

# ARCHIVO PAPERS

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## ARCHIVE AND CONFLICT

Anna María Guasch, Ana Catarina Pinho,  
Arola Valls Bonfill, Pablo Santa Olalla (Eds.)

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ARCHIVE AND CONFLICT

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*Majnoon Island, Iraq - Mehdi Bakeri / 14 February 1985.*

From the series *By an Eye-Witness*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.

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## INTRODUCTION

# ARCHIVE AND CONFLICT

## ARTISTIC STRATEGIES COUNTER-ACTING REPRESSIVE HISTORIES

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The relationship between archives and conflict is deeply intertwined, as archives serve both as repositories of historical documentation and as battlegrounds for competing narratives. Scholars such as Michel Foucault have emphasised that archives are not neutral spaces but are imbued with power dynamics that influence which histories are preserved and which are marginalised.<sup>1</sup> Archival materials related to conflict, whether they be photographs, documents, or testimonies, play a crucial role in shaping collective memories and historical discourses. They provide evidence of atrocities, support claims for justice, and offer insights into the lived experiences of those affected by conflict. However, as Derrida points out, the process of archiving itself can be an act of control, determining what is remembered and what is forgotten.<sup>2</sup> This tension is evident in the examination of post-conflict societies, where archives become sites of remembrance as much as sites of contestation. For instance, photographs from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (1948-), preserved in repositories like the Israel State Archives and the Palestinian Museum Digital Archive, document the historical and ongoing impacts of the conflict, serving as tools for asserting narratives and rights.<sup>3</sup> Thus, archives are not merely passive repositories of knowledge but active players in the ongoing struggle over historical accountability and collective memories.

The current volume of *Archivo Papers* is the result of over a year of collaboration between Archivo Platform and the Global Art Archive research

network (GAA, Universitat de Barcelona). This partnership commenced in March 2023 with the seminar 'Archive and Conflict. Archives and the Techno-Aesthetics of Datafication,'<sup>4</sup> which laid the groundwork for the thematic focus of this volume. As the title of the seminar suggests, the relationship between archives, conflicts and digital technologies was emphasised from the outset. Within this triangulation, the relationship between archives and conflict situations has occupied a specific critical position, often serving as a *basso continuo* against which contemporary discussions on documentary bodies in conflict situations must necessarily be positioned. In this volume, the editors aim to highlight the evolving nature of archives and the critical role of photography and other lens-based media in shaping our understanding of historical and cultural legacies related to conflict. By investigating the convergence of documentary sources in both analogical and digital archival contexts, and the ways in which they express imaginaries, representations, and memories, this volume seeks to elucidate the complex mechanisms that influence our perceptions of the past, the present and thus the possibility of realising more equitable futures. Through diverse case studies within visual culture, archival materials are interrogated and critically appropriated, demonstrating the significant contribution of the visual arts in challenging and contesting historical narratives

## IMAGES BETWEEN CONFLICTIVE HISTORIES, REPRESENTATION, AND MEMORY

In an era dominated by visual culture, the role of photography in documenting and interpreting history is profoundly complex. The contributions in this volume delve into the intricate processes of production, selection, and accumulation of documents that collectively shape our perception of archives and the historical narratives they support. By scrutinising the ambivalence of photographic images and their representational limits, the editors seek to challenge the traditionally perceived factual and objective nature of archival materials, understanding how photography, as both an art form and a documentary medium, plays a pivotal role in shaping historical consciousness. Lens-based media offer more than mere visual records; they embody the cultural, social, and political contexts in which they were created. However, the interpretation of these images often depends on the frameworks and biases brought to archival creation and its examination. This duality raises essential questions about the relationship between images and their historical and memorial representations, encompassing various dimensions such as documentary, fictional, material, digital, etc. These aspects are addressed throughout this volume via scholarly articles, visual essays, and artist portfolios.

One landmark event that encapsulates the critical reflection on historical legacies of conflict and cultural representation is Documenta11 (2002), directed by Okwui Enwezor at the turn of the century. This iteration of Documenta was transformative, marking a significant moment for the critical examination of

imperial and capitalist power dynamics. Enwezor questioned how it was possible to make sense of the changes and transformations that evoked the spectres of turbulent times<sup>5</sup> and his vision extended beyond conventional curatorial practices, emphasizing transdisciplinary action within the “contemporary global public sphere.”<sup>6</sup> Documenta11’s innovative format, featuring five Platforms spread across four continents, redefined the boundaries of exhibition spaces, transforming them into interdisciplinary research and discussion forums. This approach challenged the traditional structure of art exhibitions and provided a broader context for understanding global conflicts and cultural exchanges. Enwezor’s curatorial strategy, which replaced the single curator hierarchy with a collaborative model involving five guest curators, underscored the importance of diverse perspectives in interpreting historical events. The inclusion of previously underrepresented artists and the focus on postcolonial and global themes fostered a deeper engagement with the complexities of historical memory and cultural identity. Documenta11 thus served as a crucial forum for questioning established narratives and exploring new modes of knowledge production.<sup>7</sup>

In 2008, Enwezor furthered his exploration of archival representation with the acclaimed exhibition “Archive Fever” at the International Center of Photography in New York. Drawing inspiration from Jacques Derrida’s *Mal d’Archive* (*Archive Fever*, 1995), Enwezor examined the ideological implications of photographic dispersal through mass media and its role in shaping public perception. By juxtaposing works of established artists who engage with archival forms, Enwezor highlighted the transformative potential of archival materials in reflecting on the present,<sup>8</sup> noting that

Archival returns are often conjoined with the struggle against amnesia and anomie. A heightened sense of urgency surrounds the demand to remember and commemorate in societies where social codes of communication have been unstable or preempted by state repression.”<sup>9</sup>

Enwezor’s approach emphasised the importance of conceptual strategies that repurpose archival materials into profound reflections on the historical condition, thereby challenging traditional documentary modes.<sup>10</sup> Expanding on these themes, Simone Osthoff’s book *Performing the Archive* (2009) invites us to view the archive as a dynamic and generative production tool.<sup>11</sup> Osthoff’s hypothesis challenges the conventional notion of history as a linear discourse based on chronology and documentation. Instead, she proposes a generative archive, one that is continuously transformed through artistic performative gestures. This perspective aligns with contemporary art practices that frequently incorporate multiple recursions of fiction and non-fiction, destabilising established historical narratives and integrating theory and history into the creative process.<sup>12</sup>

## FICTIONAL INTERVENTIONS AND PERFORMED ARCHIVES

The extensive body of artwork produced since the 1990s, situated at the intersection of contemporary artistic practices and photographic archives within the framework of the historiographical turn, can be understood through two discursive lines. Firstly, through the notion of history proposed by Walter Benjamin in his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1939-40), which conceives the past as an active time that challenges us, as subjects of the present, to be held accountable for it. Secondly, through the revision of the notion of the photographic archive, conceived since postmodernity not as a repository of ultimate truths but as a space whose images can be re-read and re-signified. This perspective, accompanied by a conception of the photographic image that questions the 19th-century paradigm of its objectivity and transparency, emphasizes the conditions of production, dissemination, and consumption of photography. From its role as mere illustration of a singular History to its axial function as the articulator of multiple histories (consciously and radically plural), photography is instituted as a foundational tool in the relationship that these artistic practices establish with the past.

Archival artistic practices, converging within this theoretical framework, offer a diverse array of possibilities, including strategies at odds with the 19th-century concepts of archive and photography, such as fiction and reenactment. In this context, and echoing Wolfgang Ernst's assertion that traditional archives "are not dynamic by themselves, but keep the memory of a departed dynamics intact by spatializing (topologically) the temporal sequence that led to the records,"<sup>13</sup> contemporary art activates them, challenging their role as static repositories bound to the principle of provenance.

The artistic proposals under discussion intentionally blur the boundaries between historiography and fabulation, not to assert that all historical narratives are inherently literary or fictional due to their linguistic construction, but to advocate for the historical legitimacy of a narrative grounded in visual expression. They recognize, consistent with Enzo Traverso's observation, that archives, despite serving as primary sources for historians, can themselves be deceptive, as they never provide an immediate or completely unbiased reflection of reality.<sup>14</sup> However, rather than simply acknowledging this potential for deception, these artworks engage in speculative exploration of the past, tracing a reverse trajectory. They do not merely accept the archive as a repository of falsehoods, they transform falsehoods into archival material, thus challenging conventional understandings of historical truth.

Therefore, they take a stance that emphasizes the distinction highlighted by Enzo Traverso between the historical narrative, involving the construction of history through narrative, and historical fiction—essentially, the literary imagining of the past.<sup>15</sup> This fiction, now articulated through photographic images, exploits the credibility conferred by such representations, engaging with the notion of mimesis as described by philosopher Paul Ricoeur. Here, the inventive imitation capable of conjuring the "as-if" blurs the boundaries between fictional and historical narratives.<sup>16</sup>



The intertwining of fabulation with authentic accounts reaches a point where they become indistinguishable, enriching historical narratives through the transformative potential of imagination. The fusion of fiction with contemporary art, photography, and archival material leads us to acknowledge that all recounted history, as Reinhart Koselleck suggests, ultimately traverses the realm where fantasy becomes necessary for generating even a minimum of meaning and coherence.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to fictionalization, we come across alternative artistic approaches that embrace a reenactment methodology. Here, the emphasis is not on crafting a narrative but on addressing the omissions and gaps within history through a performative strategy. By relying on the body and staging, they shed light on stories that have been silenced or underrepresented, thereby granting them visibility. Aligned with Jacques Rancière, who states that “the real must be fictionalized in order to be thought,”<sup>18</sup> these artworks do not question the inherent fictional aspect of reenactment. Instead, they conceive staging as a path equally valid to narratives formulated from historical sources. In this regard, we can interpret this performative strategy from what Rebecca Schneider defines as the condition of reappearance: “When we approach performance not as that which disappears (as the archive expects), but as both the *act* of remaining and a means of reappearance [...] we almost immediately are forced to admit that remains do not have to be isolated to the document, to the object, to bone versus flesh.”<sup>19</sup>

Consequently, reenactment underscores the significance of the process itself and, through a ritual order repetition, rethinks the place of particular events within historical narratives, now generating a history embodied in bodies. Likewise, when these artworks extend reenactment into the realm of photography, the resultant recreations are captured in images that may subsequently be established as historical knowledge, akin to some of the earliest war photographs of the 19th century, as highlighted by Susan Sontag. Despite their staged nature, these images later attained status as historical evidence. While reenactment’s capacity to bring memory into the realm of knowledge predominantly centers on personal experiences, it also leads to the question posed by Marianne Hirsch: “Can we remember other people’s memories?”<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the intertwining of fiction and performance as artistic practices with photography and archival methods can prompt a reimagining, echoing Jacques Rancière, of the distribution of the sensible, involving the imagination and embodied experiences within the sphere of our shared reality.

## THE TECHNO-AESTHETICS OF DATAFICATION AS A BACKDROP

Today, the digital turn is of paramount importance in all areas of society and culture. Even if the use of computer media and their datafication procedures are not always at the centre of the topics and cases dealt with in this volume of *Archivo Papers*, the link between culture and digital technologies is an inescapable background, surfacing where it needs to resonate more strongly. We are compelled to question

the current state of historical documentary bodies, even in cases that seem far removed from issues of data technology. Our access to archives and the tools we use to analyse their content are not immune to contemporary information flows. Thus, we cannot ignore the challenges of media archaeology and remediation, nor the urgent issues of recognizing gender, sexual, racial or colonial biases.<sup>21</sup>

Accumulation, selection and preservation of data are processes within a liquid territory, with constant fluxes of information taking place in real-time. Digital technologies have extended the boundaries of archives, collections and repositories. This new technological framework urges us to recognise errors, limits and exclusions, to identify what remains hidden or has gained excessive centrality in the processes of information capture, classification, ownership, property, and access. For example, in the age of the Internet, the constant flow of data through undersea cables provides us with a global network in which extractivist and warmongering apparatuses take shape. We are in a moment of renewed Cold War,<sup>22</sup> where conflicts manifest not only in direct warfare but also in disputes over the control of software and hardware. Alongside the use of missiles and weapons, data storage and processing technologies will determine the geopolitical balance of the 21st century.

The interconnected planetary network also broadens the conflictuality of the digitised archival machinery into new dimensions that we cannot fail to notice. One such dimension is the (im)materiality of the system that enables contemporary datafication. At first glance, the digital sphere leads us towards *dematerialisation*, as everyday language suggests – we connect wirelessly, we work with files in the cloud, and so on. However, the hidden infrastructures of the global archive, such as undersea cables and server farms, occupy vast spaces and consume massive amounts of resources and energy. Beyond its physicality, this archival apparatus has direct consequences for the environment and for various bodies—human, natural, social, or bodies of knowledge.<sup>23</sup>

Another dimension to explore is the power differential registered in data. Traditional archives were already sites of domination and authority, through their form and content, but also through their censorship, concealment, or destruction. Today, under the dominance of datafication, such processes have only accelerated and expanded. Colonialism and extractivism have not stopped at the unequal exchange of goods and commodities or the subordination of cultures along the North-South and centre-periphery axes that have hierarchically structured the “modern/colonial world system” since the 15th century.<sup>24</sup> Instead, they now unfold in new digitalised forms, such as the increasing financialisation of economies, the commercial flow of migrant people and ideas, and the monetisation of behaviours and everyday life.

Throughout the months of study and collaboration culminating in this volume, our aim has been to consider these dimensions within the cultural framework that we have termed the ‘techno-aesthetics of datification’. We have sought not only to record how the relationship between archives and conflict,

more or less mediated by digital technologies, is reflected in contemporary culture. Beyond focusing on disputes surrounding data or document accumulation, we have explored how the ubiquity of the digital archive is a source of conflict. To this end, we ask: how does contemporary visual culture deal with this intersection of archives, conflict, and digitisation?

The answer to this question can be approached in different ways. One option could be the appropriation of usual archival modes of operation, using their narrative and objectifying capacities to shed light on invisible conflicts. This can be done by working on existing repositories or creating new ones; by engaging with the performativity of archives through fictionalisation and reenactment, as noted earlier; or through deviant media “guerrilla” strategies, as proposed by Mark Dery in the 1990s.<sup>25</sup> Following this last path, diverting usual modes of archival operation may lead to considering alternative forms of archiving, such as the anti-archive, counter-archive or anarchive. In this sense, we refer to the theoretical proposal of the Chilean sociologist and philosopher Andrés Maximiliano Tello, who defines the “anarchivist movement” as a way of confronting the totalising machinery of the contemporary archive. One characteristic of this “anarchivism” is “the physiological accession of its juridical accession,” meaning:

*access as an indisposition of official catalogues and restrictions of use, disturbance of their orders and their commercial deprivations, but also as a technical possibility to produce various forms of *accessão* (attack) to the very corpus of archontic archives that shape the social field and determine the aesthetic and political experience we have with the new digital environments.*<sup>26</sup>

Paraphrasing Gilles Deleuze’s *Post-scriptum on Societies of Control* (1990), Tello reminds us that just as the machinery of disciplinary societies was exposed to strikes and sabotage, the computer machinery of the society of control is exposed to piracy and viral propagation. In other words, some operating conditions of techno-archival power can serve as tools to counteract its own alienating capacities, even exploiting its expansive and accelerating properties to direct them against itself.

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The essays in this volume explore the dynamic relationship between archives, visual media, and the representation of conflict. Through a variety of theoretical approaches and case studies, the authors demonstrate how archival practices can be sites of both contestation and transformation, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced and inclusive historical discourse. Anna Maria Guasch’s essay “Archive, Record and Power: The archive as a productive space of conflict” examines the relationship between archival practices and conflict, highlighting how conventional archives often reflect existing power dynamics and dominant ideologies, leading to disputes over representation and interpretation. However, she also elucidates the emergence of *conflict archives*, which operate within more open frameworks and

engage with contested histories and perspectives, fostering new and productive disputes. Through case studies on the works of Antoni Muntadas, Stefanos Tsivopoulos, and Marco Scotini, Guasch demonstrates how integrating feminist, queer, postcolonial, and decolonial perspectives in archival practices can challenge entrenched hierarchies and advocate for social justice. This approach underscores the ethical responsibilities of archiving sensitive material and promotes the inclusion of marginalised voices, suggesting that conflicts within archives can catalyse transformative change, ultimately shaping collective memory and historical narratives in more inclusive and equitable ways. In the same line of thought, Sara Callahan discusses the nuances of archival theory, including perspectives from figures like Foucault and Derrida, as well as critiques of traditional archival practices. In her essay “Strategies of Critique in Contemporary Artistic Archival Practices,” Callahan delves into how contemporary artists Katarina Pirak Sikku, Kader Attia, Michael Rakowitz, and Kajsa Dahlberg, engage with the archive and grapple with specific instances of conflict within their artistic practice, such as racial biases, cultural authenticity, identity politics, and environmental degradation, challenging conventional approaches to archival discourse by reframing confrontational strategies and incorporating elements of care, repair, empathy, and permeability.

Focusing on the relationship between representation and power dynamics, Paul Grace scrutinizes how conventional portrayals of atrocities reinforce existing hierarchies of knowledge and serve dominant interests. In “Horror Vacui: Hidden Photographs and the Counter-Archive,” Grace examines Alfredo Jaar and Robert Fitterman’s works to explore counter-archival strategies that challenge the authority of representation and disrupt the symbolic power structures of conflict. The author further analyzes photography’s role in perpetuating narratives of conflict, particularly in the Rwandan genocide, and how image manipulation perpetuates violence. Grace suggests that while representation can reflect and perpetuate power imbalances, counter-archival practices have the potential to subvert these dynamics and provoke critical engagement with traumatic events. On a complementary perspective, Michael Rowland delves into the transformative potential of contemporary visual practices in reshaping historical narratives and material realities. Focusing on how Brazilian architect Paulo Tavares combines critical engagement with visual archives, lens-based technology, and non-Western perspectives to challenge conventional Western modes of visualizing history, the author examines creative methods for decolonial, emancipatory, and ecological ends, through a compelling case study for reimagining collective conceptions of history and society.

Daniela Cifuentes Acevedo’s article examines photographs from the book *La Violencia en Colombia - estudio de un proceso social* (1962) that depict women as victims of violence during the Colombian war. Using a gender studies lens to analyze Aby Warburg’s “Mnemosyne Atlas” as a method to rethink patriarchal history, the article highlights the need to redefine archival methods and expose historical gender biases. On the other hand, Gustavo Balbela’s article, on the other hand, examines how the far-right shift in Brazilian politics revived a long-hidden military threat. Through an

analysis of the archive's role in the author's artistic practice, it built a response to this resurgence during Bolsonaro's tenure. Combining press images and texts with photos of Porto Alegre during the 1964 military dictatorship, and drawing inspiration by Georges Didi-Huberman and Allan Sekula, the author explores the archive's capacity to connect mundane urban elements with violent historical processes.

In this volume, we also highlight one of the recent proposals by German-American historian Sven Spieker, who in 2016 presented his "Manifesto for a Slow Archive"<sup>27</sup> in the magazine *ARTMargins Online*. Spieker suggests a way of operating in the field of art-archive relationship that understands the archive as an environment, ecologically speaking. In "Exploring the 'Slow Archive': an interview with Sven Spieker," we asked the author to provide context for his proposal, delving into some of the "Slow Archive" characteristics, such as "the slowing of information flow as a new archival politics," "the strategic assumptions of fiction as fact," and "digital obscurity" opposing the supposed transparency of the global neoliberal archive. At a certain point in the interview, Spieker posed a very appealing question: "How can we retake the archive and revive or instil in it a critical function without either nostalgically invoking its humanist incarnation or endorsing its neo-liberal nemesis, the idea of a fully transparent, fully capitalized mega-archive?"

Turning our focus to a practice-based perspective, we interviewed Lebanese artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige. The artists discuss their visual practice, which uses the armed conflict that has shaped life in Lebanon in recent decades as a conceptual framework. Their work not only questions the geopolitical determinants of the conflict but also closely examines the historical forms of narrating it. This analysis is conducted through photographic and videographic images, which they critically examine. In this context, it is significant that the artists define themselves as researchers (rather than photographers or video artists), highlighting their alignment with artistic practices that, since the historiographical turn, adopt the *modus operandi* of historians.

This volume of *Archivo Papers* also includes two Visual Essays, offering a different, not solely textual, way of accessing the theoretical core. Diego Marchante 'Genderhacker' contributes his essay 'Queer Futurities. Artistic Strategies for the Dynamization of Archives.' In it, he introduces his work on generating a counter-history to recover feminist and queer threads in archives, incorporating performativity, and operating strongly in the digital terrain through the creation of online repositories and archiving tools. Amalia Caputo's essay, "Permeable Membranes. The Archive in Visual Atlas Constructions," explores the relationship between the multiplication of photographic images in the digital environment and the incorporation of this multiplicity in physical space. For this transmediation, which Caputo has incorporated in various installations since 2000, she draws on the visual apparatuses proposed by Aby Warburg for his "Mnemosyne Atlas."

The Portfolio section of this volume includes works by contemporary artists Azadeh Akhlaghi and Maryam Jafri. Azadeh Akhlaghi is an Iranian photographer and filmmaker who, after living in Australia, returned to Iran to work as an assistant

director with Abbas Kiarostami. Her work 'By an Eye-Witness' adopts the strategy of staging events that span a 90-year time frame to embody the collective memory of her country. By depicting scenes that feature the violent, traumatic, or controversial demise of poets, journalists, students, intellectuals, or political activists, Akhlaghi leads us to the realm of the sensible and lived experience. Maryam Jafri's portfolio features three bodies of work that explore archival imagery in relation to cultural and historical representations, addressing the interplay between material and digital archives, and focusing on the preservation and disappearance of images from historical narratives. Jafri's artistic practice combines found and original material, emphasising extensive research-oriented methodologies while also exploring the roles of chance and intuition in the creation of the final works. Her projects "Independence Day 1934-1975" (2009-2019), "Disappearance Online" (2021), and "Getty vs. Ghana" (2012) exemplify this approach. They investigate subjects such as decolonization processes in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, revealing similarities in Independence Day ceremonies orchestrated by departing colonial powers, as well as the digitization of historical images and the implications for cultural memory and copyright law.

In today's world, marked by increasing conflicts and a pervasive digital ecosystem, the use of archives has become an essential cultural concern. This volume addresses these pressing issues by exploring how archives serve as tools for understanding, preserving, and reinterpreting cultural and historical narratives. The editors hope that readers will find insights in the various articles that make up this volume of *Archivo Papers*, fostering critical discourse and promoting a deeper understanding of historical visual representations and their legacies.

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  - 2 See Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, 1995.
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- 20 Marianne Hirsch, "Connective Arts of Postmemory," *Analecta Polit.* 9, no. 16 (June 2019): 172.
- 21 For "media archaeology" see Jussi Parikka, *What is Media Archaeology?*, 2012. For the concept of "remediation" see Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation. Understanding New Media*, 2000. The problem of 'biases' is very relevant today, especially with regard to Big Data and the repositories used to train artificial intelligences. See, for example, Cathy O'Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction*, 2016.
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- 24 We take the expression "modern/colonial world system" from Latin American decolonial theory. See, Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 2000.
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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,”<sup>1</sup> 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”<sup>2</sup> 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 publications<sup>3</sup> 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”<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, as noted in the text "How the Art World Caught Archive Fever,"<sup>7</sup> 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).<sup>8</sup> 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)<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

*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.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, in Susan Pell’s essay “Radicalizing the Politics of the Archive,”<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup>

## 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?<sup>15</sup>



## 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup>

### 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 2022<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup>

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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup>

## 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.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup>

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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?
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## ARTICLE

# STRATEGIES OF CRITIQUE IN CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC ARCHIVAL PRACTICE

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## Abstract

This essay proposes that selected artworks by Katarina Pirak Sikku, Kader Attia, Michael Rakowitz, and Kajsa Dahlberg exemplify a set of approaches within contemporary artistic practices that operate in ways that simultaneously align with and deviate from the main tenets of the “archival turn” in contemporary art. The author suggests that these artworks involve indirect reconsideration of what critical archival practice can involve. All four artists deal with specific instances of conflict, marginalization, and forms of oppression by actively reframing the confrontational, suspicious and undermining strategies that has characterized some archival discourse. The essay shows how these artistic practices stress notions of care, repair, empathy and permeability in ways that have specific methodological and conceptual consequences. By doing so they invite a rethinking of critical archive theory in the face of specific question and concerns of the current moment such as how to handle remnants of racist histories in present-day archives; the need for recycling and repair in the face of the environmental effects of rampant consumption; how to address those who hold diametrically opposed political position from oneself; and how to take serious people whose bodies operate in ways that tend to marginalize them as non-productive in the face of neo-liberal values like professional success and self-sufficiency.

**Keywords:** Archive art, Katarina Pirak Sikku, Kader Attia, Michael Rakowitz, Kajsa Dahlberg

Now that the archive has been at the forefront of the international artworld for several decades, it is perhaps a good time to consider some of the nuances and different conceptual foundations of artistic practices that engage with broadly archival themes, materials, notions and aesthetics. In this essay I suggest that artworks by Katarina Pirak Sikku, Kader Attia, Michael Rakowitz and Kajsa Dahlberg operate in ways that simultaneously align with and deviate from the main tenets of the theoretical foundation of the so-called archival turn.<sup>1</sup> While all four artists deal with specific instances of conflict, marginalization, and forms of oppression, they do so by actively seeking to reframe the confrontational, combative and undermining strategies that have characterized some archival discourse. I will, in what follows, outline how these artistic practices activate notions of care, repair, empathy and permeability in ways that have specific methodological and conceptual consequences. These strategies indirectly invite a rethinking or updating of so-called archival theory to tackle acute questions and concerns of the current moment. The artworks deal with topical questions like how to handle remnants of racist histories; the need for recycling and repair in the face of the environmental effects of rampant consumption; how to address someone who holds a diametrically opposed political position; and how to take seriously people whose bodies operate in ways that tend to marginalize them as non-productive or unfit in neo-liberal societies focused on success and self-sufficiency.

I will begin by briefly outlining several broad theoretical frameworks: first, what can be called “archive theory,” and then different challenges or adjustments to some of its foundational tenets. In the second part of the essay, I argue that my selected artworks activate strategies that shed light on the theoretical frameworks mentioned in the introduction, and vice versa. My specific focus is on instances where the purity of distanced and suspicious critical practices is both challenged and supplemented. To be clear: my aim is not to propose that these artists have deliberately set out to challenge an established set of critical archival theories. Rather, my point is that these artists represent a particular way of *blending* elements of archival critique with practices and methods that emerged, in part, as reactions against *specific forms of critical practice*, often by scholars who had themselves been deeply committed to such critical practices. By drawing out these various theoretical groundings, I hope to clarify connections between archival themes and other perspectives and theory clusters, shedding light on how they operate together in a number of specific present-day artworks.

Although there is, strictly speaking, no such thing as a coherent “archive theory,” those who have followed discussions about archival themes in the artworld and beyond will no doubt have noticed that certain figures, phrases, and notions recur in much writing by scholars, art critics, curators, and artists alike.<sup>2</sup> No figure looms larger in this group than Michel Foucault. His *Archaeology of Knowledge* presented knowledge not as immutable or eternal, but as something that structures what it is possible to know, say, and think at a particular time.<sup>3</sup> In this text, Foucault activated the terminology of the archive to outline a new type of historical practice,



specifically by setting up a distinction between two types of archives. Firstly, there is the archive (*archives* plural in French) as a site housing various documents; this is the actual, material dusty archive that aligns with how the term is used in vernacular language. In addition to this, there is also the archive as a system of thought (*archive* singular in French), which Foucault formulates as a “law of what can be said.”<sup>4</sup> Foucault stressed that the two are inseparable from one another: it is from the files and documents stored in the actual archive that we can learn about the deep political and historical forces of the structural archive.

