona's private collection was donated to the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden (SKD). This transformation of a private collection into a public archive, known as the Archiv der Avantgarden (AdA), marks the beginning of "The Whole Life: Archives and Reality." This transition prompts several new questions: What are the implications of this process? How do archival practices and policies shape collections? What role do archives play as sites for counter-narratives and alternative knowledge production?
- 16 Muntadas' statements are included on the project website. Since its initial installation in 1994, "The File Room" remains active and is managed by the University of Illinois, Media Channel, and the National Coalition Against Censorship, a centre that addresses the rights of citizens and artists in their interactions with censorship. Accessed December 4, 2023, <http://fileroom.aaup.uic.edu/documents/homepage.html>.
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- 21 Scotini, *L'inarchiviabile*, 27.
- 22 Ibid, 184.
- 23 Arjun Appadurai, "Archive as Aspiration," in *Information is Alive*, edited by Brouwer, Joke., Mulder, Arjen, Susan Charlton (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2003), 16.
- 24 Appadurai, 16, 25.