Jacques Derrida is the figure who, together with Foucault, can be said to constitute the core troupe of the archive theory cluster. Derrida’s *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* dealt with history writing, memory, psychoanalysis, Jewish identity, and much, much more.<sup>5</sup> It is particularly two elements from Derrida’s complex musings on the archive that have become staple references in subsequent writing. The first is Derrida’s description of the archive as Thanatos and Eros, i.e. engaging both destructive and protective impulses; the second is his description of how the term “archive” is etymologically related to two Greek words *arkhē* and *arkheion*, thus pointing to its double function of establishing origins and exerting control.<sup>6</sup>

The explicit critique of conventional and accepted knowledge and history represented by Foucault’s and Derrida’s writing about archives proved highly relevant to scholars interested in questions of race and gender. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak offered a specific example of how the archive exerts its power in her essay “The Rani of Sirmur: an Essay in Reading the Archives.”<sup>7</sup> Here, Spivak examined Britain’s colonial archival practices in India and showed that these archives do not—indeed, cannot—provide accurate historical records. As a woman and as a native Indian, the historical figure of the Rani was doubly excluded from archival memory: “There was no possible access to the Rani outside of these absences and fictions; to approach her”, Spivak noted, “was to move in ‘the shadow of shadows’.”<sup>8</sup> Allan Sekula, in his “The Body and the Archive”, offered a broad socio-historical critique by considering archival practices.<sup>9</sup> The archive and the camera, Sekula argued, were crucial components of an ideological complex centred around views of the human body, criminality, property, and racial and delinquent taxonomies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

From around the 1980s, something akin to a heterogeneous “archive theory” began to take shape: a canon of texts by different writers from different disciplines reflected on archives in their own specific (and not always compatible) ways. A few of the most frequently referenced names today in addition to Foucault, Derrida, Spivak and Sekula, include Aleida Assmann, Ariella Azoulay, Walter Benjamin, Jorge Luis Borges, Wolfgang Ernst, Arlette Farge, Mike Featherstone, Achille Mbembe, Pierre Nora, W. G. Sebald, Shawn Michelle Smith, Carolyn Steedman, and Ann Laura Stoler, to name only a few. In fact, the literature on this topic has become too extensive for a comprehensive overview.

Shawn Michelle Smith summed up the view of the archive that permeates many of these studies: “Even as it purports simply to supply evidence, or to

document historical occurrences, the archive maps the cultural terrain it claims to describe. In other words, the archive constructs the knowledge it would seem only to register or make evident. Thus archives are ideological; they are conceived with political intent, to make specific claims on cultural meaning.”<sup>10</sup>

Archival theory has largely focused on critiquing the archive in different ways; reading it suspiciously *against the grain* in order to unveil what it says between the lines and beyond the explicit intentions that created it. This mode of reading is infused by what is sometimes called a “hermeneutics of suspicion.”<sup>11</sup> The term points to forms of interpretation that are anchored in a diagnostic or symptomatic approach, where the reader seeks out clues pointing to ills such as racial, gendered, and other biases at work in archival documents and practices. Critique in this vein has been immensely productive for research in the cultural sciences and the humanities, providing scholars with novel methods and much-needed perspectives. However, in recent years, some have raised questions about the limits, even dangers, of particular applications of critical approaches in academe and beyond.<sup>12</sup> Scholars complain that their students and colleagues are so immersed in negative skills that their academic work is solely focused on tearing down without proposing much in terms of constructive or creative ideas.

One consequence of the success of hermeneutics of suspicion has been a homogenization of approach in some academic milieus. Rita Felski has noted how this approach often breeds “an inability to tolerate rivals.”<sup>13</sup> Those who do not carry out critique in this suspicious vein are seen as “uncritical”—the ultimate insult—thus stifling the possibility of engaged intellectual debate where different methods and perspectives can coexist. When Bruno Latour expressed his own unease with the stronghold of this form of critique, he noted that it seemed eerily similar to methods used for entirely different purposes by populists, climate change deniers, and ironically, anti-intellectual forces worldwide.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick described a form of “paranoid reading” that she argued ought to be supplemented by more productive reparative approaches.<sup>15</sup>

What is sometimes referred to as “affect theory” seems to offer an alternative or supplement to such suspicious critical methods. Donna Haraway’s insistence that all knowledge is situated is broadly in line with the notion of the archive as the field in which discourses are regulated. However, Haraway, along with other feminist writers, specifically stresses the importance of examining the body as a key part of this situatedness in a more direct way than what has been formulated in some of the most well-known texts that constitute early iterations of archive theory.<sup>16</sup> Haraway has also described her own methodological choice in the following terms: “I will critically analyze ... only that which I love and only that in which I am deeply implicated.”<sup>17</sup> This points to a kind of embeddedness that goes against the very possibility of distanced cool critique. Similarly, Sara Ahmed has described affect as “sticky,” since it delves into what sustains connections between ideas, values, and objects.<sup>18</sup> The point these writers seem to make is that the coolly distanced aspects of some critical methodologies need to be actively

thawed by relating them more closely to bodies, matter, and emotionally embedded connections and attachments.

Related to the terminology of affect is that of “care,” and there have recently been intense discussions about how scholarship and intellectual practices could be done in ways that involve acting with, and analysing elements of care. Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher’s well-known definition encapsulates the main attitude of this approach: care is simply “*everything that we do to maintain, continue and repair ‘our world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life sustaining web.*”<sup>19</sup> This sense of attention is tied to an embrace of elements of openness and unpredictability: “[c]aring means becoming subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning.”<sup>20</sup>

Patricia T. Clough has suggested that the affective turn’s most provocative and enduring contribution may have been the way it pointed towards “a dynamism immanent to bodily matter and matter generally” after a period where the focus had been on constructivisms under the influence of post-structuralism and deconstruction.<sup>21</sup> Affect theory is thus connected to the shift towards—or a return—to a concern with materiality, sometimes referred to as “new materialism”. This approach involves a broad critique of anthropocentrism and a correction to the perceived persistent downplaying of matter as a passive substance intrinsically devoid of meaning in theoretical writing.<sup>22</sup> Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory and the notion of “flat” ontologies are key references in this field.<sup>23</sup> Scholars committed to these approaches actively consider the dissolution of distinctions between human and non-human actors as well as between levels of micro-macro, foreground-background, nature-culture. Following from this is the view that historical outcomes and events are not reflections of *something else* which presumably lies hidden beneath the surface of things, but that the surface itself constitutes the level at which various types of relations (material and meaning) are entangled with one another.<sup>24</sup>

In sum, the broad spectrum of perspectives, variously described as different turns, -isms or clusters—post-critique, new materialism, the affective turn, affect theory, theories of care, etc.—partially revolves around an acknowledgement of complexity, open-endedness, and a recognition that ideas, things, and matter are closely interlinked. In some ways, these perspectives stand in opposition to critical archival practices, at least when defined as embedded in a hermeneutics of suspicion. It is vital to stress here, however, that although affect theory and new materialism grew out of a concern with what their proponents viewed as limitations of some of the same critical perspectives that also infuse much of archival theory, it would be incorrect to posit any absolute or sharply delineated boundary between them. Proponents of these “alternatives” are often not interested in abandoning “critique” in a general sense. In fact, they often engage in critical practices, but they do so in ways that aim to nuance or add to the understanding of what critique is

and how it can be practiced. I suggest that a similar openness to a multifaceted and more embedded forms of critique can be observed in the selected artworks by Katarina Pirak Sikku, Kader Attia, Michael Rakowitz and Kajsa Dahlberg. Descriptions of these artworks and the ways in which such operations can be seen in them will take up the remainder of this essay.

## KATARINA PIRAK SIKKU - PRACTICING ARCHIVAL CARE

One of the most common ways contemporary artists critically engage with the historical archive is highlighting the problematic ways in which issues of racial, gender and other structural injustices and oppression are made visible in its materials. The archives of the Swedish State Institute for Racial Biology housed at Uppsala University would be an obvious target of such an approach. Established in 1921, the institute was concerned with gathering data and materials in their quest to understand racial differences and establish a systematic racial science. In furtherance of this aim, they organized excursions to the north of Sweden to study the native Sami populations. Katarina Pirak Sikku has used measuring instruments and skin-tone charts in artworks addressing her community's experiences of being subjected to the anthropometric and archival acts conducted by the institute.<sup>25</sup> Questions about what to do with photographs found in such archives have preoccupied scholars and artists in different parts of the world. Sikku does not use images of people found in the archive, and she has explained that this decision boils down to a question of consent. "I cannot ask the people on the photographs if I can use their images...I feel that to display them again would be to add to the abuse."<sup>26</sup> However, she made one exception to this rule in *Ánná siessá - Faster Anna* (2013), which includes three black and white photographs of a Sami woman depicted in a manner that conforms to established formats associated with criminal and anthropometric photographic systematicity: three quarters, frontal, and profile views.<sup>27</sup> [Figure 1]. Upon showing the photographs to people in her community, Pirak Sikku found out that the woman was the aunt of one of her friends. When asked about her decision to show these images, Pirak Sikku simply states that "I had to do something with Anna. It has to do with a feeling that was impossible to put into words, it just struck me."<sup>28</sup> As a way of caring for the photographs, Sikku created a hand-embroidered frame made in traditional Sami handicraft using pewter thread. Additionally, she included a piece of fabric taken from the *kolt* (the traditional Sami garment) that Anna wore when the photograph was taken. With this act of framing—or re-framing—the photographs are no longer archival images of an anonymous scientific specimen, but become part of an affective material object, reminiscent of vernacular mourning portraits dedicated not to a racialized type but to a very specific loved and missed individual.

More recently, Pirak Sikku created another work that also involved reframing the images found in the archives, albeit without directly exhibiting the photographs themselves. "Ágálaččat bivttastuvvon sohkaččat ivnniiguin lhkát ájttegiij bájnjoj



**Figure 1.**

Katarina Pirak Sikku, *Ánná siessá - Aunt Anna*, 2013. Cloth, tin, wool yarn, photo paper. 65x47.5 cm. Photo: Polly Yassin  
Courtesy of the artist

gárvodum - För evigt klädda i ättens färger - Ihkuven aajkan maadtoej klaeriejgujmie gåårveldihkie” [Perpetually Wound in the Colours of the Ancestors] (2021) [Figure 2] involved wrapping 42 bound albums containing photographs of Sami men, women, and children taken by the institute’s photographers. This work arguably activates the notion of care, understood as an act of carrying out maintenance work in order to repair our world so that we can, in the terminology of Tronto and Fisher, live in it as well as possible.<sup>29</sup> This type of care is simultaneously focused on the present (handling the past in the here and now) as well as really paying attention and seeing the historical subject as a multi-faceted being. This involves avoiding the temptation to reduce the historical subject only to a victim: those who were subjected to abuses and objectifying visual practices ought not to be only represented through that narrative frame, as they too lived complex lives and often looked back on those who studied them and the ideologies they represented.<sup>30</sup>

Although not engaging in posthuman materialism, Sikku deliberately conflates the material photographs and the albums that house them with the subjects depicted in them by approaching these as objects to be cared for. One consequence of using an approach framed by a hermeneutic of suspicion is that the present-day researcher often makes predictable discoveries about historical views on gender and race that are now considered abhorrent by most people. Pirak Sikku is obviously engaged in this form of archival critique, but what I want to stress here is that she combines it with the ability to be surprised and moved by her materials. This is seen in the way she makes an exception from her own rule not to show images from the archive, not because of any analytically anchored reason,



**Figure 2.**

Katarina Pirak Sikku

*Agálaččat bivttastuvvon sohkagotti  
ivnniiguin lhkát ájttegij bájnoj gárvodum  
Forever dressed in the colors of the  
family  
lhkuven aajkan maadtoej klaeriejgujmie  
gáárveldihkie*

*Perpetually Wound in the Colors of the  
Ancestors, 2021*

Cloth, yarn, pewter wire, pewter buttons,  
metal, beads

40 albums, Karolina Rediviva, Kart- och  
bildenheten, Uppsala University

Photo: Mattias Lindbäck

Courtesy of the artist

but simply because she felt that the material itself granted her permission to do so. Another example of this is the simultaneous display and hiding of the albums. Anyone engaging with them must first open the intricately decorated and folded textile envelopes, underscoring that the people depicted are neither dehumanized representatives of a racial type nor mere examples of the dehumanizing archival processes that created and sustained these typologies. Instead, they were, just like the person looking at them today, actual human beings enmeshed in various layers of affective as well as critical networks of meaning.

## KADER ATTIA: REPAIR AND THE HOSPITALITY TOWARDS UNEXPECTED GUESTS

Let me begin with a bit of anecdotal evidence. Over the past year or so, I have noticed an increasing number of posts relating to repair circulating in my social media feed. Short clips showing how to fix a hole in a tablecloth by embroidering a leafy design, or how to repair furniture, crockery, and other items in ways that draw attention to the process of repair itself. The growing interest in repair methods aligns with a growing awareness of the unsustainable consumption patterns of globalised capitalism over the past few decades and a recognition of the need to rediscover the art of caring for what we already have.

Kader Attia, the contemporary artist most directly associated with the notion of repair, has been working with visible cracks and folds, stapling and stitching together long before such posts appeared in my social media feed. For him, it all began many years ago when he received a piece of delicate Kuba fabric from the Congo. The gifted fabric was old and many of its holes had been repaired



**Figure 3.**  
Kader Attia, *Open Your Eyes*, 2010  
2-channel analog slide projection.  
180 slides. Courtesy of the Artist and  
Collection MoMA, Collection Frac Pays  
de la Loire, and Collection Moderna  
Museet

by applying, with the same embroidery that covered the rest of the fabric, small pieces of a different fabric in a blue and white colonial French Vichy pattern—an addition that Attia pointedly describes as an “unexpected guest.”<sup>31</sup> Following his first encounter with this form of repair practice, Attia noticed similar repairs in other objects in the region: a missing eye in a wooden sculpture had been replaced with a simple button; masks and bowls held together by roped stitches. Years later, when Attia examined museum collections in Europe and in the United States, he found many similar objects in their storage spaces [Figure 3]. Curiously, however, these repaired bowls, masks, ritual sculptures and reliquary objects were set apart from other objects in the collections and, in many cases, had never been exhibited at all. Why, Attia asked, were such objects deemed impossible to categorize in the existing taxonomic systems of these museums? His conclusion was that the repaired objects “belong to an aesthetics that the Occident is unable to understand,” particularly those incorporating cast-off materials from the West like old buttons, pieces of broken mirrors, old fabrics, parts of tin cans, etc.<sup>32</sup> Formulating it in terms of archival theory, the archive, as the “law of what can be said,” had no way of handling these repaired objects—they were, so to speak, *unarchivable* and thus rendered mute and invisible in these specific curatorial contexts. The issue seemed to boil down to two distinct problems: first, that the repairs were unabashedly embracing their own history as old and broken, since the repairs were neither subtle nor discreet. And second, that they mixed materials and cultures in ways that challenged important tenets of modern Western thought about originality, authenticity, distinctions between high and low culture, as well as notions of the Occident vs. non-Occident as clearly delineated categories.

Attia has created several works where Western and non-Western, or Occidental and what he calls “Extra-Occidental,” notions of repair are juxtaposed and considered in relation to one another. He argues that, in the modern Western context, repair aims to return something or someone to a pre-injured state; the repaired object should look as new or unharmed as possible, whereas the Extra-Occidental examples he highlights do not seek to control time in this way. Instead,



according to Attia, repair in these contexts is an opportunity for rebirth, ushering in a new aesthetic and a new history that eschews the illusion of a time of perfection that operates by a temporal loop of an eternal present<sup>33</sup> [Figure 4].

Notions of cannibalism and cultural blending are important in Attia's work; specifically Oswald de Andrade's notion of *antropofagia* and the idea that we are all cultural cannibals: "[c]ulture, language, and art are always ... hybrid evocations of an origin that has never existed."<sup>34</sup> Attia seems to ask us to look carefully, to avoid oversimplified reductions of complex relationships, and invites us to find connections where we do not expect them.<sup>35</sup> In this sense, the "unexpected guest" can simultaneously be a colonial trace and something so intertwined with the material world of ancient Congolese traditions that separating the two becomes impossible.

Attia's artistic practice is explicitly and unapologetically political. He is concerned with the lasting and profound effects of colonialization, even cautioning against the dangers of playing "the game of empathy" by focusing on individuals rather than the collective.<sup>36</sup> In that, and in many other ways, Attia's work differs significantly from Pirak Sikku's. My point in discussing them together, alongside Michael Rakowitz and Kajsa Dahlberg in this paper, is not to skirt over the differences between them, but to highlight that their work, along with that of other contemporary artists, activate elements of archival theory in ways that expand, refine and challenge notions of how critique can operate, even when it tackles some of archival theory's most treasured topics, such as colonial traces and other marginalized histories.



**Figure 4.**  
Kader Attia, *Untitled*, 2017  
Sculpture. Ceramic plate, metal wire.  
Courtesy of the Artist

## MICHAEL RAKOWITZ: I SEE THE CONFLICT IN YOU AND THE CONFLICT IN ME. ENGAGING THE EMPATHETIC CRITICAL ADDRESS

During the summer of 2023, Michael Rakowitz's exhibition "I'm god at love, I'm good at hate, it's in between I freeze" was on view at the Barbara Wien gallery in Berlin. A 32-minute video played inside a black box in one of the gallery rooms, adjacent to a brightly lit space where related material like photographs, a typewriter, letters, newspaper clippings, documents and LPs were displayed inside glass-covered vitrine tables, tapping into what has now become a recognizable archival aesthetics.

The exhibition hand-out and press-release describes the work in the following way:

In 2009, [Leonard] Cohen was scheduled to perform two concerts: one in Tel Aviv, Israel, and one in Ramallah, Palestine. Cohen had a large fan base in Palestine, but the concert in Ramallah was seen as an attempt to pacify a potential backlash against the concert in Israel and was thus considered a hollow symbolic gesture of solidarity. The performance in Palestine was boycotted and ultimately cancelled. As a Leonard Cohen fan, and a signatory of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), Rakowitz started researching Cohen's stance on the conflict in the region. [...] Rakowitz contemplated the implications of staging Cohen's Ramallah concert himself. He found Cohen's old Olivetti typewriter on eBay, bought it, and started typing out a screenplay about the concert in Palestine that never happened. He then decided to write a letter to the singer, asking permission to perform his songs in Ramallah, but Cohen never replied.<sup>37</sup>

When Rakowitz was invited to do an exhibition in Montréal in 2015, he produced a film about his own family history, Cohen's relationship to the Jewish homeland and the concert that never happened. After Cohen's death in 2016, the estate withdrew the rights to use his music in any subsequent contexts. What was shown at Barbara Wien in the summer of 2023 was an adapted, remade version of the 2015 film that included the repressive response from the estate and their attempts to make Rakowitz change his film in order to, as they said, avoid providing a one-sided pro-Palestinian narrative. In passages where Cohen's music had previously been played, Rakowitz added commentaries by invited friends Emily Jacir, Eyal Weizman, and Lama Altakruri.

The letter Rakowitz wrote to Cohen makes up the main narrative of the film and is read by the artist over the film's visual imagery.<sup>38</sup> What is of particular interest to me is the combination of profound empathy and razor-sharp critique in the tone of the letter and in the film as a whole. The letter consistently addresses Cohen as "Leonard" and "you", pointing to affinities between the two, fellow Jews, but also stresses how their different histories lead them to approach the world from different directions: "You came from the West and made a choice. I approach from the East and make another. Both are painful, and both yield unacceptable consequences of elimination" [Figure 5].

In his commentary, Eyal Weizman picks up on the fact that the lawyers

of Cohen's estate stressed that not only was the material not to be used, but that the injunction not to use it could not be discussed in any way. Weizman describes this as "the erasure of the evidence of their denial", emphasizing the violence inherent in such an act of double erasure. A gag-order like this makes objections or discussions of the act itself impossible, presumably with the aim of eventually achieving a complete amnesia about its occurrence.

A key scene in the reworked version of the film is where Rakowitz restages Cohen's cancelled concert. Due to the legal injunction against using Cohen's music, Rakowitz's concert is silent, performed in an empty concert hall. The emotional resonance in this silent singing is of course an overt refusal of allowing the erasure to be invisibilized by turning the silence into a tangible absence<sup>39</sup> [Figure 6].

Within theoretical writing about archives, the process of erasure that Weizman describes has been addressed by Derrida, who referred to it as the doubled death drive – the drive not just to destroy but also to destroy the very trace and testimony of the destruction.<sup>40</sup> Derrida developed this line of thought during a visit to South Africa in the late 1990s. Both the South African and the Palestine/Israel contexts are rich with archival themes and both have been the subject of contested cultural boycotts. The connection between the two is made clear in the film when the actor who plays Cohen picks up an LP record titled "Sun City. Artists United Against Apartheid." There is little doubt that Rakowitz and his invited commentators are deeply critical of Cohen's decision to perform in Israel in direct violation of the cultural boycott, and the case for this critique is forcefully made in the video. However, the tone of letter and several of the anecdotes and images included in the film point to a desire to not merely condemn but to converse, consider and actually understand Cohen. Although Rakowitz, like Attia, may be wary of the notion of empathy in this context, as it can be seen as apolitical, it is nevertheless possible to read this address to Cohen as, precisely, empathetic [Figure 7]. Empathy can be described as an attempt to walk in someone else's shoes, to try to see the world from someone else's point of view, or to use the terminology of care, to pay attention and care for those with whom one strongly disagrees. The very act of addressing Cohen directly in a letter with a number of meandering and intensely personal stories and reflections stands in sharp contrast to the distant certainty of some critical methodologies. The typewriter is important here as well. Typing the letter on Cohen's own typewriter is an act of comradeship: this is presumably the same typewriter that Cohen typed out many of the songs and poems that Rakowitz so admired. The implicit hope is that this object may have some agency of its own, opening a line of communication about one of the world's most infected conflicts where the two sides tend to have been firmly entrenched and cemented for generations.

Rakowitz's entire film is imbued by a recognition of the complexity of the questions it addresses, rejecting binaries, purities, and absolutist positions. Rakowitz's own identity as an Arab Jew symbolizes the impossibility of embracing simple binary categorizations. When the artist states in his letter to Cohen that he has



**Figure 5 and 6**

Michael Rakowitz

*I'm good at love, I'm good at hate, it's in  
between I freeze*

2017/2023

Video, colour, sound, 32 min.

Edition: 7 (+ 3 A.P.)

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie

Barbara Wien, Berlin

never been interested in perfection (neither moral nor ethical) he is acknowledging that there is no possibility of returning to a state of pre-injury that Attia's notion of Extra-Occidental repair is also getting at. Towards the end of the letter, Rakowitz writes: "I see the conflict in you and the conflict in me and think that somehow we can blend and have it both ways." In the audio-version of the letter included in the film, he adds, "We can't have it both ways." Throughout, there is a clear rejection of Cohen's stance while also acknowledging that he had complex reasons for acting as he did, and that his affective reasons are understandable even if they are impossible to condone: "I guess I want you to know", Michael writes, "that the way you feel feels normal to me, but that that is no excuse." Key here is that Rakowitz's political anger does not lead him to obliterate Cohen, neither as an actor with responsibility for his actions nor as someone with whom it is possible to empathise and sympathise. In fact, Cohen's music and writing, perhaps paradoxically, continue to nourish and support Rakowitz's own ethical position in the world.





**Figure 7.**

Installation view

Michael Rakowitz

*I'm good at love, I'm good at hate, it's in between I freeze*, 2009/2023

Installation consisting of:

Video, colour, sound, 32 min., edition 1 / 7 (+ 3 A.P.)

Documents, books, photographs, and memorabilia including a typewriter purportedly owned by Leonard, Cohen, and a facsimile of the letter written by the artist

Dimensions variable

Installation Michael Rakowitz: *I'm good at love, I'm good at hate, it's in between I freeze*, Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin, April 28 – July 29, 2023 (extended until August 12)

Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin

Photo: Nick Ash

## KAJSA DAHLBERG: THE POROUS BOUNDARY BETWEEN THE BODY AND ITS ENVIRONMENT

The final work I want to discuss is “It Is Not Even True That There Is Air Between Us” (2022) by Kajsa Dahlberg: an hour-long video which consists of archival material and a sound recording of six people who, one by one, describe their experiences with different types of hypersensitivity. The people are not filmed, only their voices are heard as they speak in English and in Norwegian, all subtitled in English over a dark background. Interspersed with these are short sequences of films in different stages of damage caused by radiation, mould, agricultural chemicals, oxidation and humidity. The archival footage shows the clean-up operations in Chernobyl after the nuclear catastrophe, scenes from 1930s Shanghai, a collective farm in Ukraine in the 1970s, a demonstration of ballet movement in 1930s Chicago, constructed dams in Norway and Brazil, and a student protest in San Francisco in the 1960s [Figure 8]. The opening footage is from Chernobyl and this is the only one with a soundtrack, consisting solely of a strange clicking noise. Subtitles describe how the defective-looking film stock recorded the sound and visual appearance of nuclear radiation that is otherwise invisible, silent, and odourless. Following this opening, Ylva, the first of the recorded participants, describes how her childhood near an industrial site has given her lifelong severe allergies—a kind of “bodily archive of industrial history.” Another participant describes the “very porous boundary” between her body and the surrounding world, and yet another, who suffers from extreme sensitivity to odours of all kinds, describes how she is “convinced that

nature constantly flows through us. I experience, intensely, how my surroundings are part of me.”

Dahlberg’s video is engaged with archival material and explores the notion of the body as an archive of past trauma or exposure. She combines this with a reflection on the effects of erroneously trying to separate humans from nature: each speaker describes ways of being in the world that do not neatly conform to the binary nature-culture divide or between the body and its environment [Figure 9].

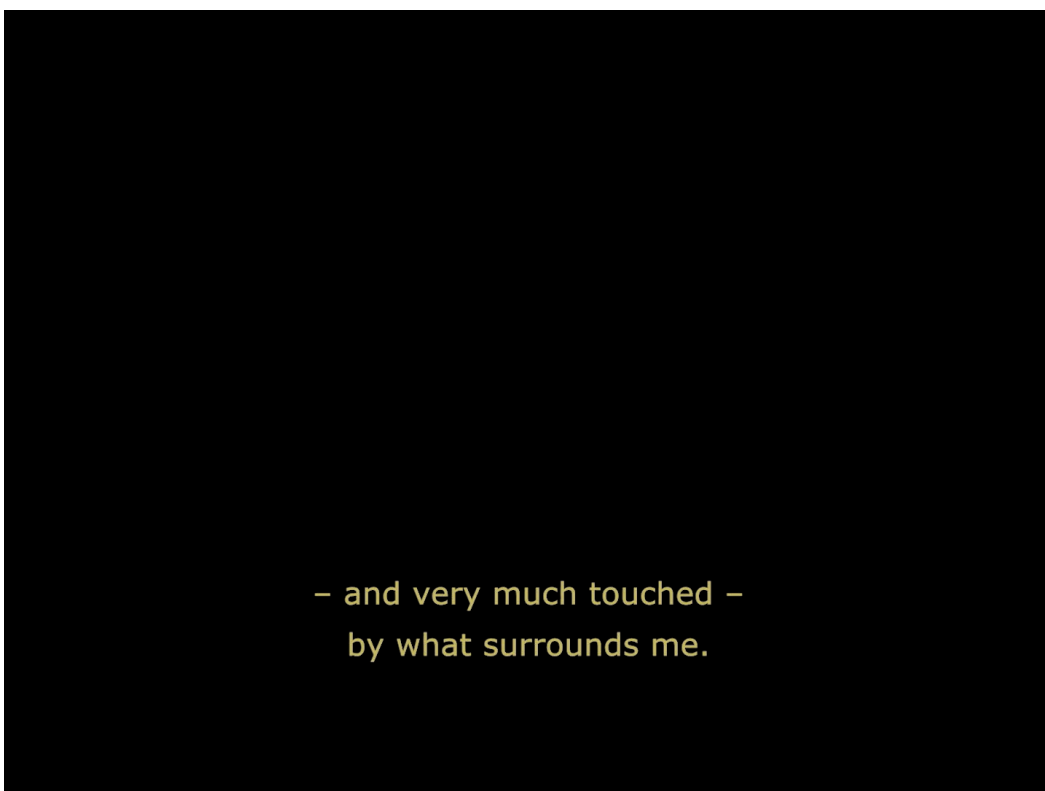
The film offers up a strikingly empathetic depiction of people suffering from afflictions that are often seen as psychosomatic, imagined, or hysterical. Consequently, they are often accused of being lazy and unwilling to work. The way that Dahlberg’s video gives voice to those that are not usually heard, aligns well with established critical practices of rectifying archival exclusions. However, the complexity of the different understandings of care, illness, and health discussed in articulate and theoretically nuanced ways by the participants themselves can be understood to — indirectly — activate other theory-clusters as well. Ylva, for instance, describes how she gradually adopted a different position of critique for herself, away from a hatred of the landscape that made her sick. Through years of birdwatching, she noticed that her view on different landscapes needed to be reformulated when considering other species. Birds and other animals often thrive in toxic environments, she notes, precisely because humans have abandoned them. Such environments can, therefore, be simultaneously perceived as toxic and protective. This is similar to what has been formulated as “violent care” in academic reflections relating to care-theory, where it is noted that conservation efforts often entail the care and protection of one species at the expense of violently destroying another, thus again eschewing the very possibility of ethical purity. This is not a move to downplay the responsibilities of heavy industry or the harm of different forms of pollution, nor does it ignore the difficulties of living with hypersensitivity. When taken together, the participants suggest that the same place can be experienced very differently depending on the body that experiences it and that the permeability of their own sick bodies can also be considered as an asset, a warning, or a way to see the world in a more expanded way. In this sense, their personal testimonies argue against the visual imperative of one-point perspective and the complete separation of the subject from their environment.

Another aspect of this interest in non-human actors is evident in the connections Dahlberg draws between the bodies of the participants and the medium through which viewers engage with their stories. Human bodies are not fully encased and separate from the world in which they live; they literally allow things in and react, sometimes violently, to their environment. Celluloid film is also reactive, as seen for instance in footage from a communal farm in Ukraine damaged by agricultural chemicals. This serves as one of many symbolic visualizations of the affinities between visual media, materiality, and the body.





**Figure 8.**  
Kajsa Dahlberg, *It Is Not Even True That There Is Air Between Us* (still), 2022  
HD Video 56 min, 17 sec loop  
Courtesy of the artist



**Figure 9.**  
Kajsa Dahlberg, *It Is Not Even True That There Is Air Between Us* (still), 2022  
HD Video 56 min, 17 sec loop  
Courtesy of the artist

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Contemporary artists are often well-versed in theory and engage in research or research-like practices. Katarina Pirak Sikku, Kader Attia, Michael Rakowitz and Kajsa Dahlberg may well be interested in affect theory, archival theory and new materialism. But then again, they might not. What I have attempted to demonstrate is simply that the type of critical practice I claim my four selected artists are engaged in is less about a distant, symptomatic reading between the lines to unveil hidden truths behind whatever expression or phenomenon they are concerned with, and more about an attitude of care, empathy, and affect that, far from abdicating a critical engagement, offers a different mode of critique.

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- 39 Over parts of this scene Emily Jacir reads a passage from a text by Edward Said about the multi-faceted way of being that is part of the Palestinian experience, and how there is a need for a new, alternative mode of expression to capture the Palestinian present.
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ARTICLE

# HORROR VACUI

## HIDDEN PHOTOGRAPHS AND THE COUNTER-ARCHIVE

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### Abstract

Horror vacui – the fear of the void, is faced in the two instances of counter-archival practice examined here: *Real Pictures*, an installation by the artist Alfredo Jaar, and *Holocaust Museum*, by the poet Robert Fitterman. Both works have at their center, photographs from the realm of atrocity that are, in different ways, rendered invisible to viewers or readers, who are beckoned into the resulting representational void. This article is an exploration of the epistemic implications of this perverse mode of representation, which include the opening up of both invisible image, and decontextualized words to active forms of imagining. Both Jaar and Fitterman confront the archive, as it is conceived by Michel Foucault – an engine of epistemic regulation – by disabling one of its primary mechanisms: the binding of text to image.

Keywords: Atrocity, Counter-archive, Representation, Museum, Memorial

## SYMBOLIC BATTLEGROUND

The presentation of photographs of atrocities and their aftermath, obscured and absent from view suggests a perverse act of representation; but it is an act that also illuminates the perversity of certain aspects of representation itself. In two works: “Real Pictures,”<sup>1</sup> an installation by the artist Alfredo Jaar, and *Holocaust Museum*,<sup>2</sup> a book by the poet Robert Fitterman – visible access is denied to the very images upon which each work is founded. These stagings of photographic absence raises urgent questions about knowledge transmission in the face of catastrophe.

Each of these works – by loosening the bonds that tie photographic images to text – problematize the authorization of knowledge, the hierarchical selection and presentation of facets of reality in ways that correspond to the interests of powerful representational forces. Such institutionalization of knowledge has famously been theorized by Michel Foucault and subsequent thinkers as ‘archival’<sup>3</sup> and the works analysed in what follows are, in their confrontation with representational authority, counter-archival. If the archive is the engine of epistemic regulation and control, then the counter-archive represents resistance to this. Counter-archival works differ radically from acts of representation conducted under the auspices of symbolic power which serve to distance collective apprehension of reality from actual social experience. By problematizing the organization, presentation and transmission of knowledge counter-archival strategies illuminate the space between symbolization and experience. Counter-archival practice is not a style or a genre, but a mode of reconfiguring existing information that is manifested in diverse forms of cultural practice. By illuminating the distance between phenomena and their representation, Jaar and Fitterman problematize the truth-claims implicit in representation, but they are also attempting to traverse this distance.

The representational strategies employed by Jaar and Fitterman partake in the symbolic war over actual conditions of existence. However far removed they may be from reality, symbolic operations also structure, sustain and transform the concrete experience of this reality: there is no aspect of social experience that is not symbolically grounded.<sup>4</sup> We find an example of the conflict between symbolic and experiential realms in the phenomena of the battleground; this territory – on which the destruction of human bodies occurs – is impossible to representationally exhaust as factual, material ground, and it is also the example par excellence of a symbolically saturated phenomenon, a mythic territorial ground over whose contested status human beings die *en masse*. This symbolic battleground of mass death is disturbed in both “Real Pictures” and *Holocaust Museum*; works which are not involved in the production of representations so much as they are contestations of the closures of representation itself. There is a recognition in such work, that the experiential reality of the human victims of atrocity, invisibly populating the works of Jaar and Fitterman, is symbolically unrepresentable; and an awareness of the disastrous paradox that some superimposed, ideologically inflected, symbolic

representation of them has contributed to their harm. Their suffering may not be representable, but *a priori* representation of their identity as ‘other’ was, in each case, the precursor of their suffering. Human beings – constituted in an archivally controlled field of representation; ideologically identified as types of subjects within this construct; and destroyed as a result of this identification – are ravaged in the name of representational force which is itself based on impossible truth-claims. The mythic assertion of the alignment of reality with particular symbolic claims is the herald of a force which shapes the social world into conformity with the precepts of power. The mythic nature of this representational force is the “big secret” of the archive; a secret that lies in the fact that the representations of authority cannot, in truth, represent.<sup>5</sup> Yet this ‘secret’ provides the symbolic underpinning of violence against the bodies of those designated as others. The ethical implications arising out of the acknowledgement of this representational incapacity become most urgent in instances of atrocity such as those that occurred in Rwanda following the 1994 genocide and during the Holocaust. These events form the basis of Jaar’s “Real Pictures” and Fitterman’s *Holocaust Museum*, respectively.

The political theorist Yannis Stavrakakis, from his own Lacanian perspective elaborates on the implications of this secret for representation: “The field of representation is itself revealed as lacking because it attempts the impossible, that is to say, the representation of something ultimately unrepresentable. Representation is the representation of a real fullness which is always beyond our grasp.”<sup>6</sup> By implication, behind the “fullness” described by Stavrakakis is a lack – a void in the symbolic order. It is the fear of this void that generates the “horror” of our title, and the following example of memorializing confronts this horror.

## GENOCIDE AND THE MEMORIAL VACUUM

In the wave of genocidal killing that began in Rwanda in April 1994, Tutsi civilians frequently left towns and villages and took refuge in local churches.<sup>7</sup> Rather than providing sanctuary, these churches, provided the Hutu militias and groups of civilians with convenient concentrations of victims. They were trapped and slaughtered, usually with machetes, rifles and hand grenades.<sup>8</sup> In and around some of these churches, nothing resembling a traditional memorialising process occurred for over a year, and the aftermath of atrocity was left intact. In the catholic mission at Nyarubuye, for instance, and the church at Ntirama, the dead remained unburied, lying where they were killed. Under the auspices of the new government – the Tutsi dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), which took power following the civil war in the aftermath of the genocide – these sites were preserved, in lieu of official memorials. The untouched sites – obviously retained something of the horror of the event – served as evidential sites, and as a means of propagating both political and humanitarian messages to Rwandan citizens and foreign journalists. The decision to leave intact sites of carnage, indicates a recognition on the part of the R.P.F. that

to cleanse the area might similarly amount to a cleansing of the event in collective memory.<sup>9</sup> The cultural and communitarian impulse to provide a symbolic dignity in death for the victims was – and to a certain extent still is – relegated below the need to preserve something of the carnal actuality of the atrocity.<sup>10</sup> This “leaving” of the physical evidence of the atrocity, the delay in the burial of the dead, also suggests a refusal to bury the traumatic charge of the event itself.

Responding to the aftermath of atrocity by failing to “cleanse” the site suggests a singular approach to public memory, one which maintains that if atrocity holds lessons for the future, it involves facing traces of its events in an unmediated form, without the symbolic abstraction a memorial would affect. Implicit in the act of preservation – as opposed to memorialized representation – is a mistrust in the capacity of representation itself to approach traumatic reality.

The question raised by the postponement of memorialising action at Ntirama and Nyarubuye concerns the extent to which the shrine, memorial, or any other official representation or mediation of the event, may itself facilitate forgetting. The refusal concerns the avoidance of the symbolic crystallisation of memory, whereby the memorial becomes the official concretion of a story which closes the case on the event by historicizing it, and consigning it to memory. In this scenario, the risk is that the burying of the atrocity, in conventional memorializing practices becomes, the concealment of both its causes and effects. Behind the consideration of photographic “refusal” in what follows, lies a question about the extent to which the structural roots of atrocity events may be protected by representation.

Esther Leslie, in an analysis of the burial of evidence of traumatic events in German history, speculates that: “The concretion of increasing oblivion might be the very essence of the memorial.”<sup>11</sup> The questions I explore here concern the extent to which the photography of atrocity corresponds to this amnesiac characteristic of the memorial. Is it possible for photographs to evade the discursive enclosures that may inhibit their affective potential? A potential that includes the activation of continual collective interrogation of traumatic events and their causes. In countering the assumption that any representation may bring that which is represented into the realm of full knowledge, the treatment of photographs in Jaar’s “Real Pictures” and Fitterman’s *Holocaust Museum* maintains a representational drive against epistemic closure, instead it solicits acts of imagination in the face of the unimaginable.

## PHOTOGRAPHIC PETRIFICATION

Photography, as an archival mechanism, represents the technologization of a petrifying gaze; a projection of desire that transforms all it surveys into the requirements of the projecting subject, the culture that infuses them, and the economic base which generates this culture. This projection is just one stage of an inescapable cycle in which acculturation has already become photographic. The photograph saturates perceptual experience to the extent that it is hard to



see, how we might see (or imagine) other than photographically. Perception, (if not the unconscious) is structured like a photograph.<sup>12</sup> Photography is in us before we gaze outward. We make the world in our photographic image because we are already made in its.

We can see this photographication of perception at work in accounts of the aftermath of massacres in Rwanda. For instance, here Philip Gourevitch describes his encounter with the dead in the church at Nyarubuye one year after the genocidal events:

At least fifty mostly decomposed cadavers covered the floor, wadded in clothing, their belongings strewn about and smashed. Macheted skulls had rolled here and there. The dead looked like pictures of the dead. They did not smell. They did not buzz with flies. They had been killed thirteen months earlier, and they hadn't been moved. Skin stuck here and there over the bones, many of which lay scattered away from the bodies, dismembered by the killers, or by scavengers – birds, dogs, bugs.<sup>13</sup>

While this account epitomizes traumatic representation at its most harrowing, a kind of photographication of perception is evident. Gourevitch's text suggests a scene of perceptual alternation between a "picturing" gaze, and embodied aspects of witnessing which are not amenable to visual representation. These include the sensory, nonvisual, effects of decomposition – for instance, smell, and in a later passage sound – as Gourevitch and another visitor accidentally tread upon and break the skull of one of the dead at Nyarubuye. But what we might think of as a kind of pre-photographic abstraction in the gaze – an abstraction that grants the observer perceptual distance from their own sensory immersion – is already at work. An internalized representational apparatus filters experience even in the immediacy of such experience. Journalists who have witnessed such scenes often draw attention to their own representational incapacity and the loss, however momentarily, of preconceived, sheltering worldviews.<sup>14</sup>

These accounts reveal how the encounters with the sites generate contradictory responses simultaneously; the ontological wounding caused by witnessing the horror produces the scab of representational closure. These experiences, where cognitive abstraction and traumatic, somatic engagement collide, show how that which needs to become the subject of communicative transaction – that which has to be shown, seemingly cannot become the subject of representation without the loss of its most vital component: its destabilizing somatic/traumatic potential. There is no representational means or strategy which does not cleanse the event and risk anaesthetizing the viewer against its effects. The mistrust of photographic representation that imbues the works considered in the next section, does not imply scepticism about its underlying drive to facilitate a cognitive transaction of that which we have not experienced. It is rather a concern with the extent to which the notion of representation itself may act as a screen or barrier against such transactions, with the result that a cognitive closure is

imposed on a reality which has dangerously evaded cognition. The maintenance of faith, on the part of these artists, in a continual process of representation – in the perpetual representational act – works against cognitive closure and the closed pre-representation of the other, of which atrocity is a symptom.

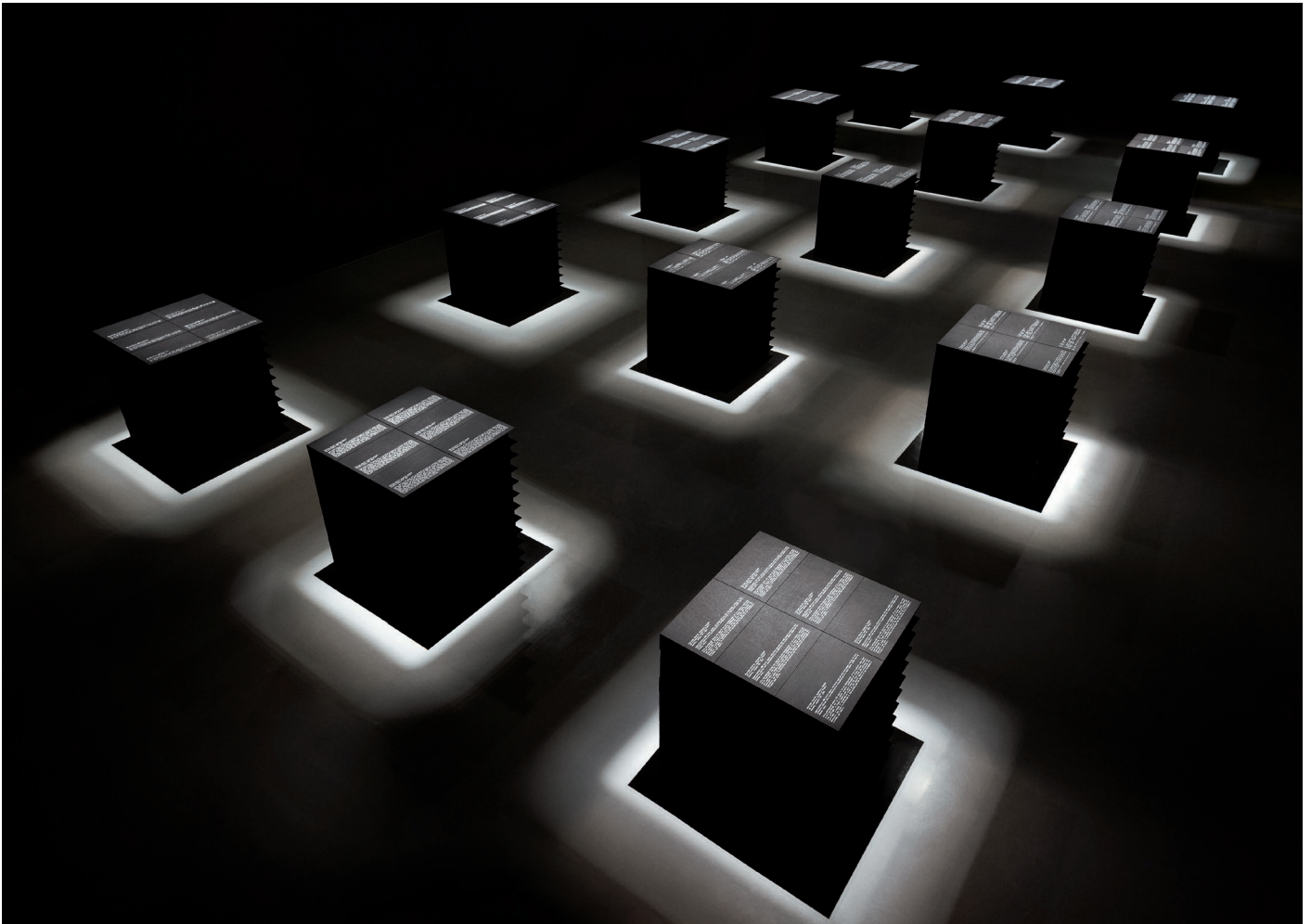
## ALFREDO JAAR: REAL PICTURES

Alfredo Jaar visited several Rwandan atrocity sites in the immediate aftermath of the genocide in 1994. This resulted in a series of works collectively entitled “The Rwanda Project” made in response to the events and their mediation. In some of these works, and in his commentary about them, Jaar examines the Western representational denial of the unfolding disaster.<sup>15</sup> As the enormity of the Rwanda crisis deepened, and the death count rose exponentially, the global informational lacuna expanded. In response, Jaar’s work becomes increasingly structured around invisibility and absence. When Western states and media did eventually begin to report the crisis, Jaar recognized the voyeuristic, colonial representational tropes that informed such representation. In which the tide of photographs of harmed, starving or destroyed bodies fuels a paternalistic vision of Africa and Africans. Against this, Jaar began to question the efficacy of photographs of violence and suffering.<sup>16</sup> Although he took many photographs of the aftermath of the carnage, none of those that feature the dead have ever been shown. Yet 372 of these images form the basis of the installation “Real Pictures,” first exhibited in 1995.<sup>17</sup> This work stages absence as a means of confronting representational and political blindness. The photographs, some of which Jaar has described as “the most terrible images I had ever taken”<sup>18</sup> are hidden from view in black archival boxes which are symmetrically stacked in groups to form monolithic, sepulchral forms, sparsely illuminated in darkened spaces [Figure 1]. Each box is printed with a white text, like the example cited below, which describes the inaccessible photograph inside.

Ntarama Church, Nyamata, Rwanda  
40 kilometres south of Kigali  
Monday, August 29, 1994

This photograph shows Benjamin Musisi, 50, crouched low in the doorway of the church amongst scattered bodies spilling out in the daylight. Four hundred Tutsi men, women and children who had come here seeking refuge, were slaughtered during Sunday mass.

Benjamin looks directly into the camera, as if recording what the camera saw. He asked to be photographed amongst the dead. He wanted to prove to his friends in Kampala, Uganda that the atrocities were real and that he had seen the aftermath.



**Figure 1**  
Alfredo Jaar, *Real Pictures*, 1995.  
Image courtesy of the artist.

The viewing scene is aestheticized and theatricalized, yet at the same time, any potential aestheticizing or voyeuristic gaze upon those in the photographs is thwarted. What we cannot see, we are incited to imagine. There is no photographic form to guide this imagining, and so the words become catalysts for subjectively generated imagery. By staging a distanciation of the viewer from the apprehension of the photograph, Jaar calls attention to the distanciating effects of representation itself, and in doing so refutes the implicit claim of all photography – indeed of all representation – that we have access to represented phenomena (or any phenomenal aspects of the scene) via such representation. The mediation of reality – the substitution of experience with authorized accounts – is illuminated by Jaar's strategy of thwarting it. Mythic transparency is replaced by a perceptual screen, and in this way an incitement is staged; an incitement to access the events in some other way that through the receipt of imagery (imagery which carries the implicit claim that the events have been representationally 'taken care of').

The implicit claim of representation nurtures an assumption of understanding; in this case it is symptomatic of an epistemic closure in the face of a collapse of human relatedness whose causes and effects demand perpetual attention. The assumption of knowledge of such an event is the ally of atrocity. In a scenario of unimaginable suffering like this, only ethical function of representation is the clarion call for interminable attention.

## PHOTOGRAPHIC VOID

The effect of the void created by Jaar's obscuring of photographs of the dead is analogous to effect of the theoretical void in the symbolic field that is central to Lacanian psychoanalytical epistemology. The void cannot exist except in relation to the communicative (symbolic) field it appears in, and Jaar differentiates his own communicative acts by removing photographs from ubiquitous confirmatory binary of image and text, which – fused together – form the basic scaffolding of mass-mediation. For Lacan the void is synonymous with those traumatically generated facets of the psyche that cannot be brought to consciousness, yet which perpetually pull symbolizing activity towards them. The void is the manifestation in the symbolic field, of what he terms "the real", whose fundamental characteristic is resistance to symbolization.<sup>19</sup> From this psychic model, subsequent Lacanian thinkers such as the philosopher Joan Copjec, have extrapolated this idea of the void to propose voiding effects in the entire symbolic field. These are the effects of symbolic negation which generate autonomous acts of representation. Where, for Lacan, symbolic processes occur via a transaction of the dead signs of living signifiers, the production of a void in the symbolic field acquires a perversely animating role. It activates the imaginary activity of the subject, who is left with no other option than to imagine what was once there. It is this imaginary activity, this envisaging of absent information and experience, that is the target of Jaar's work. The epistemic suspension creates a void in the field of discourse, which is the site of a productive "nonknowledge". It is a form of knowledge that may not have ideological utility, but is autonomous. It is not introjected, and if it resembles ignorance then it does so no more than 'knowledge' provided by power; it is the ground zero of autonomous thought. For Copjec, its value lies in its capacity subject to resist totalitarian inscription. Copjec contrasts this nonknowledge to epistemic positivity – the assumption of knowledge which leads to a determinative, self-fulfilling belief in discursive omnipotence. For Copjec "Nonknowledge or invisibility is not registered as the wavering and negotiations between two certainties, two meanings or positions, but as the undermining of every certainty, the incompleteness of every meaning and position."<sup>20</sup>

## A GAZE FROM THE VOID

Jaar's "Real Pictures" complicate the power-saturated conventions of receiving representations; a complication that has political implications for viewing-as-spectatorship. Each text in "Real Pictures" alludes to the gaze of a Rwandan witness, so that attention to the events themselves are supplemented by attention to their effects upon a survivor. If it were possible to transmit the gaze of those who have survived atrocity, so that it entered us as easily as ideology, the ethical problems associated with its representation would vanish. The gaze of the witness/survivor carries an inaccessible, somatic archive of pain. It cannot be transmitted, but when

Jaar stages its non-transmission, we are incited to search for it. The manifold functions of the photograph are opened up to scrutiny in Jaar's texts about witnessing, the complex field of witnessing, and viewing witnesses is activated, and the critical evidentiary role of the photograph for Rwandan witnesses of the genocide is emphasized (itself the main reason why the photograph must exist). In an inversion of the power relations in the panoptic gaze, we are made aware of, but cannot see the gaze of the witnesses in the photographs. And so, the photographic gaze – the vehicle of othering and objectification that so often reinforces the power relationship between African and Western viewers through cultural production and consumption of the traumatic experience of the 'other' – is diverted. "We," consumers viewing others – far removed from the scene yet implicated in the politics that create it – must find other ways of witnessing.

Ariella Azoulay notes how "disenfranchized populations are prone to turn into photographs taken by others, more than they tend to become photographers themselves, or self-photographed subjects."<sup>21</sup> Jaar's denial of photographic access to his predominantly Western viewing audience denies them the easy self-reinforcement that is the product of the unencumbered gaze. Jaar's complication of the photographic transaction is also a reminder of Azoulay's key conceptualization of the photograph itself, not as an object or a mere trace, but as an experiential site of encounter, which has the potential to create a community, or, more specifically a "citizenry" around each photographic event. For Azoulay, however power-saturated and oppressive the photographic scenario may be, the photographed subject can still contribute to this community in a way that refutes their subjugation by the gaze. For Azoulay the photograph of a human being is not a frozen memory or a record of subservience, but a means of preserving and re-activating the presence of the photographed subject in the (always politicized) encounter with the photograph. Each photograph has the potential to be a catalyst for an intermingling of subjectivity predicated on the gaze of both viewer and photographed subject:

To see more than they could alone, individuals had to align themselves with other individuals who would agree to share their visual field with one another. Photography reorganized what was accessible to the gaze, in the course of which everyone had to renounce his or her right to preserve his or her own, autonomous visual field from external forces, but also acquired an obligation to defend the gaze in order to make it available for others to enter and intermingle.<sup>22</sup>

The idea of such a photographic encounter is always at war with the political drive to establish the nature of a photograph as commodifiable. A commodification which cannot be separated from photographic experience that culminates in the projection of the gaze itself as the means of imbuing what is seen with commodity-value; a value whose measure is its contribution to an economic function. The aestheticizing gaze which as we noted earlier, is brought to bear upon carnage, is not the result of an alignment of the gaze with norms of beauty or a correspondence

with customs of formal order. It marks, rather the integration of the gaze into a network of signifiers that normalize specific instrumentalized conditions of existence where human dispensability abounds.

In Jaar's "Real Pictures" the images of suffering are protected from this gaze, and from the aesthetic process that is conditioned by it. The images in "Real Pictures" can only be reached by a metaphysical act of imagination which denies both the commodifying gaze and sensory gratification and the objectification of those pictured. The images of the dead must be imagined; they cannot be closed and consumed. The act of sealing the images from view reflects an anxiety over what the "view" has become, and the social relations it is instrumental in perpetuating.

### THE CAPTION AND THE VOID – ROBERT FITTERMAN'S '*HOLOCAUST MUSEUM*'

The poet Robert Fitterman's book *Holocaust Museum* directs an iterative poetic practice based on the use of "found" language from various sources towards the representation of atrocity.<sup>23</sup> The work is an archive of an archive, in which Fitterman re-presents a selection of captions from photographs taken from the website of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.<sup>24</sup> It severs these captions from the images they once described, and like Jaar, Fitterman effects a photographic dissociation in which texts that only exist because of the existence of photographs are released from their photographic referents.

Under normal circumstances of representation, bound together with captions, photographs reinforce the rhetorics of representation by forming a bond of mutually confirming truth-claims. Where representation relies on image/caption dyads, these basic units of mediation are usually concerned with the transaction of positivity. The term 'positivity' here, as well as indicating epistemic certainty, is also fundamental to Foucault's notion of the historical *a priori*; the matrix of authorized, validated and sanctioned knowledge that conditions our perception of reality.<sup>25</sup> Such all-pervasive representational units authorize the transformation of the erstwhile unknown, into ostensible knowledge; the rhetoric of positive knowledge carried by the caption implicitly assert the positivity of facts; an assertion whose power is intensified by the anonymity of authorship. This removes the taint of subjective partiality and disguises the caption as a disembodied unit of pure knowledge; reinforcing its status as a positive force destined to fill the void in understanding. The caption, in conventional usage, serves to corral the visual image toward linguistic meaning. Where the image threatens to divert and proliferate thought – the caption harnesses the image's unpredictable multiplicity – it yokes the image to the task of representational singularity. The interlocking of image and caption authorises information as an apparent manifestation of the phenomenal world, and together, through this provision of knowledge, they erect an authorizing screen of certainty over the troubling dubiety of reality. But behind the resulting positive constructs, the void



of ignorance, uncertainty, qualm and negativity continues to dilate. By breaking the seal formed around the represented event, (by disabling the function of the caption) *Holocaust Museum* opens a portal to this epistemic void in the representation of atrocity. Where the caption customarily serves to bar access to the vacuum in knowledge that is embodied by the uncertainties of the photograph, then, inversely, the removal of the caption reopens the void into which imaginary activity is drawn.

The subjugating effect of texts upon photographs in this relationship is well known.<sup>26</sup> And it is difficult to conceive of a photographic image free of textual determination. In Fitterman's *Holocaust Museum* the result of the photograph's "removal", is also a removal of the capacity of text to foreclose perception of photographs. But the content of the photographs is, nonetheless evoked – haunting the catalogue of captions like an indistinct, collective, visual memory. The separation also results in an unexpected liberation of the captions from their role as 'captors' of the photographs; they are no longer determined by their relation to the photographs, and begin to act with a disturbing autonomy [Figure 2].

The ostensibly simple act of separation illuminates, disrupts and problematizes the entire archival mechanism that underpins photographic display. The epistemic function of any archive or museum, including that of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, is entangled with the political aims of the state, and the captioning of any photograph forms the uppermost layer of an invisible palimpsest of superposed meaning that has deep roots in the political-industrial complex. If we follow the Foucauldian model and conceive of the archive, not as a repository, but a discourse-machine which pre-interprets the significance of the documents, then Fitterman's de-captioning confronts such a priori interpretation. It disturbs the components of official language in their position within the matrix of signifiers that constitute the field of representation. If the text-image relationship really is the scaffolding upon which the archival episteme is built, then their separation serves to undermine confidence in its construction of discourse. Once we lose confidence in the discursive underpinnings of reality, we may find ourselves drifting toward a cognitive void, where time-honoured prescriptions and received information no longer orientate us in our apprehension of reality.

Fitterman's texts are isolated from the representational field in which they are embedded, the field that establishes the norms of description – a "reinforcement field" that imbues descriptive language with the appearance of transparency, as if it were a natural emanation from events and things. This decontextualization also draws attention to the process of captioning itself, if the caption does not arise from the photograph where does it come from? What is the process that grants any authorial rights over represented phenomena?<sup>27</sup> Because the language of the caption is intended to be used as an instrument for interpretation of the photograph, its dissociation from the photograph means that this instrumentalizing function is blocked; the language ceases to refer only to its lost referent, even when that referent is its explicit target. For example, in the following text: "A survivor stokes smouldering human remains in a crematorium oven that is still lit [Photograph #00315]."<sup>28</sup>

View of one of the ovens in the crematorium at the Ebensee concentration camp. [Photograph #48973]

An American soldier inspects the crematorium in Buchenwald. [Photograph #82224]

A survivor stokes smoldering human remains in a crematorium oven that is still lit. [Photograph #00315]

American soldiers view a pile of human remains outside the crematorium in Buchenwald. [Photograph #20308]

Ruins of crematorium II. [Photograph #08857]

An American soldier tests the crematorium elevator while on an inspection of the Natzweiler-Struthof concentration camp. [Photograph #02005]

The new crematorium in Dachau, which was completed in May 1944. [Photograph #05810]

Two ovens inside the crematorium at the Dachau concentration camp. [Photograph #80722]

Crematoria ovens in Buchenwald concentration camp. [Photograph #80255]

The charred remains of former prisoners in two crematoria ovens in the newly liberated Buchenwald concentration camp. [Photograph #80253]

View of crematorium ovens at the Majdanek concentration camp after the liberation. [Photograph #05548]

A crematoria oven in Ebensee, a sub-camp of Mauthausen. [Photograph #04880]

In which there are no specific identifiers of place, time or identity, the referring function of language has its grip – on the historical, temporal specificity of the Holocaust – weakened. The language strays into a generalized realm of bodily conflagration; it touches other atrocities and connects with them through its evocation of more universal, deathly scenarios. The unframing of the language creates a kind of terrible poetic dispersal of what is described, into other times, places and situations.

By contrast in a section entitled “GAS CHAMBERS” the majority of the 51 texts locate what is described in a specific, named site of a concentration camp. But even here, the reiteration of the names of these real, specific sites in the accumulated captions – because they are separated from the attendant photograph – take on a repetitive, insistent quality, a fragmented, chaotic refrain that evokes a terrible accumulation of violence. The names of atrocity sites that populate the decontextualised captions form a terrible litany of accumulating disaster, repetitively mentioning:

Dachau, Mauthausen, Dachau, Dachau, Dachau, Auschwitz, Mauthausen, Birkenau, Dachau, Dachau, Stutthof, Auschwitz, Gusen, Majdanek, Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, Dachau, Dachau, Dachau, Ebensee, Buchenwald, Buchenwald, Natzweiler, Struthof, Dachau, Dachau, Buchenwald, Buchenwald, Majdanek, Ebensee, Mauthausen, Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen, Bergen, Belsen, Buchenwald, Dachau, Dachau, Dachau, Dachau, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Dachau, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Auschwitz-Birkenau, Auschwitz-Birkenau...

In Fitterman’s iteration, the names of atrocity-sites escape their geographical and historical locations, and assume the status of carnage-saturated language, delivered into our world now – with the disruptive quality of a dark mantra or a curse. The closures of instrumental language are unbound in such a process. Once the caption loses its utility it takes on a kind of linguistic surplus-value that it cannot be measured by descriptive efficacy. In this respect, Fitterman’s work amounts to the theft of language from the production-line of confirmatory discourse in order for it to be re-assembled elsewhere in contexts where it can be read (or heard) set apart from historicizing narratives.

## THE AUTHORIZING CAPTION

The implication of the self-proclaimed *raison d’être* of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, is that an epistemic disaster would be taking place if visitors to it were to become acclimatized to atrocity through its representations of it.<sup>29</sup> But the museum’s reliance on representational orthodoxies exacerbates exactly this risk – of perpetuating the forms of an archival mechanism acclimatizing visitors to existing global conditions in which atrocity plays an important part in the maintenance of international political order. One aspect of the maintenance of this order is the enclosing

of subjectively experienced reality within an overarching narrative superimposed from above. The photographic caption plays its part in this by directing apprehension of the atrocity photograph to pre-determined ends (establishing the referent as belonging to history, the event as occurrence elsewhere, disaster as the concern of others, etc.). Narrative is the sugar-coating of discourse; it encloses both the subject and the referent in an authorized story, and from its inception the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum authorities set out to encapsulate atrocity in narrative:

Comprehension of the narrative and its meaning, is not only an intellectual but also an emotional experience. The emotional effect of the narrative in the museum exhibition is comparable to that of the narrative in novels, plays, or motion pictures. All of them are based on plot. The plot triggers identification which envelops us mentally and forces us to relate to the meaning of the story line. Being gripped by the plot, projecting ourselves into it, identifying with its heroes, and developing resentment towards its villains, we get emotionally involved. This emotional involvement opens us up to educational influence.<sup>30</sup>

This description of narrative reveals an uncomfortable similarity between its own function as an educational tool, and the indoctrinating potential of myth; where the efficacy of each requires the veiling of authorial intention.<sup>31</sup> The “educational influence” to which we are “emotionally” opened up, is limited in this way to the reception of an a priori narration; a narrative enclosure in which experience of the face of atrocity has already been taken care of. The relationship between the visitors to the museum in this “circulation path,”<sup>32</sup> this “funnel” of narrative, through which they move, mirrors the relationship of the seeing, experiencing subject to the wider symbolic order. The seeing subject poses a threat to this order to the extent that their account of their experience of it, is unpredictable; and any unpredictability that threatens to become communicative currency, presents a challenge to established accounts of the world and its structural power-relationships. The suppression of such accounts is an inevitable aspect of the archival (self-preserving, symbolic) mechanisms of this order. The archive must absorb accounts which are potentially destabilising to it. The symbolic apparatus of power also “envelops us mentally and forces us to relate to the meaning of its story line.”<sup>33</sup> The effect is that atrocity is held in place by narrative, thus ensuring that no connection is made, for instance between the represented atrocity and a state’s own genocidal origin-story; or its contemporary sponsorship of regimes whose activities may mirror those represented in the museum.

But in Fitterman’s “dissociated” texts the flow of narrative is broken. A space is opened up between language and the absent image in which it is impossible to receive fixed meaning. As such it evades the closures of utility and prolongs the possibility of dwelling in the effect of the descriptive words. In doing so it prolongs attention to their horrific implications; it unties the violence of the Holocaust from its embedded position in a historicizing narrative discourse. The pile of destructive referents lose the sense that was hitherto made of them through the ostensibly, mutually-explaining associations offered by photographs with captions. If there is an aesthetic in this work then it is an

aesthetic of shattered sense – a “palilaliac” litany of gas chambers, crematoria, ovens, human remains, bones, ashes, prisoners, victims and ruins. The accumulation of such words – in a language snatched from functionality – stains the language itself with the pathology of atrocity. It becomes an inventory that reverberates with pain.

## CONCLUSION: IN VACUO

In the representation of atrocity, the existence of the gap between the positive claims of representation, and the phenomenal reality of the event, presents the most urgent of epistemic and ethical problems. A problem that might be characterized as the aggregation of ignorance generated by the receipt (rather than the acquisition) of knowledge. The idea that we have, at the experiential level, understood an event because of the representational efficacy of the image/caption binary, leads to the establishment of a host of representational fallacies, for instance: that the suffering of others has somehow been comprehended; that the horror of the disastrous event has been transmitted; and that its causes have been made apparent. In this way the atrocity is historicized, and the case for further imaginary inquiry into it, is closed. Receipt of ostensibly objective knowledge displaces subjective attention to the causes of atrocity. By suffusing the atrocity event in this way, with a representational past tense, attention is diverted from the persistence of these causes in subsequent political configurations.

By contrast, the caption deprived of the image, as it is in the work of Fitterman and Jaar, loses its instrumentalising *raison d'être* – the provision of a linguistic conclusion to imaginary activity around the image. By the same token, when the image is, under “normal” conditions, welded to the caption, the image is reduced to the supplementary role of provider of visual proof for the claims of the caption. When this text-image binary is broken, as it is in *Holocaust Museum* and “Real Pictures” a series of effects is produced, which release the stranglehold of the knowledge-authorising caption from perception.

Firstly, by removing it from its connection to the image, the instrumentalizing function of the caption is exposed, and because it is exposed in this way, it ceases to authorize knowledge of the event. It is revealed to be what Lacan describes as an “anchoring point” (*point de capiton*), a signifier which “stops the otherwise endless movement of the signification.”<sup>34</sup> This loss of the captioning function grants a perilous, imaginary entry into the realm of atrocity, without the guiding authorizations of meaning hitherto provided. The horror is signalled by the words, but where it was once granted a final meaning through the combination of words and text, this semblance of received, conclusive meaning is now denied. What remains is a void in the field of constructed meaning, a vacuum that draws subjective projections of meaning into it. In “Real Pictures” and *Holocaust Museum*, the liberated captions become prompts for imaginary enquiry into the realm of atrocity, a realm that is signposted but not foreclosed. Consequently, we find ourselves simultaneously in

a realm of horror, and a space empty of given meaning.

If any trace of disaster is retained by any representation, then in order to approach it – if any such approach is possible – we must overcome our horror at the absence of predetermined meaning, and dwell in this absence; in this dearth of explanatory logic. The void itself thus becomes the generator of collective imaginary activity that allows us to transcend the authorization of prefabricated meanings and explanations. Jaar and Fitterman, in different ways, beckon toward the void, asking us to enter without the crutches of deflecting reason and historicizing knowledge, and examine the event for traces of the causes of horror that still thrive among us in the present.

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  - 8 Estimates of the numbers of dead vary to the extent that massive number of victims may be regarded as literally incalculable. It became a commonplace shorthand in the months after the genocide to speak of "up to a million" (Keane 1995), 29. Examples of later calculations place the figure between 500,000 and one million (Wrong 2001, 243), at 800,000 (Gourevitch 1998, 3) and at 850,000 (Jennings 2000, 8).
  - 9 For a detailed report on subsequent memorialising controversies in Rwanda, see Rémi Korman, "Sacred Spaces and Massacre Sites after the Tutsi Genocide: Questions about the Patrimonialization of Churches in Rwanda," *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 137, no.1 (2018): 155 – 167. [https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E\\_VING\\_137\\_0155-sacred-spaces-and-massacres-sites.htm#no18](https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_VING_137_0155-sacred-spaces-and-massacres-sites.htm#no18)

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- 11 Esther Leslie, "Wrapping the Reichstag: Re-visioning German History," *Radical Philosophy* (May-June 1996): 6-17.
- 12 I am taking liberties with the Lacanian maxim "the unconscious is structured like a language". See Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (London: Penguin, 1994), 203.
- 13 Philip Gourevitch, *We Wish to Inform You That Tomorrow We Will be Killed With Our Families* (London: Picador, 199), 15.
- 14 See, for instance David Beresford, "Dogged by Haunting Images," *Media Guardian*, London, 22 August 1994. And Christian Jennings, "The Good, the Mad and The Ugly," *Daily Telegraph*, London, 12 March 1995.
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- 16 Debra Bricker Balken and Alfredo Jaar, *The Lament of the Images. Exhibition Catalogue* (Massachusetts: MIT, 1999), 19.
- 17 See Artist website: <https://alfredojaar.net/projects/1995/the-rwanda-project/real-pictures/>
- 18 Alfredo Jaar in Bricker Balken and Jaar, *The Lament of the Images*, 23.
- 19 Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 49.
- 20 Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire. Lacan Against the Historicists* (Massachusetts: MIT, 1994), 18.
- 21 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 176.
- 22 Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 113.
- 23 For a detailed, analytical survey of other examples of works utilizing found language, see Kaja Marczevska, *This is Not a Copy. Writing at the Iterative Turn* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).
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- 26 See for instance Alan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," *Artforum* 13, no.5 (January 1975). <https://www.artforum.com/features/on-the-invention-of-photographic-meaning-212642/>
- 27 "When asked at a public reading about the ethical justification of his appropriation Fitterman answered, 'Who has ownership of the articulation of collective memory?'" See Maggie Rosenau, "Robert Fitterman. Holocaust Museum Review," *The Volta*, 1 April 2015. <https://thevolta.org/inreview-holocaustmuseum.html>
- 28 Fitterman, *Holocaust Museum*, 92.
- 29 One of the aims of the museum is "demonstrating the applicability of the moral lessons learned from the Holocaust to current and future events." See Jeshujahu Weinberg, *The Holocaust Museum in Washington* (New York: Rizzoli, 1995), 19.
- 30 Weinberg, *The Holocaust Museum in Washington*, 49.
- 31 Walter Benjamin has proposed that the entanglement of violence and myth is intrinsic to the establishment of law. See Walter Benjamin, *Toward the Critique of Violence, A Critical Edition*. Ed. Peter Fenves and Julia NG (California: Stanford University Press, 2021), 57.
- 32 Weinberg, *The Holocaust Museum in Washington*, 51.
- 33 Ibid, 49.
- 34 Jacques Lacan. *Écrits*, Trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1992), 303.

## ARTICLE

# HISTORICAL NARRATIVES, (COUNTER)VISUALITIES, AND MODERNITY

## THE ACTIVIST AND ARCHIVAL INTERVENTIONS OF PAULO TAVARES

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Beginning with the assumption that the climate crisis is a crisis of colonialism and coloniality, this article discusses Paulo Tavares – an architect, researcher and activist who engages in ecological-political struggles throughout but not limited to South America. Throughout this article considers Tavares in view of decolonial, Africana and radical continental theory in order to elucidate his epistemological, ethical and methodological principles for researchers in the Global North. Focuses include the employment of research by Tavares and those he collaborates with to demystify colonial archives, invert modern visual technologies and produce critical discourses in order to fashion what can be described as counter histories and counter archives. This includes the appropriation and subversion of colonial photographic archival material and the production of technically rendered digital images that are used to expose the dual anti-ecological and anti-Indigenous attacks throughout the Amazon Forest, and beyond. Elsewhere Tavares' partnerships with Indigenous activists and deployment of Indigenous epistemologies to criticize and decentre modern epistemology are considered in view of the goal of enacting political-legal change within official modern structures of knowledge and power. Specifically, the article details how the act and application of counter archival material within organizations, such as the museum, gallery, university and court, exposes the ingrained inability of modern structures to respond to climate breakdown and decolonial demands.

**Keywords:** Modernity, Colonialism, Histories, Archive, Paulo Tavares.

## INTRODUCTION

Faced with the collapse of the earth systems and the continuing globally articulated demand to address the ongoing legacy of colonialism, the centres of academia in the Global North are increasingly producing knowledge for the purposes of decarbonization and decolonization. Both inside and outside the institution efforts to change humanity's relationship to the environment in the Netherlands, where I write from, have largely been conceptualized in isolation from the enduring "political, epistemic, scientific, legal, and philosophical struggles to dismantle the colonial structures of living together."<sup>1</sup> As argued by Malcom Ferdinand, the lack of engagement with "the colonial question" has led academics and activists alike to "overlook the fact that both historical colonization and contemporary structural racism are at the centre of destructive ways of inhabiting the Earth."<sup>2</sup> Compounded by the ethical and moral responsibility of institutions who historically fulfilled and in many respects continue to fulfil key functions within the project of modernity – constituted by interlinked interventions into the world's environmental and social systems – academics must conceptualize and thereby link the two struggles together as a matter of urgency.

Through the touchpoint of architect, researcher and activist Paulo Tavares, this article discusses the epistemologies of and activities within multiple intersecting alliances based across the world, including in South and North America/Abya Yala and Europe. These groups jointly struggle towards Indigenous land sovereignty and against the violent environmental extractivism and abuse enacted throughout the globe by public-private partnerships. The various communities Tavares has engaged with partake and theorize endeavours that cross boundaries between political action, education, research and art. This also includes projects conducted in the fields and official spaces of academia, heritage, law, design and architecture.<sup>3</sup> To a significant degree Tavares's participation revolves around synergistic ecological-political struggles and the fashioning of critical discourses. Recurrent throughout the various levels of activism is Tavares's involvement in the collective generation of visual counter archives including but not limited to rearranged colonial photographs and new digitally produced technical images. The act of creating new archival material constitutes and is constituted by interventions into modern state-corporate organizations – such as the museum, gallery, university and court – with the intention to enact political-legal change within official structures, for example, the granting of legal protections by the state to a given social group, in addition to challenging the way these structures conceive of and thereby operate in the world.

This article considers Tavares's production of visual counter-archives in view of theory that overlaps with his stated emancipatory and ecological intentions. This includes scholarship at the junctures between decolonial, Africana and what in Europe is referred to as radical continental theory. Rather than seeking to evaluate or taxonomize the intellectual concepts used by and activities of Tavares, this article foregrounds the epistemological, ethical and methodological principles that

guide the communities he engages with. Theory to this end facilitates the location of ideological “common ground” and potentialities of alliances inside and outside of the academy.<sup>4</sup> A particular focus is how decolonial theory and praxis can be generated *vis-à-vis* visual archives within the context of modernity’s traditional knowledge producing structures.

Beginning with an overview of Tavares’s epistemological and ethical outlook, the first section of the article outlines understandings of the past within decolonial, Africana and radical continental theory. This entails a discussion of the concepts of colonialism, colonality, western knowledge and knowledge production, History, the archive, modern visual technology, histories and counter-archives. Highlighting the interconnectedness of ecological and decolonial demands and strategies, this section provides framework with which to elucidate Tavares’s work. The second part of the article focuses on the projects of “Des-Habitat”, those carried out in collaboration with *Forensic Architecture* and “Trees, Vines, Palms and Other Architectural Monuments.” Included is a discussion of how Tavares appropriates architectural, spatial and visual technologies as a means of producing counter visual archives. Additionally, the use of retellings of history are discussed in the context of their application within the political-legal structures of modernity.

## EPISTEMOLOGIES AND APPROACHES

Tavares and the groups he engages with are informed by a plurality of epistemological frameworks. Amongst other influences there are traces of an understanding of the past shared in decolonial, Africana and radical continental spheres throughout his work. Broadly this shared history conceptualizes the epoch of modernity as the production and reproduction of the contemporary “transnational, capitalist order” that was established by the European conquest of the New World, transatlantic slavery and colonization from the 15th century onwards.<sup>5</sup> Decolonial scholarship describes modernity as being constituted by both colonialism, described by Maldonado-Torres as the “political and economic relation in which the sovereignty of a nation or a people rests on the power of another nation”, and colonality, that is, the “long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labour, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations.”<sup>6</sup> Tavares focuses on both the ongoing colonial projects of political and economic control, such as the continued incursions by settler-colonial groups into Indigenous lands, in combination with the hierarchical “authoritarian and discriminatory mentality and form of sociability” that is a product of the homogenizing, monopolizing dynamics of colonality.<sup>7</sup>

Modernity can be seen as the dominant ideology of the “ruling exploiting” class which was established through conquest, slavery and colonialism.<sup>8</sup> This group’s “own’ explanation of history” – referred to in this article as History – serves “its class interests, cements its unity, and maintains the masses under its

exploitation.”<sup>9</sup> As outlined by Jackson, modernity is premised on the reduction of non-western forms of knowing to chaotic and incomplete forms of reason.<sup>10</sup> In turn this produces an epistemic hierarchy that crowns European thought and its various colonially mediated mutations as an inviolable form of reason or, in other words, the only cognitive and linguistic means through which reality can be accurately represented. As evident in the binaries produced by modernity to interpret the world, for example, “nature/society, savage/civilized, developed/underdeveloped”, the ideology of modernity enforces a historically contingent, limiting and limited “conceptual orthodoxy” that masquerades as ahistorical and universal.<sup>11</sup>

For Tavares, the hierarchical ordering of forms of knowledge by no means ceases or has ceased following the end of colonialism. Instead, in line with Mignolo’s following description, he infers that contemporary “master paradigms” – from universal categories in academia, design, architecture to law and beyond – are entangled with “imperial desires” by their claim to singularly reflect reality.<sup>12</sup> This is evident in his exposition of individuals emanating from the official institutions of western knowledge production, including “the north American archaeologist Betty J. Meggers”, the sociologists Gilberto Freyre and Werneck Sodr  and “the urban planner of Bras lia” Lucio Costa, as complicit in the project of modernity.<sup>13</sup> Contrasting the professed objectivity and neutrality of western epistemology’s claims to reveal the truth, Tavares situates modern academic thought in view of the social networks, relations and historical contingencies that it constitutes and is constituted by. For example, Meggers’s interpretation of Indigenous civilization as ‘limited’ due to “the incapacity of the tropical forest soil to sustain intense agriculture” is positioned as a product of, in part, her localized Euro-American metrics of progress.<sup>14</sup> In this case, a successful civilization is synonymous with that which erases biodiversity for the purposes of monoculturalizing agriculture and establishing dwellings cleaved from nature. An unsuccessful, underdeveloped civilization by extension is one that does not follow western practices and interpretations of the relationship between humanity and nature. Highlighting the Achuar’s conceptualization of “the forest as an extension rather than the outside of the village space” in view of Megger’s diagnosis, Tavares demonstrates the colonial dynamics of supposedly neutral scholars who profess to be able to speak for others.<sup>15</sup> Likewise technologically western means of representing the world, for example, advanced digitally rendered images, are within dominant ideology conceived to be objective, transparent reflections of reality. Photographs and video, for instance, are viewed to be adequate mediums to be used to establish the truth of a past event within a legal setting over, for example, Indigenous forms of storytelling. To this end the control of image technology and its positioning as superior to other forms of representing reality can too be seen as exclusionary in that if a claim to truth is not produced using a western technology of knowledge, it risks being labelled as corrupted.

Tavares also adopts a critical stance towards what Benjamin describes as the archive. Envisioned as the repository of all sources considered to be accurate, reliable fragments of the past, and as such a material manifestation and site of



sustaining a given historical outlook, the archive's self-representation as a neutral vessel is exposed as a fallacy. Instead, here the archive is conceptualized as a schema that ascribes value to objects ossified within it according to the regional epistemic principles of the West – principles which are draped in garments of universality. Historian of the Middle Passage Smallwood elaborates this notion by arguing that the archive acts to naturalize the West's particular historical perspective, by neutralizing others' through the casting of alternative understandings as non-existent, ahistoric or underdeveloped and therefore unworthy of note. The archive's unequal ethical consideration of racialized groups reifies the hierarchical and totalizing notions of the ways in which the past can be interpreted by claiming to be transparent and universally legitimate rather than the product of a particular historical vantage point. In this sense the archive embodies "the process of colonial violence".<sup>16</sup> Smallwood uses the example of slave ship accountancy logs to elucidate this point, noting that the transformation of details of victims lives into homogenous, banal economic data construed in terms of (un)successful trading voyages serves to create "comforting and harmonious stories" out of barbarous events.<sup>17</sup> One can determine that even if future generations condemn the morality of past historical actors, by assuming the neutrality of the archive the mode by which the past is interpreted and related to is repeated – the enslaved remain numbers on a balance sheet and antiblack slavery remains a 'trade', that is, a civilized form of economic behaviour.

Rather than achieving hegemony through accident or merit, Tavares's understanding of colonialism and coloniality posit that the triumph of western knowledge was achieved through the joint ecological destruction, genocide and "epistemicide" that occurred and is occurring throughout modernity.<sup>18</sup> Visual scholar Mirzoeff concurs by arguing that the "inevitability" of History's narrative of superiority and its archive's claim to embody objective truth rests upon an endless cycle of violence.<sup>19</sup> Specifically the aims and functions of "[c]lassifying, separating, and aestheticizing", so as to ultimately control and justify that control, was and continues to be at the core of the operations of (visual) power in modernity.<sup>20</sup> It is in this context that Tavares enacts "epistemic disobedience" as a means to combat the effects of colonialism and coloniality "*experienced* by all the inhabitants of the globe" through practices of history.<sup>21</sup> This in part can be seen as deriving from the acknowledgement that different "modes of knowing, being irremediably partial and situated, will have different consequences and effects on the world."<sup>22</sup> In practice this constitutes the application of varying forms of knowledge according to the ethical and political priorities of a given group, thereby "coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes."<sup>23</sup> This is reflected by Tavares's critical engagement of western epistemologies with non-western epistemologies as a means of challenging the assumptions of colonially derived forms of knowledge through exposition and contrast, in turn "recovering" and mobilizing the "emancipatory potential of science."<sup>24</sup> This engenders appropriating modernity's material and ideological infrastructure for emancipatory and ecological ends. Tavares's critical engagement with visual

technologies complicit in modernity in this light turns the products of modernity against itself.<sup>25</sup> Within this matrix knowledge becomes disentangled from notions of cognitive superiority and is instead attached to utility for a given community.<sup>26</sup> The role of the academy and institutions in this light becomes structured by the respect of, in the case of Tavares's engagements with the communities of the Amazon forest, Indigenous sovereignty and an understanding of the historically cognitively violent role played by official, western knowledge producing centres within modernity. In turn the exchange of knowledge and research relationships are structured around accountability "to the collective" and an inversion of the hoarding, exclusionary production of knowledge that traditionally characterized and continues to characterize occidental academic and institutional organizations.<sup>27</sup> This can be said to be guided in part by the decolonial value of "self-reflexivity" that "productively reshapes the context of practices into the motive and engine of actions that do not simply repeat their contexts" – such a repetition here would be the complicity of Tavares, as an individual occupying 'official' roles within modern institutions, in epistemicidal discourse.<sup>28</sup>

The regeneration of histories, that is elements and retellings of the past that counterpose History and its claim to universality, can be described as acts of epistemic disobedience. Using Mirzoeff's concept of countervisuality, histories can be positioned as "totally different form[s] of seeing, acting and being grounded" that contribute towards "tears" in modernity's hegemonic History.<sup>29</sup> Countervisuality is similarly "the dissensus" with modernity and "a dispute over what is visible as an element of a situation, over which visible elements belong to what is common, over the capacity of subjects to designate this common and argue for it."<sup>30</sup> In this sense countervisuality does not accept the modern archive's framing of events. Instead, it seeks to create new narratives that expose the violence of colonialism and coloniality. This is countenanced through "attempts to bring into view, and into being, alternative ways of imagining and modes of becoming, that aim to challenge and undo authoritative regimes."<sup>31</sup> Following that histories and countervisual forms of knowledge intersect, one can surmise that both are grounded in understandings of the past that defy the western narrative of progress.<sup>32</sup> In other words rather than repeating modernity's story, histories are explanations of the past and present which address "the precise dialectical problem that the present is called upon to resolve", thereby gearing knowledge production towards the needs of the community.<sup>33</sup>

Tavares deploys histories through engagement with the institutions and concepts of modernity to craft antihegemonic concepts of being that defy colonial thought. In challenging their operative terms, the goal to expand the universal rights enshrined within law – which are here conceived of as products of modernity – is forwarded in an effort to re-engineer the contemporary state and world order's governing logics. Specifically, human life and subjectivity are represented as interrelated with and constituted by the nonhuman. This is reflected by his production of histories and knowledge that articulates to a community that goes beyond the anthropocentric, individualized conception of society and life in

the western tradition. Deconstructing and disavowing the racialized hierarchy of beings present within modern knowledge, potential and already existing alliances that are at once local and global are centralized by threading the fates of all humans across the world in view of the dual crisis of colonialism/coloniality and ecological breakdown.<sup>34</sup> This collective is also evoked through Tavares's efforts to resurface histories which highlight the interconnected struggles of Indigenous sovereignty and ecological justice, the health of the Amazon Forest, for instance, being shown to a great degree to depend upon on whether the land is still occupied by Indigenous people. To this Tavares argues:

Given that those territories under Indigenous stewardship are among the best-preserved areas in the Amazon rainforest, and that deforestation in the Amazon is itself a major contributor to global climate change, upholding Indigenous land rights becomes a matter of both sovereignty and survival.<sup>35</sup>

At the transnational level, this collective is evoked through the production of a digitally published and publicly available visual-textual or multimedia sites with each project that makes the information gathered accessible to anyone on the internet. By activating the constituency of the global collective, Tavares opens questions up and poses solutions for the inadequacies and ingrained toxicities in modern thought that prevent dominant culture and official organs of power from responding to the interweaved colonial and ecological crises of the day. Following Benjamin's proposal, this is achieved by incorporating already existing ideas from Indigenous communities into modern structures as opposed to seeking to fashion new forms of knowledge from the epistemology that resulted in the issue, in this case, the Euro-American model of development and progress. In this sense Tavares seeks to amplify rather than conceal the knowledge contained within what Benjamin terms the "struggling, oppressed class".<sup>36</sup> For Benjamin and Tavares alike rather than imposing solutions on this group, listening and engagement facilitates the proliferation of novel counterhegemonic modes of being through the process of drawing upon "the depository of historical knowledge" that has been systemically attacked from the onset of modernity.<sup>37</sup> Following their mobilization, Tavares's engagement of histories within modernity principally constitutes efforts to reconfigure the legal-political structures of modernity towards the collective's egalitarian goals. The alliances he participates in do not therefore attempt to turn back the clock to before colonialism, rather they attempt a "working through of Enlightenment claims to rights in the context of coloniality, with an emphasis on the right to subjectivity and the contestation of poverty."<sup>38</sup> In the following section Tavares's production of histories and their accompanying counter-archives are discussed using examples of projects. The networks Tavares operates within are shown to appropriate and invert the archive, technology, western knowledge and modern institutional structures of power through participation as a means of exposure. This entails thinking through and reworking the archive, as well as producing new counter-archives to produce histories. In turn

through application within institutions, the reconfiguration of praxis and discourse is shown to produce modes of being that counter the ongoing interlinked forces of colonialism and coloniality within rather than outside of modernity and its social-ecological dynamics.

## PROJECTS

The archival visual “textual-graphic project” “Des-Habitat”, featured in the *Bauhaus imaginista* São Paulo exhibition in 2018 and later launched in the *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* in 2019, can be considered an intervention into History.<sup>39</sup> The project centred on the Brazilian mid-twentieth century arts and design magazine of the same name, headed by influential architect Linda Bo Bardi, described as a “militant-modernist” publication that “not only propagated images of modern art and architecture, but also images of popular and indigenous crafts and artifacts.”<sup>40</sup> “Habitat” juxtaposed modernist art, design and architecture with Indigenous objects to promote an image of a nationally specific Brazilian form of modernist design and architecture – emphasizing that the European-derived modernism of Brazil was “more primitive than Europe” through the nation-state’s dominance and perceived ownership of lands formerly inhabited by Indigenous people.<sup>41</sup> A product of a nationally specific iteration of the homogenizing, racializing dominant mode of humanity that was established during Early Modernity, “Habitat” articulates a Brazilian historical consciousness that positions Indigenous people as racial inferiors through a hierarchical Eurocentric understanding of civilization. The magazine’s framing of “images of indigenous, bodies, arts, and crafts as [...] objects detached from their social and territorial milieu”, for example, positions inhabitants of the Amazon as people who do not qualify for ethical consideration.<sup>42</sup>

Seeking to invert the dissociated Historical narrative of “Habitat,” the project reframed the self-styled and publicly disseminated “images of civilization, images of modernization” as “archives of colonial power” through recontextualization.<sup>43</sup> Enacting “an archaeology of media”, the atomized and decontextualized Indigenous objects featured in the magazine next to avant-garde modernist works are traced in view of Brazil’s “politics of pacification” campaign – a set of post-war efforts by the Brazilian government to integrate and homogenize Indigenous peoples within the framework of the nation-state.<sup>44</sup> Using the same “constructivist modernist” aesthetic register employed in the magazine to construct links between Indigenous objects and Brazilian modernism, the project inserted archival photographic evidence of the pacification campaign to draw attention to those Indigenous people who visually featured or through the medium of stolen objects were connected to the magazine. In turn Tavares and the project participants were able to add those “outside the frame” of this archive’s History and historical perspective back into the picture.<sup>45</sup> Specifically archival traces of the colonization of the Karajá people and their land surrounding the Araguaia River in the Brazilian interior are reinserted into “Habitat’s” textual-

visual narrative. Although originally produced as strategies and manifestations of a modernist historical consciousness, the logic of the “Habitat” archive is inverted when elements of other colonial archives are interweaved against the original logic of their organization. This includes the positioning of aerial photographs taken from the declassified archives of Brazil’s military dictatorship, produced with the purpose of surveying and in turn mastering the people and forest alongside the Araguaia River, next to images from “Habitat” to highlight the complicity of modernist design with the subordination of Indigenous people. This is because the featuring of Karajá objects in the magazine is shown to be a product of settler-colonial efforts to expand control in the region over several centuries. Specifically, the objects utilized by members of the magazine’s board, such as Bo Bardi, are situated in the context of property of the Karajá people passing to missionaries, governmental officials and state sanctioned academics during ‘pacification’ attempts. The result is an elaboration of how the Karajá were victims of colonization by expulsion and resettlement in addition to having their home transformed into a “highly mediatized space from where images of nature, primitiveness and national identity were produced, diffused, and manipulated.”<sup>46</sup> Tavares describes this as a process of questioning how the visual archive and its images “partake in an ecology of violence” in order to “unlearn” images of modernity understanding them instead as “images of violence [...] documents of civilization that are in fact documents of violence.”<sup>47</sup> In “Des-Habitat,” the invisibility of the history of violence on the magazine’s pages is rectified through a research process crossing into photography, art, design and architecture. This in turn challenges and reworks the History of Brazilian aesthetics by incorporating histories produced outside of the academy. Recontextualizing the stolen objects serves a restorative function, transforming an exclusionary narrative into an inclusive one. In view of Mirzoeff, the necropolitical function of “Des-Habitat” – that is, its joint ontological silence and justification of colonial politics affirming the right of Brazil’s government to determine “who may allocate, divide, and distribute death” – is replaced with the right of the Karajá people to exist.<sup>48</sup> Following Opperman’s conceptualization of racism as the “specific tactics, imaginaries, and knowledges” that produce and “are themselves shaped by the environments they attempt to ossify and control”, the project’s aesthetic redeployment of modernist art and Indigenous objects constitute efforts to produce the forms of knowledge and understanding necessary to generate wider networks of solidarity.<sup>49</sup> In this case the visual archive has been engaged with to posit who the visual archive is for by redeploying western knowledge “as a tool that can be subverted and reconfigured to tell other stories, to tell not only stories of those who won but also those who struggled”.<sup>50</sup>

In addition to reworking old colonial archives, the networks Tavares operates within also create new counter-archival material through the use of technology. Specifically, architectural, spatial and visual digital technologies are utilized to uncover the interlinked realities of ecocide and the persecution of Indigenous people in the Amazon. For example, in the *Forensic Architecture* project “Gold Mining and Violence in the Amazon Rainforest” Tavares appropriates

technically sophisticated digital image making technologies not for the purposes of surveillance and extraction, for which they were designed, but rather as a means of exposing colonial violence. Likewise, “The Mirador Mine” project has combined geolocation and remote sensing with fieldwork, that is, on the ground expeditions in collaboration with villagers expelled by the mining companies’ operatives in Cordillera del Condór in the Ecuadorian Amazon. The former project makes use of 3D modelling, geolocation, pattern analysis and image complex remote sensing so as to reconstruct the illegal mining that proliferated under Jair Bolsonaro’s regime.<sup>51</sup> Bolstered by the government’s neofascist rhetoric and *laissez-faire* policy changes, violence against the environment and the Yanomami people has accelerated. To expose this extractive violence, technology is deployed in collaboration with Indigenous groups to visually map the destruction of the forest and poisoning of the water, in addition to identifying the perpetrators.<sup>52</sup> The use of this technology alleviates the lack of evidence in the modern archive, opposing the disinformation that South American officials and multinational corporations seek to amplify. In this sense technology is employed to produce a different imagined zone of the Amazon Forest – one produced through the visual language of modernity in a manner that connects “different forms of knowledge and technologies” so as to learn “from the indigenous leaderships and communities” which can in turn “expose the ways in which [technologies] have been complicit with colonial power by the very act of using them against neocolonial systems.”<sup>53</sup> At the level of the digital, the publication and utilization of visual culture by Tavares and his colleagues at *Forensic Architecture* to create pressure on, amongst others, the Canadian and Chinese mining companies active in Ecuador and beyond via exposure and legal challenge can also be seen as an appropriation of the modern. As with the increasing availability of relatively cheap but highly technical image rendering technology, the internet has provided activists with powerful tools that enable them to produce and disperse culture in ways that were formerly not accessible. For example, the Ecuador mining projects resulted in the creation of an online platform with technologically realized event reconstructions, historical context and video testimonies alongside a physical exhibition entitled *Atmósferas de Terror*. In operating across rather than within different disciplines, spaces and networks, Tavares articulates a wide-ranging collective that interconnects the fate of communities in the Amazon with those in the urban centres of South America as well as in the Global North. Articulating this global community necessarily entails claiming the digital because, according to Tavares, “we are already in this domain”, it therefore being imperative to establish “what kind of rights, what kind of new domain of rights we need to forge, we need to create in order to establish certain types of barriers for state and corporate power.”<sup>54</sup> Reflected elsewhere by the choice to engage with modern structures rather than act outside them, Tavares argues that one task of the online activist is to challenge the “toxic ecology of images that block us from seeing the truth” by reformulating what we mean by truth through focusing on “how you read [the] image, display the image, how you organize the image in order to counter this toxicology that now



makes our public sphere.”<sup>55</sup> Rather than more surveillance and more images, for instance, Tavares argues for a restructuring of our relationship with online images. Drawing on Tuhiwai Smith’s concept of truth, one can note that Tavares’s emphasis on relationality between images and how they are read indicates that his digital interventions are not only attempts to obtain recognition or adapt the narrative within official knowledge producing institutions such as the academy.<sup>56</sup> They also centre around activating and mobilizing new networks and collectives that tip the balance of power in a given social context towards History’s victims and those allies who seek to challenge the power of the hunter.

Through the production of histories and counter visual archives, Tavares deploys co-opted western technology with non-western knowledge for the purposes of effecting legal change. One example is the use of technical images in combination with “Indigenous epistemes and visions that escape the knowledge-technological apparatus of the colonial-modern western gaze” as a means of challenging how the state thinks about Indigenous land sovereignty and ecology.<sup>57</sup> This can be seen in the project “Trees, Vines, Palms and Other Architectural Monuments,” a collaborative endeavour realized by *autonoma* – a research and intervention platform co-created by Tavares in 2017 – and the Bö’ Xavante Association, an organization stemming from the Xavante Indigenous people seeking to protect and reclaim their ancestral lands. Following the dual agricultural modernization and genocidal forced migration of the Xavante people enacted during Brazil’s years of military rule, much of the forest was transformed into what is referred to as farmland in the modern, rational imperial imagination. With the aim of helping to restore the sovereignty of the Xavante people and the biodiversity of the land, Tavares has employed a variety of visual technologies forged through colonialism and coloniality – including but not limited to maps, airplane photographs, satellite images, remote sensing, drone photography, 3D modelling, geolocation and pattern analysis. In practice they are deployed in collaboration with Xavante survivors of the expulsions to identify villages such as Bö’u in north-western Brazil. Unseen by the Western eye, elder knowledge of the spatial layout of plant life has resulted in the identification of the ruins of villages in the modern register currently on farmland – the digital technical image being a form of knowledge production recognized and valued by settler-colonial governments such as Brazil. As with the “Des-Habitat” project, old archival images taken by the government during the expulsions as well as newly produced images were used. In addition to facilitating the recognition of the lands as Xavante by the government, the practice of reworking images formerly “reported as evidence, as images, representations of a country that in colonizing itself was moving towards the future” contributes towards the crafting of an alternative imaginary.<sup>58</sup> In this sense the violence of colonial imagery as a means of justifying destruction is counteracted by combining an “image archaeology” with “landscape archaeology”.<sup>59</sup> The counter visual archival material has been submitted to the Brazilian National Institute of Artistic and Historic Heritage (IPHAN) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) with the intention of attaining protected status,

thereby returning the land to the Xavante people.

Whilst the technical images produced during the project ultimately conform to modern notions of knowledge, their application directly challenges other forms of knowledge such as the western specific, architectural understanding of built heritage. This is because visual material is deployed within an institutional and legal-political context to engage with, expose and challenge hegemonic universal categories of matter and being. In the case of “Trees, Vines, Palms and Other Architectural Monuments,” this is constituted by a challenge to the concept of heritage which in the western tradition is understood as an unliving, constructed form of property. It is in this vein that Tavares employs Indigenous understandings of heritage that recognize plant life as ruins, the Amazon Forest and the plants within it being “neither fully or exclusively human, nor are they completely natural.”<sup>60</sup> Rather, they are “the product of long-term and complex interactions between human collectives, environmental forces and the agency of other species, themselves actors in the historical process of ‘designing the forest.’”<sup>61</sup> As such, he proposes:

Beyond listing monuments to be dismantled, we need to build new memorial landscapes to care for, land sites that can enable other histories to be told, all the while repairing communities and restoring the environment. Grounded and global, architecture-as-advocacy simultaneously responds to situated land conflicts and the earth-politics of climate change.<sup>62</sup>

Elsewhere Tavares also seeks to introduce the notion of “the forest as a cosmopolis” which “implies that every being that inhabits the forest — rivers, trees, jaguars, peoples — are ‘citizens’; agents or subjects within an enlarged political arena to whom even rights ought to be granted” in a legal-political context, modernity, that is centred around the basic legal unit of the universal (hu)man.<sup>63</sup> Through this intervention “an altogether different form of polis [...], one that escapes the spatial imaginaries, political geometries and epistemic frames of colonial modernity” is proposed.<sup>64</sup> In turn the “original design-act” narrative of modernity is too challenged, implying that human life “does not rest on clearing the forest but rather on the continued practice of its cultivation.”<sup>65</sup> To this end Tavares cites the power of histories to suggest “an image of design” and at large human behaviour

that is less about planning and more about planting the planet, inasmuch as planting is also a practice of planning and design, but one that needs to be fine-tuned to the agency of winds, climates and the myriad of beings upon which the seeding and pollination of life depends.<sup>66</sup>

This approach can be said to be in part inspired by Ecuador’s lawsuit against British Petroleum (BP) during the Gulf of Mexico oil spill which similarly sought to expand legal fiction by “advocating not on behalf of the interests of the users of the Gulf of Mexico but ‘in defense of the rights of the sea.’”<sup>67</sup> This was embodied by the prosecution’s framing of nature “as the primary subject whose rights had been

violated rather than only the medium through which the rights of persons were impaired”, an intervention that confronted modernity’s logics of individualism with a collective ecological legal category.<sup>68</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The various networks and alliances discussed in this article are united in their efforts to combat the dual ecological and colonial/coloniality crisis. For researchers in the Global North, aside from employing decolonial conceptual tools and modes of understanding, the approach of Tavares may be followed in order to structure how knowledge is produced, who it is for and the ways in which it is applied. Regarding the ways in which knowledge is produced, Tavares defies modernity by subverting western academic disciplinary and technological boundaries through the use of Indigenous epistemes and the appropriation of digital spaces and tools. Research is hence carried out in a collaborative rather than top-down manner, sharing ideas and approaches that draw on and synthesize non-western and activist approaches. To this end knowledge production does not reproduce conclusions that modernity engenders. Concerning who knowledge is produced for, Tavares and those he works with follow the decolonial principle of reflexivity. This translates to a form of praxis that, as individuals occupying official positions of intellectual authority, ensures they do not become “subsumed” into the hierarchical positionalities of knowledge production that characterize academic and institutional structures.<sup>69</sup> Part of this creates research that is respectful towards, accessible and legible to those outside of the academy – research that circulates to those who within modernity are positioned as the intellectually superior keepers and guardians of knowledge. It also follows that an inclusive global collective that crosses geopolitical lines and modes of being established during colonialism should be evoked within research, as a means to cross the binaries of the civilized/uncivilized and human/nonhuman that are both overtly and discretely embedded into western academic approaches. Concerning application, in opposition to “the ecocidal designs of late modernity”, the researcher may seek to produce counter-archives that, in addition to overhauling power dynamics between the Global North and Global South, can be effectively deployed to probe “how nature appears within legal forums and texts” combined with “questioning the ways by which violence against forms of life other than human are legally moderated”.<sup>70</sup> These demands, importantly, must not shy away from the political, including the demand for Indigenous sovereignty over colonized land that the decolonizing movement is rooted in.<sup>71</sup> Although not the only strategy available to researchers, the combination of making counter-archives accessible and putting them to work in legal environments is shown by Tavares to be particularly effective. This is because it opens possibilities for structures which are public in name – namely the state, its law and by extension international law – to be reconfigured to serve the majority of the earth’s people and its nonhuman inhabitants. Through these engaged, collaborative and political means, action can

in turn be galvanised with the goal of making “life a possible project amidst the ruins of the ‘age of humans.’”<sup>72</sup>

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## ARTICLE

# FEMICIDES OF MOTHERS-TERRITORY

## A GENDER STUDIES LOOK AT THE *MNEMOSYNE ATLAS* AS A LIVING ARCHIVE

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## Abstract

From a gender studies perspective, this paper focuses on understanding Aby Warburg's proposal of a *Mnemosyne Atlas* as a living archive, with the aim of elucidating the potential and limits of this methodology of collecting and organizing images as a tool for rethinking a patriarchal past and present.

Following this guideline, the photographs of sexual, gender and violence records occurring in the context of the war in Colombia, published in the book *La Violencia en Colombia - estudio de un proceso social* (Violence in Colombia - study of a social process, 1962; 1964), are taken as a case study. These images show how women and their bodies, in the context of a patriarchy exacerbated by the war, become repositories of violence by being codified as territory and origin of life. These photographs are the axis of a *Mnemosyne Atlas*, taken as a methodology and considered as an archival device that compiles works of art from other contexts and temporalities that dialogue with the woman-land-life relationship.

Keywords: Gender Studies, Woman as Territory, *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Armed Conflict in Colombia, Ecofeminism

Gender studies, along with postcolonial studies, have established themselves as a theoretical and methodological analytical tool that places the need for a political re-evaluation of the past as one of its fundamental principles. This involves settling historical debts, identifying systematic invisibilizations, and clarifying research biases that stem from a construction of history primarily carried out through a male and phalocentric lens. Although academic studies tend to categorize and label fields of knowledge,<sup>1</sup> gender, postcolonial, and queer reading practices have contributed in tandem not only to a criticism of the consequences of a patriarchal system but to contradict its basis on a hierarchical and dualistic mode of thinking, with queer theory focusing especially on transcending dualistic narratives.<sup>2</sup>

The discipline of history is rooted in 18th-century precepts of scientific truth, distant objectivity, and an insistence that the object of study must be detached from the observer.<sup>3</sup> This view denies inherent biases and envisions the past as a remote entity that has no bearing on the present or on those who recount and construct it. On the other hand, as Griselda Pollock points out, dominant discourse in art history introduced a directional and developmental concept of time.<sup>4</sup> This approach is notably linear, reducing historical narrative to a chronological succession of styles, classified as civilized or primitive based on their proximity or distance to an ideal of Western beauty. In other words, it's a hierarchical model that divides the past into opposing categories and justifies the supremacy of a pyramidal model that is always preceded and built by a very distinct figure: a white Western heterosexual man. In the case of art history gender biases, central figures in the discipline such as Vasari's biographies from the 16th-century and Ernst Gombrich's *The Story of Art* published in 1950 have erased half of the population from the narrative of the past, not to mention sexually dissident populations. Vasari briefly mentions four female artists in contrast to the over 190 male artists appearing in his writings, and Gombrich does not include any female artists in his survey of "universal" art history. This perspective becomes normalized and obscured by the principles of scientific truth and distant objectivity, disregarding inherent biases. Such an approach envisions the past as a distant entity, seemingly detached from the present and the individuals who narrate and construct its history.

From this model of history emerges a particular way of understanding the archive, one that promotes a chronological, hierarchical categorization of the past, constrained by rigid space-time associations and an emphasis on objectivity and distance. This perspective conceals biases in its construction and organization. However, the archive, when viewed through the lens of gender studies, can be a tool to rethink this model of history. Specifically, these lines aim to revisit, from a gender studies perspective, the methodology of studying and organizing images proposed by Aby Warburg in his *Mnemosyne Atlas* (Atlas of Memory, 1921-1928), to analyze it as one that advocates for the creation of living archives, opening the door to new and necessary interpretations of the past.<sup>5</sup>

Aby Warburg, in the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, proposed an approach to researching and organizing images based on his concept of "good neighborliness,"

which suggests that new meanings emerge when certain images are placed next to each other. In this sense, the image is not understood as a separate entity but is interpreted in relation to others. The guiding thread in this selection and organization procedure is a formal pattern or “gesture” that repeats. The value of repetition allows images from different historical periods and geographic locations to coexist in an *Atlas* because the aim is to show how a gesture that initially appears exclusive to one image is repeated in many others.

Therefore, for gender studies, Warburg’s methodology becomes relevant in the sense that by valuing repetition, it allows us to trace patterns of representation that transcend chronological and causal associations. This approach is especially relevant when applied to gender studies, as it unveils deep visual structures that patriarchy has globalized and extended across different moments and geographic spaces.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the *Atlas* proposes an archival view that is not constrained by chronological associations but rather privileges connections between times, proposing an organization of the past more akin to a rhizomatic structure than a pyramidal one. Likewise, the *Mnemosyne Atlas* not only proposes a history of art that resists being confined by rigid space-time borders but also opens a door to a non-dualistic understanding of the image. As will be explained in the following section, for Warburg, the image moves between polarities. However, as Margaret Iversen explains in her article “Retrieving Warburg’s Tradition”, they “tend to lose any strict hierarchical ordering and become dynamic, dialectical polarities.”<sup>7</sup> Iversen sees Warburg’s early rejection of dualistic constructions of the past as a significant contribution to feminist theory, insofar as it transcends phallogocentric logic of dividing the world into irreconcilable opposites. In sum, for this essay, reviewing the possible connections and contributions of Warburg’s method to gender studies is based on understanding his proposal as one that resists a hierarchical, dualistic history of art and one that focuses on the search for repetitive gestures as a means of uncovering new narratives of the past.

This is why, to understand the scope and limits of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* as a method for rethinking the past through the lens of gender studies, the case study will focus on the photographs published in the book *La Violencia en Colombia - estudio de un proceso social*, which documents femicides that occurred during the period of Colombian history known as ‘La Violencia’. These photographs will serve as the central axis of an *Atlas* that will revolve around tracing the repetitive gesture of considering, capturing, and representing women as symbols of mother-territory. The objective is to illustrate how the darker side of this symbol becomes evident in the context of war: being synonymous with life and territory in the context of a patriarchy exacerbated by the conflict makes women the repository of violence both in reality and in representation. However, before delving into the case study, it is crucial to further explore how Warburg, in his *Mnemosyne Atlas*, grasps the value of a repetitive gesture as a phenomenon associated with trauma. Additionally, we must consider how his historiography has, at times, sought to conceal this perspective and, at other moments, endeavored to revitalize the sense of trauma inherent in the *Mnemosyne Atlas*.

## MNEMOSYNE ATLAS: A LIVING ARCHIVE OF TRAUMA-LOADED IMAGES

Through his *Mnemosyne Atlas*, Warburg aimed to trace, in a variety of images, the survival of a pagan past — rational and balancing Apollonian forces alongside chaotic and emotional Dionysiac ones — during the Christian era of the Italian Renaissance. The objective was to unveil, in the repetition of forms from the past, an ailing humanity. This unfinished endeavor, halted by the death of its author in 1929, took the form of 40 panels comprised of over 1,000 images. Warburg's intention to expand the boundaries of images stemmed from his proposal to unravel unresolved traumas present in images from various temporalities. These traumas, left unhealed, repeated and resurfaced over time in ghostly forms.<sup>8</sup> The image traced by Warburg was considered a 'pathos formel', meaning it functioned as a vehicle for emotions and passions from other times, which could dynamically resurface between its Apollonian and Dionysian polarities. In this sense, the search for repetition in the *Atlas* was not confined to mere formal reiteration (a formula - 'formel') but rather a pattern charged with ancient soul passions ('pathos') or symptoms of unresolved ailment.<sup>9</sup>

Georges Didi-Huberman has argued that the phantasmagoric and traumatic nature of Warburg was erased by his successors Ernst Gombrich and Erwin Panofsky, who positioned him as the founder of their discipline, iconology.<sup>10</sup> However, they modified his principles, transforming them into a more comforting, structured, systematic, and clear theory. In this process, they eliminated anachronisms, survivals, and Warburgian ghosts from the discourse and the field of study. Didi-Huberman critically examined these constraints and simplifications of Warburg's figure throughout his extensive literature.

Specifically in the catalog of the exhibition *Atlas ¿cómo llevar el mundo a cuestas?*, Didi-Huberman proposes the *Atlas* as a framework for reflecting on the image. He does not conceive it as the outcome of a process of organization and classification of images but as the space where such a process of visual thinking takes place.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, he rescues the tragedy of the myth of the Greek Titan Atlas, the one who carries the heavens and with them the sufferings of the world. Warburg's *Atlas* is not only a framework for connections between images but also a support for human sufferings.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, recovering the intense and traumatic nature of Warburg, remembering that what the *Atlas* bears are images loaded with polarities and emotions: "gestures of love and gestures of combat, of triumph and of servitude, of ascent and of descent, of hysteria and of melancholy, of grace and of ugliness, of desire in motion and of petrified terror..."<sup>13</sup> Consequently, the *Mnemosyne Atlas* as a support (Atlas) for human sufferings transmitted images as containers of memories from the past (Mnemosyne).

Didi-Huberman's recognition of the potential in Warburg's methodology to unravel the traumatic sense of the image is what Griselda Pollock envisions as a contribution to re-think the foundations of art history. In her article "Whither Art History?", Pollock suggests that after the upheavals of the 20th-century — the



Second World War, the genocide of Jews and Gypsies, the massacres in Rwanda — the classical imagery that serves as the foundation of Western art was destroyed, as the body idealized by the Greeks was irreparably violated.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, we are facing an art history that must be contemplated from the standpoint of trauma and catastrophe. Warburg's methodology, grounded in the understanding of the image as a phenomenon loaded with passions, traumas, and psychological imprints, becomes a tool for "new formulations for suffering and affective intensity adequate to the unprecedented events that have horrifically shaped our world."<sup>15</sup> For Pollock, merely lamenting conventional ways of writing art history is no longer sufficient. After experiencing the destruction of humanity, it becomes imperative to explore renewed approaches to understanding the image in relation to that destruction and trauma.

Pollock's response to the quest for new art histories, much like Warburg's in his time, is to open the boundaries of the discipline to approach the complexity of the image and its movements over time. In this sense, Pollock sees the methodology of the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, which she interprets as tracing "the promiscuous migration of images across a temporal-spatial planetary"<sup>16</sup> as a path towards a more open art history, receptive to new worldviews and less inclined towards universalism and standardization.

This brief historiography on how the *Mnemosyne Atlas* has been interpreted reveals how, from its conception, it has been seen as a reformative agent in understanding the past and the image. At times, its contributions have been obscured, but at other moments, its elements related to trauma and affective aspects of the image have been rescued and brought to light. This perspective becomes particularly interesting when analyzing photographs linked to such a traumatic period in Colombian history that has been labeled 'La Violencia'. In this context, the notion of the *Atlas* as a support for human suffering, according to Didi-Huberman, and as a facilitator of more pluralistic art histories, as envisioned by Griselda Pollock, are fundamental concepts that gain meaning when confronting images of war.

## THE BOOK *LA VIOLENCIA EN COLOMBIA*: REGARDING THE PAIN OF OTHERS

The book *La Violencia en Colombia - estudio de un proceso social* was first published in 1962 and 1964, during the context of the Frente Nacional,<sup>17</sup> a political period that imposed a policy of silencing<sup>18</sup> and forgetting the atrocities that occurred during the bipartisan conflict of 'La Violencia'. The prevailing discourse at the time was to consider this war as a cruel act perpetrated by a "barbaric" peasantry, thus blaming the country's most marginalized populations and absolving the elites of the role they played in the onset and development of the war.<sup>19</sup> Isabel Cristina Díaz conducts a detailed study of the book, arguing that *La Violencia en Colombia* fulfilled the historical function of revealing what society tried to forget, and the photographs served as a documentary tool that left no doubt about the barbarism that occurred in rural areas to urban populations.<sup>20</sup> Díaz also delves

into the meaning of photographic records, suggesting that they played a part in a process of differentiation between the “civilized” city – the spectator of the photos – experiencing the irrational acts of a “barbaric other” – the peasants. In this sense, the author proposes that “the archive produces a visual shock [in the spectator], which translates into an encounter with an unrecognizable other.”<sup>21</sup>

This aspect, the insurmountable distance between the viewer and the suffering portrayed in the image of war, is further explored by Susan Sontag in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Sontag points out that those who have not lived through war, its sufferings, and violence “can’t understand, can’t imagine” the experiences that such images represent.<sup>22</sup> As Díaz explains, the visual shock generated by the images in the book *La Violencia* quickly leads to creating a diametrical distance between the war experienced in rural areas and those who comfortably observe it from the city. Sontag challenges this approach to war images by raising awareness of such distance and emphasizing that the viewer’s experience in the face of war images should be permeated with empathy, sensitivity, and respect for the suffering depicted. Thus, Sontag poses the ethical challenge in considering the reproduction, study, and, above all, the observation of war images. While recognizing the possibility that these images of suffering may be exploitative and revictimizing, an ethical paradox arises: how can these same images, despite their potential negative impact, play a significant role in understanding and preventing violence?

At this stage, Warburg’s methodology may offer some insights, especially concerning the specific case of the sufferings depicted in the book *La Violencia en Colombia*. As previously stated, the war photographs published in this book are intertwined with a narrative that leads to an understanding of the portrayed violent acts as isolated and the product of unexplained barbarity. To comprehend these photos as part of a broader visual universe can be a way to make sense of the senseless. This is where Warburg’s method of a living archive becomes relevant to rethink this past, in which the visual shock, as proposed by Díaz, immobilizes and individualizes the event in the face of the horror of the photos, preventing us from seeing the structures that sustain and enable it. Therefore, Warburg’s methodology opens up as a possibility to attempt to give reflective and critical meaning to the senselessness. By analyzing the relationships these images, depicting “barbaric” acts, have with other images, it may be possible to decode their complex connections between traumatic pasts, specific historical events, human sufferings, and relationships with structures of oppressive systems. It is at this point in the ethical discussion of the war image that the photographs of femicides present in the book *La Violencia en Colombia* can be introduced.

*Maternidad Frustrada* (Thwarted motherhood, Figure 1) is one of the seventy photographs published throughout the seven editions and two volumes of the book.<sup>23</sup> It depicts an unidentified woman who fell victim to a femicide that occurred at some point in the 1950s in Colombia. Her death occurred under what was referred to at the time as *no dejar ni la semilla* (“not leaving even the seed”),

a wartime strategy to symbolically and physically annihilate the adversary by torturing, violating, and murdering pregnant women from the opposing side.<sup>24</sup>

This strategy is part of a pattern that transcends this particular war. The report titled *La Guerra inscrita en el cuerpo* points out that “in the context of war [in Colombia], women’s bodies appear as a territory in which the power of patriarchal culture is expressed (...). Women’s bodies are a defined political field.”<sup>25</sup> This practice is part of what anthropologist María Victoria Uribe has defined as “killing and re-killing.” In this context, killing also meant symbolically attacking the body. In the case of



Figure 1

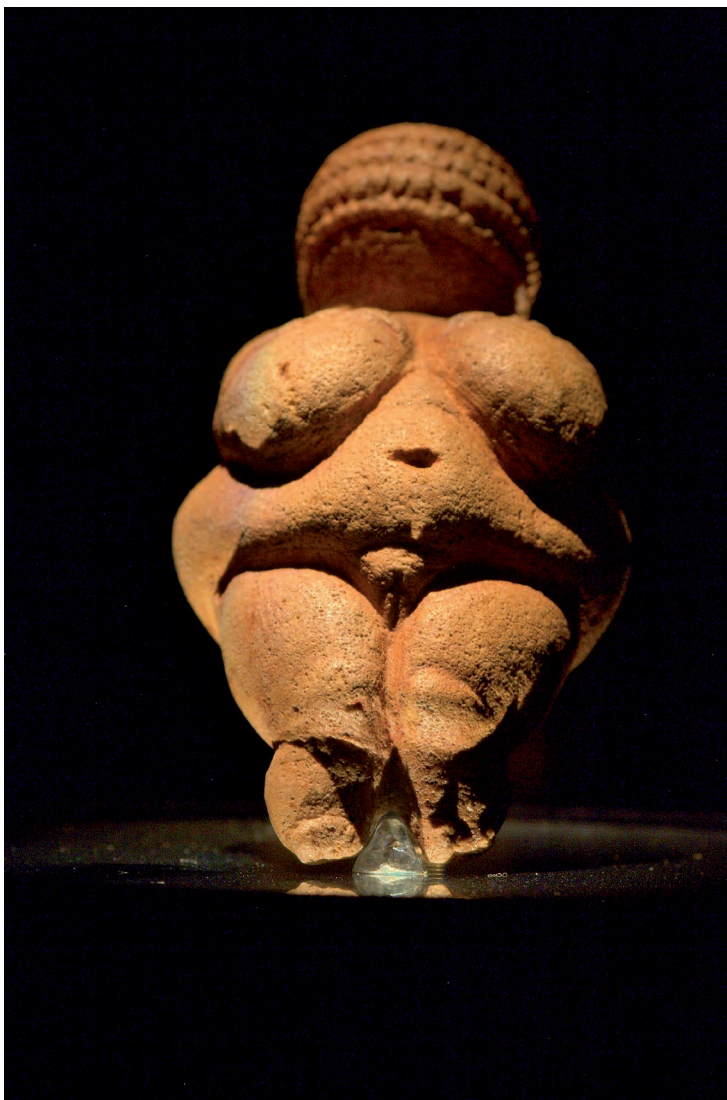
Anonymous. *Maternidad Frustrada* (Thwarted Motherhood), circa 1950. Photograph published in the book *La Violencia en Colombia - estudio de un proceso social*, Ediciones progreso, 1968.

women, the records of their femicides reveal highly violent acts targeting the parts of their bodies associated with reproductive capacity.<sup>26</sup> In the various editions of the book *La Violencia en Colombia*, eight photographs were published in which the image or caption reinforces this pattern. It’s worth noting that all the captions were written by the priest Germán Guzmán Campos, a co-author of the book, who imparted his personal and moral interpretations in the descriptions of the images. Here are the captions that accompanied the cited photographs. The first one is the only image depicting a living peasant family, while the other seven document the murder of women and children:<sup>27</sup>

- *Salvar el núcleo familiar, el honor de la mujer y la vida del hijo fue una de las causas determinantes de lucha* (Saving the family nucleus, the honor of women, and the lives of children was one of the decisive causes of the struggle)
- *El hombre, la mujer, el niño, raíz y esencia de la patria ... todo sucumbió* (Man, woman, child, the root and essence of the homeland... all succumbed)
- *Debía destruirse a la mujer* (Women had to be destroyed)
- *Para que nunca volviera a engendrar* (So that she would never engender again)
- *Maternidad frustrada* (Thwarted motherhood)
- *Crimen inenarrable: maternidad frustrada* (Unspeakable crime: thwarted motherhood)
- *No se respetó ni vida ni sexo* (Neither life nor sex was respected)
- *No debía quedar ni la semilla* (No seed must be left)

The relationship between the photos and the captions establishes a narrative that suggests that the femicides of these women did not occur because of their actions in the war but rather because they were strictly defined by their reproductive capacity. In other words, both reality and photographic records consider and capture women as symbols of motherhood, alienating the victims from their historical agency and individual identities. In this sense, it is understood that a woman's "honor" lies in her ability to "engender" and bear the "seed" of a large offspring, concepts that reference motherhood intertwined with the fertility of the land. Thus, the gesture of reducing women to symbols of Mother-Territory permeates the photographs of frustrated motherhood published in the book *La Violencia en Colombia*.

Connecting femicide photographs with ancient gestures and patterns of representation, such as the Mother-Territory, allows us to go beyond the undeniable visual impact generated by these images, surpassing the simplistic explanation provided by the book *La Violencia en Colombia*. This is why it becomes necessary to weave a *Mnemosyne Atlas* in relation to the gesture of representing women-mother-territory, which can be traced back to the so-called prehistoric Venuses, proposing what Warburg would call an "anachronistic coalition of the now and the past."<sup>28</sup>



**Figure 2**

Anonymous. *Venus of Willendorf*, circa 26,000 .c.e. Limestone with ochre coloration. Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria. Public domain.



## ANACHRONISTIC COALITIONS OF WOMEN-MOTHER-TERRITORY

The *Venus of Willendorf* (c. 26,000 BCE, Figure 2) is a stone-carved figure that emphasizes women's anatomy linked to the process of gestation: breasts, belly, thighs, and a triangular genital area form a single group. It is challenging to determine the original meaning of this millennia-old figure, but historical narratives have suggested a correspondence between primordial female fertility and the fertility of the earth.<sup>29</sup> However, as proposed by Christopher Witcombe, "the ironic identification of these figurines as 'Venus' conveniently satisfied certain assumptions of that time about the primitive, women, and taste."<sup>30</sup> In other words, this figure found in Willendorf, Austria, in 1907, more than informing us about its original significance and use, highlights — much like *Maternidad frustrada* — how patriarchy has reduced women to their reproductive capacity, making them merely a "womb or ovary," as Simone de Beauvoir postulates.<sup>31</sup>

This glorification of women for their ability to produce a large offspring equates them with the fertility of the earth, and this close correspondence has been the subject of study in Ecofeminism. Val Plumwood, in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993), argues that patriarchy has established a worldview organized by pairs of antagonistic concepts systematically constructed as superior and inferior: masculine-feminine, culture-nature, civilized-primitive.<sup>32</sup> This dualistic mental structure has left women and nature as analogous concepts with the common denominator that they can engender life. This view of woman-nature takes away woman historical agency and turns her into a symbol that passively receives violence and a scenario where male dominance is enacted.<sup>33</sup> This view is reflected in the women who are victims of femicide documented in *Maternidad frustrada*, considered mother-territories where war takes place without their active participation.

This view of understanding women as view as territory is not only replicated in prehistoric Venuses but is also actualized and re-actualized in allegories of Nature, Continents, and the Homeland. The allegory of Mother Nature can be traced back to Greco-Roman times and has been a common motif in the Western world.<sup>34</sup> An example is this image from the 17th-century, *Atalanta Fugiens*, in which nature was personified as a woman breastfeeding in the shape of the world. This perspective is also replicated by representing continents as racialized female figures. The same logic was applied with the emergence of nation-states, where women no longer personified borderless continents but came to represent national territories as Motherland figures, as seen in the case of *Policarpa Salavarrieta [como madre Patria]* (circa 1990, Figure 3), or territorial divisions of countries, as in the photograph *Alegoría a Cúcuta* (1891). In these patriotic allegories, women carry the national flag and with their bodies symbolize the fertility and continuity of a nation-state. In this sense, women's agency is reduced to being a symbol of a territory from which they were "excluded from political participation until very recent times."<sup>35</sup> The long Western tradition of female allegories of territories reveals a process of territorialization of women's bodies in which, as Plumwood highlights,

women cease to be historical subjects and their identity is reduced to being a symbol of a fertile territory where the male sphere operates.<sup>36</sup>

Débora Arango's painting *La República* (1957, Figure 4) satirizes this symbol by offering us an anti-symbol image of the Republic. The central theme of this painting is a denouncement of a country bled dry by misgovernment. In the central scene of the painting, a woman brought to the bone is devoured by carrion birds, one devours her face, and the other her womb. Her body lying on the Colombian flag reads as the personification of the defeated Republic, analogous to an allegory of a fallen nation. Furthermore, her thinness and sagging breasts stand in stark contrast to the normative fertility of mother-territories, such as the sexualized figure of the so-called *Venus of Willendorf*. This woman-republic antonym of the fertile nation is assaulted by a masculinized environment. A black animal is represented as an omnipresent deity, supported by a male audience. This painting highlights how women are symbols, but also anti-symbols of a nation governed by men.

The correspondence between the scrawny body of this infertile Republic and the slender body of the woman in *Maternidad frustrada* is unsettling because both, in representation and reality, were violated under their consideration as symbols of a territory to be conquered or ruled. This is how these two images relate to what Plumwood exposed in *Ecofeminism* when she reiterated that "To



**Figure 3**

Anonymous. Policarpa Salavarrieta  
[as an allegory of the Homeland], circa  
1900. Oil on canvas. 122.5 × 85.5 cm.  
Collection National Museum of  
Colombia, Bogotá. Public domain.





**Figure 4**

Débora Arango. *La República*, 1957. Watercolor. 77 × 56 cm. Courtesy of Museo de Arte Moderno de Medellín, Colombia.

be defined as nature in this context [in which masculinized power reigns] is to be defined as passive, non-agent and non-subject, as the environment or setting where white, Western, colonizing, male reason and culture act.”<sup>37</sup> However, in the specific case of *Maternidad frustrada*, to be defined as nature in a context of war (both in representation and reality) is to be defined as passive, non-agentic, and non-subject, functioning as the stage where the most decomposed form of domination acts: violence.

The only two photographs published in the book *La Violencia* that contradict this notion are *Todas son adolescentes guerrilleras* (All are teenage guerrillas, circa 1950, Figure 5) and *La mujer se mezcla en la lucha* (The woman blends into the struggle, circa 1950). These two images stand out as the sole records depicting women as active agents in the war, contradicting the assigned role portrayed in the rest of the book, where they are predominantly symbolized as mothers-territories-victims. These photos create tension in the narrative of the book as they challenge the sole role attributed to women: passive victims. In this sense, these women, portrayed alive, dressed not in military uniforms but in knee-length dresses, photographed alongside their male counterparts replicating the same frontal and stern pose, and identified as guerrillas, disrupt as subjects resisting being turned into passive symbols. Additionally, their presence in the book serves as a reminder

that other women portrayed as violated symbols of a territory to be conquered were, in reality, women with a history who were alive and active in the world. These two photographs challenge the patriarchal dualistic view in which the only real possibility for women is being passive entities that do not act or exert violence in war.

But although these two photographs resist the simplification of women into being symbols of mother-territory-victim and allow a break from the dualistic and dichotomous logic that a patriarchal vision has tried to impose—which permeates the narrative of *La Violencia*—the woman in *Maternidad Frustrada* was reduced to a body that was symbolized as the first step to justify her murder. In this sense, recalling Warburg's definition of an image as a contender from other times, the photograph *Maternidad Frustrada* contains countless other images of women-territories relegated to the realm of symbols and allegories that strip them of their status as historical agents. In other words, the femicides captured in the frustrated motherhood images from *La Violencia* are not isolated incidents but are part of a broader universe of images sustained by a worldview in which women have been constructed, regarded, captured, and represented as battlefields. Thus, *Maternidad Frustrada* exposes the darker side of the symbol of Mother-Earth, as in contexts of a patriarchy exacerbated by war, the strong association of women with life and territory predisposes them to femicide. It is important to note that at this point, reality and representation converge, in that the repeated representation of women as Mother-Earth solidifies imaginaries that play a role in actual violent acts.

Reaching this point, it becomes necessary to revisit the first section of this text, which explains how Warburg understands the repetition of a gesture from the



**Figure 5**

Anonymous. *Todas son adolescentes guerrilleras* (All are teenage guerrillas), circa 1950. Photograph published in the book *La Violencia en Colombia - estudio de un proceso social*, Ediciones progreso, 1968.

past as a symptom of an unresolved trauma, one that, if not made conscious, will continue to reproduce over time. This understanding gives meaning to the exercise of bringing from the depths of the past representations of women turned into symbols-territory, positioning it as an exercise of bringing to consciousness that the suffering and trauma witnessed in the photographs of *La Violencia en Colombia* as individual tragedies are part of a broader network of representation dynamics. In doing so, the ethical dimension of seeking anachronistic clashes between images in *La Violencia en Colombia* is understood as unsettling the image by viewing it in relation to representation patterns that enable it and involves disrupting these representation patterns, complicating them, and nuancing them with the ultimate goal of transcending them. Thus, taking cues from Sontag, proposing a responsible and ethical approach to the suffering recorded and observed in these images.

### PERSPECTIVES OF THE *MNEMOSYNE ATLAS* FROM A GENDER STUDIES VIEWPOINT

As such, the *Mnemosyne Atlas* put into practice here reveals an ingrained structure of a patriarchal worldview that Ecofeminism presupposes in the foundations of Western thought. In this sense, it is possible to say that the exaltation of women's connection to nature in the patriarchal system has been a way to deprive them of an active role in society's construction. Therefore, the relevance of applying the Warburg's *Atlas* methodology to gender studies lies in its "good neighbor" method, which allows us to observe long-lasting structures. This is particularly useful when studying a system in which there is historical continuity, as in the case between patriarchy in ancient societies and that of contemporary societies.<sup>38</sup> The *Mnemosyne Atlas* as a methodology enables us to analyze images not as isolated events, but as related elements which, in their turn, are connected to deep structures of representation and thought. Ultimately, this review of continuities calls for the construction of archives that are more open to an organization of the past that allows for non-chronological and non-geographical connections. The *Atlas* may be considered a living archive since more images can be included in this network, which will always lead to new readings of the past.

In relation to Warburg's method as one that can propose a path on how to observe the war image, it can be said that the strategy of viewing images of suffering through others helps us transcend the painful specificity of the war image, revealing patterns of representation that give meaning to violent acts. Revisiting Sontag's ethical question, the *Atlas*, conceived as a living archive, offers a methodology for addressing war images responsibly. By creating anachronistic associations between images, it enables the revelation of representation patterns that provide a deeper understanding of femicidal violence associated with war. Furthermore, it allows painful images not to exist in isolation, turning the *Atlas* into a space where other images can support and accompany the suffering. Returning to Didi-Huberman's

concept of the *Mnemosyne Atlas* as a support for human suffering and traumas.

However, it is important to note that Warburg's methodology always teeters on the edge of proposing ahistorical studies of the past, as it can lead to the study of repetitive gestures as timeless signs. In other words, the repetitive gesture can be understood as an essential quality that invariably emerges in different historical and geographical contexts. This would suggest a historical immobility that gender studies have focused on contradicting because an ahistorical reading proposes the existence of immutable qualities understood as natural facts and not as historical constructions.<sup>39</sup> Precisely, the patriarchy has been responsible for establishing its constructions about gender as natural, establishing fixed femininities and normative masculinities. Approaching this methodology entails taking into account that repetition does not imply lack of variation, and that the tracking of repetitive gestures does not imply that such gestures, such as considering women as symbols of mother-territory without agency, are an unchanging fact but rather a historical construction that has been embedded in Western thought. In other words, the *Mnemosyne Atlas*, understood as a methodology, could be a useful tool for studying panoramic structures of representation and making them visually evident, without losing sight of the fact that these structures are in themselves constructions with history, transformations, and variations.

One last factor to consider is that Warburg's proposal focuses on tracing historical continuities rather than discontinuities. This perspective may potentially obscure subtle changes in history and subversions carried out by marginalized groups in power. However, it is important to note that this limitation does not invalidate its use in gender studies. As the task of rethinking history requires a variety of methodologies that can examine the past from both a structuralist and a detailed perspective, these approaches are not contradictory but two necessary facets for establishing disciplines and archives that are aware of their inherent biases.

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- 1 Griselda Pollock, "Whither Art History?" *The Art Bulletin* 96, no. 1 (2014): 21.
  - 2 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick "Introduction," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press: 2003), 1-2.
  - 3 Georges Didi-Huberman, "El Arte Muere, El Arte Renace: La Historia Vuelve A Comenzar Ide Vasaria Winckelmann)," in *La imagen superviviente: historia del arte y tiempo de los fantasmas según Aby Warburg*, trans. Juan Calatrava (Madrid : Abada, 2009), 15.
  - 4 Pollock, "Whither Art History?" 13.

- 5 Didi-Huberman, "DISPAR(AT)ES 'Leer lo nunca escrito,'" in *Atlas ¿cómo llevar el mundo auestas?* (Madrid: Museo Reina Sofía and TF Editores, 2010), 14-58.
- 6 On this point, it is important to provide a conceptual clarification. Gender studies indeed examine the consequences and oppressive models derived from the patriarchal system, but their scope extends towards a more comprehensive understanding of the inherent complexities in the social construction of gender. This involves not only analyzing gender inequalities but also acknowledging the diversity of experiences and giving visibility to historically marginalized voices. Furthermore, gender studies address the intersection of gender with other categories such as race and class. They also stand out for their commitment to transcending traditional categories and questioning heteronormative norms.
- 7 Margaret Iversen, "Retrieving Warburg's Tradition," *Art History* 16, no.4 (1993): 541.
- 8 Georges Didi-Huberman, "Ouverture. L'Histoire de l'Art comme discipline anachronique", in *Devant le temps. Histoire de l'Art et anachronisme des images* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 2000), 39-48.
- 9 Georges Didi-Huberman, "La Pathosformel," in *La imagen superviviente: historia del arte y tiempo de los fantasmas según Aby Warburg* (Madrid: Abada, 2009), 172-183.
- 10 Georges Didi-Huberman, "Warburg nuestro fantasma," in *La imagen superviviente: historia del arte y tiempo de los fantasmas según Aby Warburg* (Madrid: Abada, 2009), 24-30.
- 11 Didi-Huberman, "ATLAS «Portar el mundo entero de los sufrimientos»,", in *¿Cómo llevar el mundo auestas?* (Madrid: Museo Reina Sofía y TF Editores, 2010), 91.
- 12 Ibid., 66.
- 13 Didi-Huberman, "DISPAR(AT) ES «Leer lo nunca escrito»,", in *¿Cómo llevar el mundo auestas?* (Madrid: Museo Reina Sofía y TF Editores, 2010), 23.
- 14 Pollock, "Whither Art History?", 13.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 The Frente Nacional (1958-1974) was a political pact between the ruling elites who established an alternation of Colombia's presidency between conservatives and liberals, the two traditional Colombian parties. This pact was a strategy to remove General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla from power and pacify the bipartisan civil war that had divided the country into two political factions, conservatives and liberals. This policy of amnesty and oblivion truncated the clarification of the elite's role in the conflict. See Alberto Valencia Gutiérrez, "La Violencia en Colombia de M. Guzmán, O. Fals y E. Umaña y las transgresiones al Frente Nacional," *Revista Colombiana De Sociología*, no. 35 (2012): 21. <https://revistas.unal.edu.co/index.php/recs/article/view/37195>.
- 18 The Frente Nacional policy of silencing transcended from a state policy to one adopted by the means of communication. In October 1962, under the government of Guillermo León Valencia, the Colombian press signed a pact in which they committed to not mentioning facts related to 'La Violencia' of the 1950s. See: Maryluz Vallejo Mejía, *A Plomo herido. Una crónica del periodismo en Colombia (1880-1980)* (Bogotá: Planeta, 2006), 329.
- 19 Isabel Cristina Díaz Moreno, "La Violencia en Colombia: reconstrucción y análisis visual de la Colección fotográfica del libro de Germán Guzmán Campos" [Master's thesis] (Bogotá: Universidad Jorge Tadeo Lozano, 2018), 32.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Ibid., 116.
- 22 Susan Sontag, *Regarding The Pain Of Others* (New York: PICADOR, 2003), 98.
- 23 The book *La Violencia en Colombia - Estudio de un proceso social* had two volumes, the first published in 1962 and the second in 1964, a descriptive version titled *La Violencia en Colombia, parte descriptiva* published in 1968. The book has seven editions, in which photographs and captions have varied. Isabel Cristina Díaz Moreno



noted that between the first and the second book volumes existed a change in the type of published photographs, in 1968 the tone of political denunciation sharpened, reflected in the decision to include twenty records of violent deaths. All the photos are part of the photographic archive of Monseñor Germán Guzmán, co-author of the book. It is presumed that this collection of photos is much more extensive. See: *Ibid.*, 37-41.

- 24 María Victoria Uribe, *Antropología de la inhumanidad: un ensayo interpretativo sobre el terror en Colombia* (Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes, Facultad de Derecho, Ediciones Uniandes, 2018).
- 25 Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, *La guerra inscrita en el cuerpo: Informe nacional de violencia sexual en el conflicto armado* (Bogotá: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2017), 157.
- 26 María Victoria Uribe, "Introducción," in *Matar, rematar y contramatar. Las masacres de La Violencia en Tolima 1948-1964* (Bogotá: CINEP, 1990), 27-34.
- 27 Of the eight photos published in *La Violencia en Colombia - Estudio de un proceso social*, only *Maternidad Frustrada* will be reproduced in this document since it is considered that the latter and the photograph captions are sufficiently solid to support the argument. For the author, these photos of highly violent content that portray real victims must be reproduced with a conscience to avoid falling into revictimization cycles. If desired, they can be consulted in the text by Isabel Cristina Díaz Moreno, "La Violencia en Colombia: reconstrucción y análisis visual de la Colección fotográfica del libro de Germán Guzmán Campos," pages 54-55 of the PDF downloadable at <https://expeditiorepositorio.utadeo.edu.co/handle/20.500.12010/3845>
- 28 Didi-Huberman, "Gestos memorativos, desplazados, reversos: Warburg con Darwin," in *La imagen superviviente: Historias del arte y el tiempo de los fantasmas según Aby Warburg* (Madrid: Abada Editores, 2009), 228.
- 29 Naturhistorisches Museum Wien. August 14, 2023. <https://www.nhm-wien.ac.at/forschung/praehistorie/forschungen/venus-forschung>
- 30 Christopher L.C.E. Witcombe, "Women in Prehistory: Venus of Willendorf."
- 31 Simone De Beauvoir, *El segundo sexo, Vol. I: Los hechos y los mitos* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Siglo Veinte, 1995), 29.
- 32 Val Plumwood, "Dualism: the logic of colonization," in *Feminism and the mastery of nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 33.
- 33 *Ibid.*
- 34 Hesiod, *Theogony* [circa VII b.c.e.] (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma de México, 2007).
- 35 Julia Tuñón, "Cuerpos femeninos, cuerpos de patria. Los iconos de nación en México: apuntes para un debate," *Historias*, (65): 42. <https://revistas.inah.gob.mx/index.php/historias/article/view/2199>
- 36 Val Plumwood, "Introduction," in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 4.
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## ARTICLE

# PHOTOGRAPHY, MONTAGE AND ARCHIVE AN ATLAS OF A DICTATORSHIP AND ITS LANDSCAPES

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## Abstract

The far-right turn in Brazilian politics led to the re-emergence of a ghost that has been hindering our political agency since the dawn of the republic but that had been hidden for a few decades: the Army and its violent political agency. This essay will frame the archive as an important instance within the artistic practice I have developed as a response to the apparition of this military monster during the Bolsonaro years. In a body of work called “Concrete Witnesses Inquiry,” I have combined images and texts (collected mainly from the press) with an urban landscape photographic work that presents overpasses built in my hometown, Porto Alegre, during the 1964 military dictatorship. Following authors such as Georges Didi-Huberman and Allan Sekula, I suggest that the archive can be seen as a central axis in this process, allowing me to connect otherwise unimportant elements from the urban landscape with violent historical processes, often considered distant and abstract.

Keywords: Dictatorship, Brazil, Overpasses, News, History

The current astonishment with the fact that things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This astonishment is not the beginning of knowledge – unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.<sup>1</sup>

We are in danger of being surprised by events as we were in [the] 1964 [military coup]. For lack of political will, competence, anticipation, virtù, as Machiavelli said, we may again be run over by fortuna's wheels.<sup>2</sup>

## I

This paper will reflect on the artistic practice and theoretical research that led me to develop a body of work called *Concrete Witnesses Inquiry*.<sup>3</sup> an artistic investigation that seeks to give visibility to a long-lasting (but largely ignored) military and authoritarian tradition in Brazilian politics by articulating history and landscape through photography and archival work. This body of work looks at overpasses and tunnels built in my hometown, Porto Alegre, during Brazil's civil-military dictatorship (1964-1988). Throughout the *Inquiry*, I sought to associate those road structures (generally taken as ordinary and insignificant) to the violent regime that produced them (often seen as a distant immaterial abstraction, when not erased by their apologists, even though it tortured, censored and murdered hundreds of Brazilians).<sup>4</sup>

While photography and everyday urban spaces were already the centre of my previous practice, the development of the *Inquiry* led me to explore new methods, such as collecting a variety of media (from newspaper articles to paintings and decrees). Such items were organised in a digital archive and then arranged and presented as an installation, where archived material coexists with photographic images from the overpasses. The unfolding of public and private life events – such as the crisis in Brazil's politics, the COVID-19 pandemic and my experience as a master's student – significantly shaped my practice and its outcomes throughout this process.

Thus, it will be relevant, in the scope of this paper, to articulate the *Concrete Witnesses Inquiry* not only with scholarly and artistic references which affected the work – such as Georges Didi-Huberman, Allan Sekula, Carlo Ginzburg and Aby Warburg – but also with a broader context that affected me in that period. We will start by reviewing Brazil's political context by the late 2010s and by looking at a previous response I developed to it, through my earlier photographic work. Then, we will look at archival procedures I developed in 2020, but that were abandoned after a while. Finally, we will observe how the archive returned to my work, now articulating it with my photographic practice, leading me to develop that atlas-like installation that makes the *Inquiry's* core: a surface where appropriated images and texts are presented alongside my overpasses' images.



Figure 1

*Concrete Witnesses Inquiry* exhibition at the UFRGS' Arts Institute Gallery, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

## II

I did not use to pay close attention to politics before 2018. While I attended a progressive community high school and many of my closest friends were actively engaged with left-wing parties, I grew up in a conservative catholic family. It took the election of Jair Bolsonaro and the rise of neo-fascism in Brazil for me to pick a side. At that point, I was 21 years old and had already taken my first steps into being an artist. Facing politics in such a violent way, thus, changed the way I approached my work, too.

In 2019, I started to develop “Letters to Ultramarine” (2019), a body of work that investigated how images from the Global North affected the spaces I inhabited. Only through this process did I realise that, as an upper-middle-class young Brazilian, the landscape around me and my expectations towards it were usually shaped by the image of the North American suburb. The development of this work allowed me to perceive how historically determined those expectations were. Moreover, the fact that I could see them materialised in the spaces I inhabited was a symptom not only of my race and class position within Brazilian society but also a symptom of Brazil’s position within the global system.

I now recognise that such practice already reflected the intention to produce visibility to something abstract by carefully arranging elements that initially may seem ordinary and unimportant. That is: a US-styled post-box could get lost amidst the residential neighbourhood where I first found it. However, if placed alongside similar images, that montage procedure could make visible a more elusive but no less real presence.



**Figure 2**  
*Concrete Witnesses Inquiry* exhibition  
*Untitled*, from the *Letters to Ultramarine*  
 series, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

Such a method, I understand, also reflected an underlying diagnostic about the historical moment we lived in just as Bolsonaro promised to bring the American way of life to the Brazilian middle class. In his effort to realise in Brazil the ideal of ‘progress’ defined by North American standards, our own ‘Tropical Trump’ would bend on his knee to the ‘Real Trump’, getting nothing in return but mass shootings<sup>5</sup> and these Statue of Liberty replicas.<sup>6</sup>

Just as the upper-middle-class gated communities I portray in “Letters to Ultramarine” and the American suburbs, Bolsonaro and Trump have differences that might be as hard to precisely identify as they are easy to generally feel. Brazil’s long tradition of military authoritarian interventions in civil politics, combined with Bolsonaro’s close ties with the army, for example, make him a particular type of ‘wannabe dictator’. Possibly a far more dangerous type than Trump, according to philosopher and political scientist Marcos Nobre.<sup>7</sup>

Bolsonaro was admitted into the Brazilian Army Officials Prep School in 1973, at the height of our latest military dictatorship (which lasted from 1964 to 1988). He was promoted to captain just as he was forced to leave the institution after he was caught planning a terrorist attack to demand better wages for the officials. Despite his crime (or maybe because of it), he would be continuously elected to legislative positions from 1989 to 2019, when he became president.

Throughout that period, Bolsonaro always defended the interests of the military and security agents, often attacking the newly borne 6<sup>th</sup> Republic democratic regime. He was first elected as one of Rio de Janeiro’s City Councillors in the first elections under the 1988 democratic constitution. Since then, he echoed the voices



of those who never wanted the end of dictatorship in the first place. Later on, as a Federal Representative, he would publicly side with army officials accused of crimes against humanity, defend torture, and, at one point, even suggest that the president at the time should be shot.

As a grotesque spokesperson for military interests within civil politics, Bolsonaro managed not to be excluded from the military circles he was a part of before he was expelled from the army. Thus, when his popularity began to grow by the late 2010s, many high officials in the armed forces publicly supported his candidacy. A former captain, Bolsonaro was elected president with a former general as his vice-president. They would go on to form a *military government elected by vote*, as journalist Leandro Demori puts it.<sup>8</sup> Bolsonaro's election, thus, was just the latest example of the Brazilian Army acting as if they were the Republic's patron, feeling entitled to take back control whenever civilians made a move they disapproved of. As the Brazilian human rights activist, jurist and journalist Sobral Pinto famously summarised: "The military, having proclaimed the Republic [in 1889], thought they owned the Republic and never accepted not being the Republic owners."<sup>9</sup>

That background will allow us to recognise how meaningful it was that, at the first signs of an organised opposition since Bolsonaro took office, he called his supporters to a demonstration in front of the army headquarters. His followers shouted for a 'new AI-5', referring to the 1968 5<sup>th</sup> *Institutional Act*, the decree that marked the escalation of violence during the military dictatorship, which effectively closed down the Congress, suspended constitutional guarantees, and formalised state-led censorship.

Such chants and violent ideas had not been a common sight in public life since the 1990s and were usually seen as an idiosyncrasy restricted to a small, white, elder, urban elite (generally speaking, those that felt represented by the 1964 military coup). Thus, the images showing hundreds of supporters calling for a dictatorship in front of the Army's headquarters were something I had never seen before. At the same time, however, that was the image of an old, recurring ghost. It was clear that the (symbolical and, sometimes, literal) heirs of the army that tortured and killed their own people in the 70s wanted revenge. They could no longer tolerate civilians pretending to have the nation's helm in their hands.

It already looked like Bolsonaro was setting the stage for a decades-long tenure not as president but as dictator at the Planalto Palace when the COVID pandemic hit Brazil. His government's response was to deny the crisis, calling Brazilians to go to work usually, as the disease was nothing but a *little flu*, as Bolsonaro infamously said.<sup>10</sup> When the conservative Congress and the oligarchic Supreme Court surprisingly attempted to keep Bolsonaro from force-contaminating Brazilians by the thousands, his government quickly reacted by intensifying those threats against the democratic regime, making their intentions even more explicit.

On March 31st – the date when the Army celebrates their 1964 military coup<sup>11</sup> against an elected government – he and his defence minister, General Fernando Azevedo, flew in a military helicopter over a demonstration. They waved at

his supporters on the ground through the helicopter's opened door, signalling that the army had Bolsonaro's back as he attacked the Congress and the Supreme Court.<sup>12</sup> As historian Caroline Bauer points out, an idealised utopian dictatorial past was actively mobilised by Bolsonaro in a *symbolic battle for memory*.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Bolsonaro oriented his followers, but that symbolic battle made me feel adrift in time. The Military Dictatorship I used to read about in history classes came back to haunt us, and I felt that I did not have the tools to make sense of such a chronological mess.

### III

To me, COVID's fear and shock came along with those caused by the now constant attacks on Brazil's (fragile and only somewhat effective) democratic institutions. I felt the need to think about that threat through my work, but, at first, the methodology I had developed in "Letters to Ultramarine" for investigating the urban space did not seem to fit this new kind of problem. Social distancing was, in Brazil, a privilege for the few, in which I was included. Thus, luckily locked inside my room, the city receded into the distance. As the world seemed to be silently falling apart, I *feverishly read all the newspapers I had in my hands* – to paraphrase Didi-Huberman's depiction of Bertolt Brecht during his exile<sup>14</sup> – trying to keep up with what was going on in hospitals nearby and the palaces, headquarters and ministries farther away.

That was when I started clipping photographs and headlines from newspapers. I would archive them in an accordion folder, dividing them into categories and assembling them over a white background. I would photograph my compositions and store the clippings in the folder. If the world did not seem to fit within the boundaries of logic – I may have thought – maybe neither should a work that attempted to react to it. Kept away from the urban landscape and absorbed in an endless stream of chaotic events, headlines and press images became operative devices for me to conceive those seemingly inconceivable times. Having never felt like I was manually skilled, making collages was to me an experience as alien as wearing N95 respirators or cleaning every piece of grocery with alcohol before putting them in the pantry. However, in all those cases, those seemed to be necessary responses at that time.

I would keep developing that practice for a few months. *Curitiba, PR* and *Manaus, AM*, two 1,6m wide panels shown at Eric Lawton's exhibition, "A Forged and Delicate Future," at the Robert Capa Centre in Budapest, were probably its most interesting results.<sup>15</sup> Such panels, completed in 2021, already showed some differences from the initial collages I had made in early 2020. Then, in addition to newspaper clippings, I would sometimes add other elements (such as a torn cover from Brazil's constitution) or a reproduction of technical advice from Brazil's *Federal Council of Medicine* defending the use of chloroquine for COVID-19.<sup>16</sup>

At that point, I sometimes looked online for specific images I felt were needed for my compositions, downloading them and printing them with my ink-



**Figure 3**

*Ultraviolet light might eliminate dreams,*  
collage, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

jet printer. But that was a shy movement: I would print the downloaded images on newsprint paper, hiding their digital origin and integrating them into the file I had already built. While I was happy with the pieces I had shown at Capa Centre, I believe that process was much more important for the doors it opened (as we will see) than for the primary results it produced.

## IV

Over time, as I slowly began to inhabit the city again, I eventually became aware of the connection between the 1964 dictatorship, repeatedly invoked by Bolsonaro, and the overpasses, which would become a theme in the Concrete Witnesses Inquiry. When I began photographing them, however, I thought I was starting a new body of work and that that brief period collecting headlines and making collages was just another pandemic habit that would eventually fade away as soon as we all had vaccines.



It was just when I started to think about how I would present those images that I realised I had a problem on my hands. I was sure that those overpasses were operative spaces that could offer an opportunity to articulate a violent past and a recurring present in a way that resisted the far-right's nostalgic call for another dictatorship. Those were meaningful yet forgotten landscapes that could be turned into a tangible portal, a *privileged* point – to quote Gilbert Simondon<sup>17</sup> – from where to access an apparition that otherwise could not be seen.

I soon realised, however, that while those photographs worked well to highlight those spaces as notable features in the city, those images were not enough to project a new meaning on them. So, influenced by Alan Sekula's and Robert Smithson's work, I had written some essay-works that could be presented with the images, hoping to build some context around the photographs. But even with these texts, I felt that my images could not connect *the world, how I felt and what I knew* about it.

For those photographs to work as I intended – I then realised – I needed to provide the viewer with a completely different set of instances so that other connections could be established around (and within) my images. I needed to set up a "micro arena of information exchange,"<sup>18</sup> to quote Sekula. It was while I faced that problem that my previous work with newspaper clippings re-emerged. At that point, I was almost two years removed from the first newspaper collages, a period

**Figure 4**  
*Conceição Overpass*, Installation view  
from the *Concrete Witnesses Inquiry*  
exhibition, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

marked by the experience of academic life through my first year as a master's student, when I decided to collect images from the news again, I was equipped with new tools.

Firstly, since my previous work with newspaper clippings, I had read Georges Didi-Huberman's book on Bertolt Brecht's *Kriegsfibel*, a fascinating work with newspaper images and poems by the notorious playwright. Through Didi-Huberman's eyes, Brecht's book becomes a means to think about history, war, dialectics and politics. Reading that book made me realise that a bit like Brecht, my emphasis while clipping newspaper had always been in the heuristics of the montage rather than in their graphical arrangement as a collage.

Secondly, the demands of academic writing (as well as the contact with a writing style rich in footnotes employed by authors such as Didi-Huberman, Aby Warburg and Carlo Ginzburg) made me develop a taste for referencing and commenting on what was being assembled. Not only was I interested in the juxtaposition of the elements more than in their graphical interaction, but I also noted that showing *where those elements were coming from* could be generative within the work.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, during those early months as a master's student, I had the opportunity to attend a workshop in which fellow Brazilian researcher Italo Alves taught me how to use *Zotero*, a research assistant software that organises documents and automates quotations. I soon realised that that could also be useful to my artistic practice. So, I set up a *Zotero* library dedicated exclusively to organising, not books and papers I would cite on my dissertation, but newspaper articles and blog posts (and their images) I thought could help me to think through my overpasses and their connection to Brazil's authoritarian past.

Moving my appropriated images archive from an accordion folder to *Zotero* not only allowed me to automatically keep track of the origins of the pieces I was assembling but also brought my collection practice far closer to my everyday experience with the news, which took place mostly on twitter and on newspaper websites, rather than through printed newspapers. On top of this, I now accepted that that was not an archive of newspaper images but rather an archive of anything I could find online.

While downloading images from the internet was never a technical limitation in its own right, *Zotero* was a missing piece that allowed me to organise that process. With such a tool, searching the web for meaningful images became a gesture as well integrated into my practice as searching the city for photographs. Soon, historical paintings, maps, and images from recent and old news started to feature on my studio wall, side by side with my photographs of the overpasses. Later on, I would link the *Zotero* library with an Adobe Lightroom catalogue where I could visually search through my archive, too, setting up sequences of images just as I had always done with my own images. Combined with Lightroom, *Zotero* became a site for collection and montage, where I could bring together actions and places vastly scattered through space and time.



The formal problem I had outlined before, however, remained: How should I show these images? How could I arrange this growing archive in a way that would not only help me project new meanings into my hometown's overpasses but also help me critically orient myself in time? How could the items I had archived help me build a micro-arena of information exchange, one that could help me imagine the survival of Brazil's authoritarian tradition *through* Porto Alegre's road infrastructure?

## V

I faced a practical problem, which was an epistemological problem, too. Namely, how can that "non-philosophical astonishment" – to invoke Benjamin's quote in the epigraph – be turned into a "philosophical kind of astonishment" in the face of sustained and surviving violence? What kind of approach could allow me to articulate the past so that those overpasses could be *felt* as being part not only of the military dictatorship that built them but also as part of a centuries-old tradition of an army ruling over its own people? How could I offer the viewers a way to establish connections, even if fragile ones, between the urban landscape and those supposedly *past* events that, nevertheless, insistently kept unfolding in front of our eyes? How could we avoid being run over by the "wheels of fortuna," to which echo José Murilo de Carvalho already called our attention twelve years before Bolsonaro's election but that we still could not even see?

Answering these questions would mean reacting to a past that, at one point, was presumed to have been overcome but that seemed to tragically re-emerge in the present like a ghost, producing the experience of chronological hunting. Things seemed to be out of their time, but that apparent anachronism did not keep them from affecting the present. Reacting effectively to those times, I now suggest, meant to offer to the spectator a structure capable of making sense of history beyond causality or chronology, thus offering an image for those shape-shifting "wheels of fortuna" – or, rather, to the steel tracks under "fortuna's" tanks' – as they, once again, threatened to smash our political power.

My attempt to do so – admittedly limited but, I would argue, significant nevertheless – would come after my contact with yet another book from Didi-Huberman: his *Atlas, or the Gay Anxious Science*, a work in which he explores Aby Warburg's famous *Atlas Mnemosyne*. Didi-Huberman's second<sup>20</sup> major work on the German art historian's work motivated me to take a step back from my practice, one that allowed me to realise that the archival and photographic methods could work together as part of a single, broader endeavour. If Didi-Huberman's work on Brecht's *Kriegsfibel* was important for me to reframe my collecting methods and even my reasons for collecting at all, his work on Warburg's *Atlas* was fundamental for me to rearrange what was collected and, more importantly, how to rearrange it *vis a vis* what I, then, considered "the work itself" (that is, the overpasses' photographs).



Amidst the dialogues Didi-Huberman establishes while thinking through Warburg's *Atlas* – dialogues with Nietzsche, Goethe, Goya and Benjamin, to mention a few – one specific passage of the book was particularly important for me to conceive that articulation. That is when the author establishes a polarity between the 'tableau' (painting, board) and the 'table' (table, working surface). If a *tableau* is usually taken as a 'definitive instance in the eyes of positivistic history,' a 'table' is a dynamic space where "we alternately place and get rid of everything that its 'work plane' greets without any hierarchy."<sup>21</sup>

Didi-Huberman was commenting on art history, highlighting that the core of Warburg's method was to look at the tableaux only after placing them on a table: a broader instance where multiple 'tableaux' interact with each other, such as the panels of his *Atlas Mnemosyne*. To me, however, that passage opened the door for something else entirely: the possibility of a polarity to be worked within the *Concrete Witnesses Inquiry*. I immediately thought of my black and white photographs as *tableaux*: printed in fairly large formats and framed, they would stand still and imposing on the gallery wall, categorically highlighting those landscapes as meaningful samples from the city space and displacing them to the exhibition room. But I could also balance and oppose the 'tableaux,' offering a more dynamic space where my texts and items in my archive would be greeted alongside my own photographs in a levelled plane. A 'table' could do just that: projecting new meanings over the overpasses' photographs while challenging that 'definitive' and 'grandeur' character I had just attempted to build around them.

Organising my work between those two poles was the turning point in my attempt to insert the overpasses in a broader visual system, one whose building blocks were the images archived in my Zotero Library. Just when I got to see the *Mnemosyne* working – through Didi-Huberman's thought – I realised that an atlas of images and texts could answer my problem. In such a system, an *Atlantic practice* would be the means to "reread the world: to *differently link the disparate pieces* [...] in a way to orienting and interpreting it, no doubt, but also of respecting it, of going over it again or reediting and piecing it together again without thinking we are summarising or exhausting it."<sup>22</sup>

The atlas, thus, became a meeting point (and working surface) to confront (and signify) phantoms that had been haunting me. That dynamic composition of elements became the practical and theoretical image of a syntax *capable of making heterogeneous orders of reality meet*:

It is a "table" on which one decides to *place certain disparate things with a view to establishing multiple "intimate and secret relations,"* an area possessing its own rules of arrangement and of transformation for relinking certain things whose *links are not at all obvious*. And for making these links, once they are brought to light, the paradigms of a rereading of the world.<sup>23</sup>



**Figure 5**  
Detail from the *Correspondence Panel*,  
*Concrete Witnesses Inquiry* exhibition,  
2022. Courtesy of the artist.

That was how, not only did images from my digital archive find a place alongside my overpass photographs, but also how images from the “Letters to ultramarine” body of work were found to be operative within the *Inquiry* too. That was how a reproduction of a map from the 1700s found its way alongside a calendar and a photograph from the Congress with confetti flying as the 1988 constitution was being approved. That was how a photograph of a Statue of Liberty replica found its way alongside Victor Meirelles’ “The First Mass in Brazil” painting from 1861, just above a quote from a bolsonarist Supreme Court judge’s injunction that kept churches from being closed for a few days during the pandemic.<sup>24</sup>

By combining the photographs framed on the wall with the *disparate elements* placed in an arrangement that does not strive for chronology, I hope to have offered the spectator a position from where the ghosts of the past may become more than a haunting symptom of temporal displacement. In this system of images and texts, the overpasses become privileged points for coming to terms with this ghost as it is: as an anachronical intrusion, but one that can critically inform the present. Thus, through that dialectic balance between the table and the ‘tableaux,’ I believe to have been able to put into practice the *anxious and restless knowledge*<sup>25</sup> one must accept in order to “see time,” as Didi-Huberman puts it.<sup>26</sup>

In this way, I expect the *Inquiry* to perform a double reframing in the eyes of the spectator: On the one hand, a reframing of the collected images and texts

that, through the archive, find themselves in the atlas within new and unexpected companies. On the other hand, a reframing of the overpass's photographs (as well as the structures themselves) that are now entangled to a continuum of violence that extends itself much closer to the present and far further into the past. Thus, those concrete structures, usually taken as meaningless and tautological beyond their use-value, were contextualised in a network of critical meanings and images.

This article has shown how the atlas and the archive were fundamental tools in my attempt to establish a *micro arena of information exchange*. Adopting a specific kind of archive was the link between the collection of diverse elements and their rearrangement, thus potentially making it possible to access historical processes from everyday spaces. Complementarily, through the display of that archive in the form of an atlas, I hope to have been able to invite the spectator to see the city, its past and its present through a dynamic mode of remembering: one that makes sense of the emergence of ghosts of past violence as well as their contemporary survivals. Such a mode of remembering urges us not to negate the agency of such ghosts on the basis of their inherent anachronism but rather to recognise the anachronic presence of a violent, oligarchic, militaristic, colonial and racist past. "A long past that" as famously put by writer and cartoonist Milor Fernandes, "Brazil still has ahead of itself."<sup>27</sup>

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- 1 Walter Benjamin, "Teses sobre o conceito de história," in *Magia e técnica, arte e política: Ensaios sobre literatura e história da cultura* (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1994), 224.
- 2 José Murilo de Carvalho, *Forças Armadas e Política No Brasil*, (São Paulo: Todavia, 2019), 248. Political scientist and historian José Murilo de Carvalho was one of Brazil's leading experts on the complex interaction between our military and civil politics. He passed away in August victim of COVID-19 (Brasil 2023).
- 3 This paper reframes and expands on reflections first presented in my master's dissertation, *A Noise in the Landscape and the Gaze-Function: history fragments collected from space*, available in Portuguese only (Balbela de Azambuja, 2022).
- 4 I investigate the connection between those overpasses and the 1964-1985 period in my paper "Illegitimate Landscapes: Minimalism, Authoritarianism and the Conceição Overpass," available for free in Portuguese (Balbela 2022).
- 5 Recurrent mass shootings in schools are recurrent phenomena in Brazil, but their occurrence spiked after Bolsonaro's turn in ahead of the federal government (Lo Re 2022). Prosecutors point to his policies that encouraged the use of firearms and made them more accessible, as well as to the growing hate speech culture in Brazil, of which he is a symbol, as critical factors to this process (Teodoro 2023).
- 6 These statues, such as the one that I had photographed, sit in the parking lots of a growing department store chain, whose owner is, incidentally, a fanatic Bolsonaro supporter. In addition to being convicted of tax evasion (Batista 2020), he financed COVID-related disinformation campaigns during the pandemic (Regueira et al. 2021) and shared coup messages after Bolsonaro's 2022 electoral defeat (Bittencourt 2023)
- 7 Marcos Nobre, *Ponto-final: A guerra de Bolsonaro contra a democracia* (São Paulo: Todavia, 2020).
- 8 Leandro Demori, "A Tragédia Indígena é Militar," *A Grande Guerra*, 18 June 2022. <https://www.agrandeguerra.com.br/p/a-tragedia-indigena-e-militar>.
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- 11 In fact, the cue happened on April 1st, but the official date was changed so that it wouldn't coincide with Fool's Day.
- 12 Thiago Resende, Talita Fernandes, and Igor Gielow, "Bolsonaro usa helicóptero e anda a cavalo para prestigiar ato na Esplanada contra STF e Congresso," *Folha de S. Paulo*, 31 May 2020, sec. Poder. <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/poder/2020/05/bolsonaro-usa-helicoptero-para-sobrevoar-manifestacao-na-esplanada-contra-stf-e-congresso.shtml>.
- 13 Caroline Silveira Bauer, "La dictadura cívico-militar brasileña en los discursos de Jair Bolsonaro: usos del pasado y negacionismo," *Relaciones Internacionales* 28, 57 (2019): 48.
- 14 Georges Didi-Huberman *Quando as Imagens Tomam Posição: o Olho da História I*, trans. Cleonice Paes Barreto Mourão, (Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2017), 18. My position was never even remotely close to that from where Brecht stood during WWII. I was never personally threatened or exiled, I have not been subjected to ethnic persecution or military conflict. Like Bracht, however, I also found myself feverishly reading the news countless times, trying to keep up with that play of pain, greatness and political violence.



- 15 Gustavo Balbela, Elsa Gregersdotter, Andrej Lamut, Ida Nissen, and André Viking, *A Forged and Delicate Future*, ed. Eric Lawton, (Budapest: Robert Capa Centre for Contemporary Photography, 2021).
- 16 CartaCapital. "Presidente do CFM escreveu parecer que pede liberação de uso da cloroquina," *CartaCapital*. 18 October 2021. <https://www.cartacapital.com.br/politica/presidente-do-cfm-escreveu-parecer-que-pede-liberacao-de-uso-da-cloroquina/>; Conselho Federal de Medicina. "PROCESSO-CONSULTA CFM No 2." 2020. <https://sistemas.cfm.org.br/normas/visualizar/pareceres/BR/2020/4>. Brazil's Federal Council of Medicine role, supporting the use of that medicine against COVID-19 (despite the lack of evidence supporting that practice) was key for Bolsonaro's push into denying the pandemic. He would argue that, since there was an effective medicine against the disease, measures such as the use of masks and social distancing were unnecessary and that those who defended them were enemies of the people and were trying to attack his government. (Della Coletta 2020; Uol 2020a; 2020b).
- 17 Gilbert, Simondon, *Do Modo de Existência Dos Objetos Técnico*, trans. by Vera Ribeiro, (Rio de Janeiro: Contraponto Editora, 2020), 247.
- 18 Allan Sekula, "On the Invention of Photographic Meaning," in *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works, 1973-1983*, 3–22, (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1984), 3.
- 19 A political-humorous podcast could be mentioned here as an important reference too. *Medo e Delírio em Brasília*, by Pedro Daltro and Cristiano Botafogo (n.d.), features a long list of bibliography at the end of each episode, when they mention the authors of each one of the dozens of voices used to compose their work. A bit like the bibliography of a good book, I realised that such a section had produced an interest in its own right by making visible the diversity of elements and actors that were brought together to compose any given piece.
- 20 The first one is *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art* (Didi-Huberman [2002] 2013), a more bibliographical take on Warburg's work as a whole, rather than a deep dive on the *Atlas Mnemosyne*, his final work and arguably his most epistemologically ambitious project
- 21 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Atlas ou o Gaio Saber Inquieto: o Olho da História III*, trans. Márcia Arbex and Vera Casa Nova, (Belo Horizonte: Editora UFMG, 2018), 24–25; emphasis mine.
- 22 Ibid., 27; emphasis mine.
- 23 Ibid., 59–60; emphasis mine.
- 24 Unfortunately, a detailed commentary on the signifying relationships between the elements in the atlas is not yet available in English. However, it can be found in Portuguese in the last chapter of my master's dissertation (BALBELA DE AZAMBUJA, 2022): "Um passeio pelo painel de correspondências."
- 25 In the Brazilian Portuguese translation by Márcia Arbex and Vera Casa Nova, *Le gai savoir inquiet* is translated as *O gaio saber inquieto*, or, literally in English, *The gay unquiet knowledge*.
- 26 Didi-Huberman, *Atlas ou a Gaio Saber Inquieto*, 304.
- 27 FERNANDES, Milor. Unknown date. Apud NASCIMENTO, Paulo Henrique Albuquerque do. 2023, p. 15. "O Brasil tem um enorme passado pela frente": uma arqueogenealogia do ataque/defesa à educação no Brasil contemporâneo (2018-2020)'. PhD thesis, Fortaleza: Universidade Federal do Ceará. <http://repositorio.ufc.br/handle/riufc/71989>.



INTERVIEW

## EXPLORING THE 'SLOW ARCHIVE' AN INTERVIEW WITH SVEN SPIEKER

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### Abstract

This interview with Sven Spieker explores the characteristics of his theoretical proposal known as the "Slow Archive." Introduced in his "Manifesto for a Slow Archive" (2016), it offers an original approach on the relationship between contemporary art and the archival device. The discussion delves into various topics, including temporality and speed concerning contemporary archives in the Internet age; the processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of the aura and their impact on archives; as well as strategies for slowing down the rapid flow of information, such as manipulating digital obscurity or navigating the boundaries between truth and fiction.

Keywords: Slow Archive, Art-Archive Relationship, Archival Tactics, Contemporary Criticism, Slow-down of Information Flows

## INTRODUCTION

In 2016, Sven Spieker, a Professor at the University of California (Santa Barbara, USA), published his “Manifesto for a Slow Archive” in the journal *ARTMargins online*,<sup>1</sup> of which he is the founding editor. His proposal is noteworthy in the field of theory concerning the relationship between art and the archive, a field that has seen saturation in recent decades. Spieker approaches the archive as a cultural device that neither conforms to the bureaucratic tradition nor merely opposes it, unlike other anti- or counter-archival approaches. The concept of the “Slow Archive” does not prioritize the principles of provenance or the maintenance of an original order, as traditional analogue archives do. Instead, it acknowledges that digital technologies are replacing localization with ubiquity. ICTs blur the inside/outside distinction in the information accumulation apparatus, creating an environmental condition traversed by constant data flows within the framework of neoliberalism. As we will see in the following pages, Spieker’s proposal suggests unconventional strategies for dealing with historical and contemporary conflicts. In this way he helps us navigate the complexities of the relationship between art and archive.

In essence, the “Slow Archive” can be regarded as a kind of third way that critically engages with the present, while examining both archival tradition and contemporary disruptions. It rejects both the “humanist archive” and “the neoliberal archive of fast (capital) flows,” since both are totalizing systems. Instead, the “Slow Archive” draws useful elements from each part and positions itself primarily “in the margins and blank spaces,” trying to take control of the variations in the speed at which images and documents circulate today.<sup>2</sup> Spieker challenges us with the critical, and therefore political, potency of the archival device and prompts the question: “How can we retake the archive and revive or instill in it a critical function without either nostalgically invoking its humanist incarnation or endorsing its neoliberal nemesis, the idea of a fully transparent, fully capitalized mega-archive?”<sup>3</sup> His particular solution revolves around pace and speed. However, the concept of “Slow Archive” does not advocate for the return to the slowness of analogue processes focused on preserving traces of the past. Rather, it consists in slowing down the flow of information and our actions within this flow in order to overcome “the constraints of enforced archival productivity.”<sup>4</sup>

Drawing on case studies from the art realm, Spieker’s manifesto introduces the characteristics of the “Slow Archive” in a propositional manner. For instance, Peruvian artist Luz Maria Bedoya’s artwork *Línea de Nazca* (2008) proposes an archival approach where the body, its measurements and its position in relation to data offer a reading that is particular, deviant, neither universal nor fully intelligible, yet inhabitable. Bedoya’s work, along with works by Akram Zaatari, Lina Selander, Dani Gal, Jörgen Gasilewski and Julius von Bismarck, are brought up to underline a series of strategies and possibilities for the “Slow Archive” involving shifts in speed, perspective and position, both materially and conceptually. These strategies encompass destabilizing velocities, altering viewpoints, positioning subjects or

objects in decentralized or even fictitious spaces, and particularly, the disorienting effects they may evoke, influencing how images and documents are perceived, both by humans and the technological devices we use. Spieker directly suggests that we can interpret “the slowing of information flow as a new archival politics.”<sup>5</sup>

The “Slow Archive” acknowledges that the causes of the slowness of traditional archives stem from their material condition and bureaucratic procedures. It also recognizes the perceived speed and transparency of archives in the era of internet hyper-connectivity. However, Spieker advocates for the use of “digital obscurity”<sup>6</sup> as a final operative strategy of detention, involving the manipulation of information accumulations that are marginal, hidden, consciously or unconsciously forgotten by the omniscient, neoliberal, global archive. The “Manifesto for a Slow Archive” serves as a compendium of tactics for operating within the complex contemporary framework of the archive. Like any good manifesto, the original text is direct and concise, setting out the suggested strategies with a few examples and comments. At *Archivo Papers*, we thought to delve deeper into the key characteristics of the “Slow Archive” through an interview with the author. Its relationship with time, the processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization of archival aura, the relationship between truth and fiction, and guerrilla tactics in the era of Big Data are some of the topics that we will explore in the subsequent pages.

**Pablo Santa Olalla** | Your concept of “Slow Archive” diverges from traditional assumptions such as the “allegiance to the traces of the past” or its relation to storage. At the same time, the “Slow Archive” is not only oppositional either, as it does not focus on what “negates, repudiates, or destroys” the archival device as the “an-archive”, the “anti-archive” or the “anomic archive” do.<sup>7</sup> Instead, you propose a more operational perspective on data accumulation and organisation, considering its relevance to both the present and our memory management practices. In any case, the relationship of any archive to time is remarkable. Traditional archives act as some sort of artificial memory projecting traces of the past into the present and future (→). Conversely, oppositional modes of archiving aim to reconfigure our interpretation of historical accounts by altering the structures of information gathering, ordering and preservation (⊖). Could you elaborate on the relationship between the “Slow Archive” and the “anomic” (Buchloh), “anarchivistic” (Foster) or even “disobedient” (Scotini) impulses?<sup>8</sup> Is the temporal scheme in which the “Slow Archive” operates similar to or different from that of these oppositional archives? How would you characterize it?

**Sven Spieker** | I have been working for a while on rethinking what it might mean to think about the archive in our time of AI and global digitization. Here, it is not really a question of some kind of universal archive theory that can encompass everything. I have always felt that the archive’s relationship to time responds to a variety of different demands at the same time. On the one hand, there is the

need to see the archive as being subject to (historical) time. Now as always, it is important to historicize the archive, so we can escape from the idea that there is, or can be, a universal archive. This being said, to historicize the archive also means to shield us from the temptation, so widespread nowadays, to think of the archive as a cascading series of particulars (identities) whose differences cannot be overcome in any way. What I think is needed, in thinking about the archive's relationship with (historical) time, is how we can think the universal without sacrificing the particular, and without simply condemning the one in the name of the other. The "Slow Archive" is my effort to think about this problem, by saying: let's not take an archive's relationship with time for granted; instead, let's make it the focus of our examination. My approach begins with the problem of negation: what does it mean to negate something? In classic oppositional logic, binary negations assume that the two terms locked into the equation both cancel each other yet, in doing so, are also mutually dependent on each other. I will say more about this below, but it seems to me that while such a logic is perhaps suitable for analysing certain historical constructs, such as the Cold War, they are not helpful nowadays. My goal with the "Slow Archive" was to escape from the oppositional logic of negation, and point to the fact that archives allow for multiple allegiances.

**Pablo Santa Olalla** | Today, discussions about the concept of the archive often tend to adopt a Manichean stance, oscillating between philic and phobic positions regarding accumulation and organisation of information. However, your concept of "Slow Archive" appears to disrupt this dichotomy. In this context, you draw upon Svetlana Boym's concept of "off-modernity".<sup>9</sup> The archive is undeniably a product of Western Modernity while simultaneously shaping it. Could you further explain how your idea of the "Slow Archive" aligns with Boym's principles?

**Sven Spieker** | In a recent article, I have tried to elaborate on the distinction between *archivophilia* and *archivophobia* in relation to contemporary art production.<sup>10</sup> My point there is to say that the Manichean logic you mention above is, at least when it comes to art, not helpful. First of all, it's clear that in so many ways, *phobia* and *philia* mutually condition each other, or even depend on each other. A phobic attitude to the archive does not exclude affiliation, and vice versa. To negate is not necessarily to annihilate. In fact, as we know already from classic archive theory, in archives, complete annihilation is not possible since even an act of erasure tends to leave traces that constitute an archive all of their own. This does not invalidate the *archivophobic* impulse, which plays an important role in art. It does, however, relativize any effort to think negation metaphysically, as all-out destruction or total cancellation without a trace. The "Slow Archive" wants to highlight this fact. And I mean this also in a literal way. For instance, to play a vinyl record slowly or mess with its surface so that it skips and scratches, as the



Czech artist Milan Knížák did in a well-known work called *Broken Music* (1979), is not to fully destroy either the record, nor its stored content. Instead, Knížák's act of destruction invites us to ask: Where and what, actually is the archive here, and what is being destroyed or distorted? What are we losing and what are we gaining by playing the record (the archive) in this way? To play a record slowly, to stay with this example, is also to practice what we could refer to as critical modernity, and what must not be misunderstood as a deviation or simply as an offshoot or a deviation from the metropolitan archive. The "Slow Archive" differs from what with the late Svetlana Boym we could call the *off-archive* in the way it relates not merely to a politics of space—the road not taken, the territory unexplored—but also to the affective qualities of such detours. It asks, what difference does it make at what speed we explore the off-modern, how does this speed affect our perception of that space or, more radically, how does it help us constitute such a space in the first place? In other words, the "Slow Archive" is not just the technical archive, the media archive, it's also in addition meant to suggest an archival "mode", a way of "being archive", of existing in an archival space and the affects and states of being this may generate.

**Pablo Santa Olalla** | In your article, you highlight the traditional archives' association with locality, context and original order, aspects tied to the archival science "principle of provenance". The digital archive, on the other hand, is linked to processes of delocalisation. Following your text, these processes are related to the distinction between the inside and the outside of an archive. We have moved from the archive as a tangible place, from which one enters and leaves, to inhabiting an omnipresent archive, in constant flux. Walter Benjamin described the "aura" of a work of art in relation to its "here-and-now", which is lost through the flux of technical reproduction.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, we could say that traditional archives possess such an "aura". More recently, Boris Groys has spoken of a procedure for the "restoration of the aura", made possible through the mediation and curatorship of archives, whether analogue or digital.<sup>12</sup> In the "archive-as-environment" you describe, is it possible to "recover the aura"? Can we reterritorialise the processes of data accumulation and processing, which, as a political operation, can influence the means of (cultural) production in the framework of global neoliberalism? Or does the focus on contemporary connectivity hinder new ordering operations, allowing only for a "replacement of location with different forms of disorientation", as you suggest as a characteristic feature of the "Slow Archive"?<sup>13</sup>

**Sven Spieker** | Yes, the gamble of the "Slow Archive" is to think the archive as an environment, as it were ecologically. We are all very used to think of archives economically (Greek *oikos* < house), in terms of a specific place of consignment with walls and a door that is guarded by the notorious *arkhontes*, or whatever their equivalent may be in different contexts. Yet while this *arkhon*

remains important, and while it is often thought of (among others, by Derrida) as the archive's substratum, its material base, we should not forget that no economy can exist in isolation. The *oikos* is part of an infrastructure, it cannot run its operation without connection to other houses, other economies, and so its vertical internal organization must be supplemented with a horizontal one. To some degree, this is just a matter of perspective. As I try to show in my book *The Big Archive*,<sup>14</sup> while it's important to look at archives as repositories consisting of records and their classification—in short as an independent, “stand alone” *oikos*—we should not forget that this archival architecture is also part of a complex group of interacting institutions without which no analogue archive could function, including the registry. The Principle of Provenance is the outward manifestation of this reality. It says: in an archive, every single record comes from somewhere, from some place, and this provenance determines its place in the archive, so that archives always send us to another place, another archive. Ultimately, on this level, and using Boris Groys' terminology, the modern archive marks a suspicion: the suspicion that what we see (in the archive) hides another place, another archive that the present archive documents or registers without disclosing it fully. It's inevitable, therefore, that we talk about the archive as an *environment* rather than as an isolated mechanism, something that in the digital realm is self-evident, even if the network is not quite the same as what I refer to as an *archival environment*. In the analogue archival environment, the originality or authenticity of a record (an image or text) is a function of the place it occupies, and in this sense, there is indeed a resemblance to Benjamin's ideas concerning the *Aura*, which also designates the originality of a work of art in its traditional place—say, a cathedral—and the way in which this location becomes inscribed in said artwork. Originality/the *Aura*, for Benjamin, is in this sense genuinely archival: it preserves or stores the traces of the past in a certain place. By contrast, digital images, even if they are part of an archive, exist independently from that archive in the sense that their originality, or the lack thereof, is in no way dependent on the archive in which they have been deposited. In fact, they can be moved away from that archive, and into another archive, at any time. And in this sense, as Groys observes, digital images lack an *Aura* to the extent that they lack an archive beyond the algorithm that underwrites their (virtual) existence. The “Slow Archive,” in this sense, represents indeed a version of what Groys refers to as “deterritorialization” (removal of the *Aura*) and “reterritorialization”, the tentative restoral of the *Aura* through efforts to insert digital images into various environments by *exhibiting* them. What's important here, however, is the fact that the “Slow Archive” is not a strategy for making these images visible, merely for creating an *environment* for them. In other words, “exhibiting”, as the example of Espenschied's experiments shows, can actually mean to make such images undiscoverable or obscure (see also below on “digital obscurity”). The point is not visibility but archivization: no restoring of the *Aura*, however tentative it may be, is imaginable without the archive that underwrites it.

**Pablo Santa Olalla |** Another characteristic aspect of the “Slow Archive” is “the strategic assumptions of fiction as fact,” which you illustrate through Jörgen Gasilewski’s 2006 documentary novel *The Gothenburg Events*. In recent decades, we have observed the remarkable commercial success of historical novels. While these novels have brought memory and history closer to general audiences, they do not seem to have awakened a spirit of critical reading, but rather a certain morbid fascination with the obscure historical details. This perpetuates a traditional narrative writing, centred on great figures and major events as propellers of a socio-political linear evolution where the societal body serves merely as background. However, there’s been a recent surge in “speculative” and “fictionalized history” approaches in academia, as well as a renewed attention to science fiction authors (as in the cases of the retrieval of Stanisław Lem, Karel Čapek, Ursula K. Le Guin or Sandy Stone), as sources of valid knowledge. How does the “assumption of fiction as fact” proposed by your concept of “Slow Archive” relate to these contemporary trends in literature and academic writing?

**Sven Spieker |** I cannot speak to all of the books you mention, but my example (Gasilewski) seems to come close to what you identify as “fictionalized history.” Gasilewski’s example is interesting to me mostly for the way it helps us understand a type of fact that is often associated with archives: facts as *evidence*. In his novel, Gasilewski argues that an archival document does not simply contain or own its own status as evidence; rather, it searches for that status within what he calls “the greatest of stories, reality.” I enjoyed this statement – it seems to say that the function of evidence, hence of archives, is not, as is often assumed, simply a given. Evidence is part of a process of establishing truth, and that process is interesting less for the way it neatly separates truth from fiction—we know this is impossible—than for producing what Alain Badiou calls events (*événements*): something that from the perspective of what exists, of what we know and are used to is wholly improbable and unlikely. Evidence understood in this way proves to us the real existence or possibility of what from the point of view of a “realistic” politics is impossible, hence pure fiction. The “Slow Archive” aims to be evidence in this sense. Not simply the merging of fact and fiction but rather proof (evidence) that what from the perspective of “facts” is fiction can, in fact, become actualized and real.

**Pablo Santa Olalla |** The final characteristic action of the “Slow Archive” is “the slowing of information flow as a new archival politics,” which you illustrate through the concept of “digital obscurity.” This relates to that which remains invisible, marginal to the transparency of the neoliberal global archive. However, as you briefly note in your text, traditional archives also exhibit a form of analogue obscurity. In fact, a significant part of research, whether artistic, historiographical, social, or humanistic, involves bringing to light what canonical interpretations of the accumulations of

information overlook, aiming to enrich the narratives by supporting, opposing, or deviating from them. In this sense, the “Slow Archive” approach to “digital obscurity” is contrary to that of obscurity in analogical archives. Whereas the latter seek to provide clarity, in the case of the neoliberal global archive there is an excess of transparency that the “Slow Archive” seeks to contravene. However, slowing down the contemporary flow of information can also be accomplished through other means beyond such a commitment to “digital obscurity.” Consider, for instance, the “culture jamming” procedures proposed by Mark Dery in 1993.<sup>15</sup> This kind of semiotic guerrilla warfare sought to actively intervene in the infosphere of the time, adding chaos to it. Today, these procedures of hacking, remixing, and rumour production have become more numerous and complex: pishing, pharming, spoofing, identity theft, memeing, glitching, and so on. In the operational framework of Big Data, many of these tactics seek first to accelerate the production of information in order to eventually slow down the flows by introducing noise and disrupting the channels. Do these new technophilic procedures of resistance against the neoliberal global archive bear any resemblance to the “Slow Archive”?

**Sven Spieker |** In his article on “Semiological Guerilla Warfare,” Umberto Eco recommended a series of tactics for anyone interested in resisting the pull of manipulative mass communication, in an age when it was no longer enough to identify reactionary information sources with the goal of replacing them with more progressive ones.<sup>16</sup> Eco believed that only a systematically developed conscious focus on the different ways in which messages are received and interpreted by their consumers, the different codes and systems used for their decipherment, could remedy this situation. Of course, there is nothing wrong with this view, but perhaps from our perspective, Eco’s belief in communication science and semiology and what both can teach us, feels idealistic in way that the tactics you mention in your question—pishing, pharming, spoofing, identity theft, memeing, glitching—are not. Unlike Eco’s model, these tactics argue that militancy trumps analysis. Rather than subjecting information and its flow to analysis or trying to educate the consumer of information, they perform or inhabit its flows without trying to decipher or analyze it. With often surprising results, these militant tactics subvert the neoliberal drift of the data flows that engulf us today. Yet in doing so, these tactics are perhaps also a bit helpless when it comes to what to do with their victory. How and where can we orient ourselves in a situation where manipulation no longer has an outside? The “Slow Archive” positions itself somewhere between Eco and these tactics. On the one hand, it says: we live in an age when nostalgic appeals to the past, to past struggles and ideals, or to knowledge that purports to be objective and scientific, are no longer able to underwrite a new politics. Yet at the same time it argues that this does not mean that we should simply write off the archive. On the contrary, a newly conceived archive, what I call an archive of the present, is more necessary than ever. It asks: “How can we retake the archive and revive or instill in it a critical

function without either nostalgically invoking its humanist incarnation or endorsing its neoliberal nemesis, the idea of a fully transparent, fully capitalized mega-archive?" The artworks I mention in my manifesto are all efforts to grapple with this question. In all cases, the ("slow") archive is at the center, yet this archive does not recreate the traditional archive architecture with its rigid distinction between inside and outside; nor does it lay claim to present or past knowledge to cement anachronistic intellectual or legal ownership claims. Rather, by focusing on what traditional archives and knowledges have overlooked; by reterritorializing data without sacrificing knowledge altogether; and by critiquing nostalgic invocations of the past without giving up on memory, the "Slow Archive" promotes the archive, perhaps paradoxically, as an agent of change.

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INTERVIEW

## PICTURING HISTORICAL ABSENCES A CONVERSATION WITH JOANA HADJITHOMAS & KHALIL JOREIGE

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### Abstract

In this interview, Lebanese artists Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige discuss their artistic practice on historical narratives and memory, particularly regarding their approach to the wars in Lebanon. By critically appropriating and scrutinizing archival materials, their work challenges dominant narratives, revealing historical absences that would otherwise be forgotten. Delving into the complexities of the past, the artists explore how history shapes identity and informs contemporary discourse. Through this dialogue, Hadjithomas and Joreige reflect on their artistic process and the transformative potential of art to foster critical reflection and promote more just and compassionate futures.

Keywords: Archive, Photography, Historical narratives, Memory, Lebanese Wars

## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary artistic practice, the exploration of historical narratives and memory occupies a central position, providing fertile ground for critical inquiry and creative expression. At the forefront of this discourse are Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, Lebanese artists whose work delves deeply into the complexities of interpreting and representing history, particularly in the context of conflict and the aftermath of the Lebanese civil wars. Born and raised in Beirut, Hadjithomas and Joreige offer a unique perspective in their artistic practice, drawing from their lived experiences in a region marked by decades of war and political turmoil.

The work of this artistic duo serves as a poignant reflection on the complexities of the past, delving into the ways in which history shapes identity and informs contemporary discourse. Central to their practice is the critical appropriation of archival material. By recontextualizing historical documents, the artists challenge dominant narratives and provide alternative perspectives on contentious events, through artistic interventions that disrupt conventional modes of representation, illuminating the gaps and silences inherent in the archival record. Working across mediums, including photography, film, installation, and performance, the artists explore the enduring impact of historical events on individual and societal consciousness. Despite their multidisciplinary approach, they assert the fundamentally photographic nature of their practice, emphasizing the materiality and fragility of the photographic image, particularly in relation to memory preservation. They stress the importance of confronting absences and latencies in history, imbuing invisible narratives with physicality. Through projects like “Lasting Images” (2003) and “The Story of a Pyromaniac Photographer” (1997-2006), they aim to capture the complexity of historical narratives and reveal latent presences through the materiality of photography.

In their historical inquiry, the artists explore the interplay between micro and macro history to create counter-memories, focusing on specific historical points to reveal larger narratives and challenge official histories. Through projects like “Unconformities” (2016-2020), they uncover forgotten events and highlight the disruptions and ruptures in historical narratives. Moreover, the artists reflect on the impact of technology in shaping contemporary perceptions of reality and memory. Projects such as “The Lebanese Rocket Society” (2011-2018) and “On Faces” (2009) harness technological advancements to explore issues of memory, visibility, and justice.

In this interview, Hadjithomas and Joreige delve into their artistic process and thematic concerns, reflecting on the challenges of navigating historical documents and the transformative potential of art to foster critical reflection on both the past and present. Through a comprehensive analysis of their artistic interventions, this dialogue seeks to illuminate how art can shape our understanding of history and memory, while also envisioning more just and compassionate futures.

**Ana Catarina Pinho & Arola Valls Bofill** | Your artistic practice often engages with archival research and historical documents. How do you navigate the complexities of interpreting and representing historical events? When navigating these historical documents, what kind of challenges do you encounter and how do you translate them in your artistic practice?

**Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige** | We started making images in a very specific context, in the aftermath of the Lebanese civil wars. We wanted to escape a kind of fetishisation of war images, while at the same time bearing witness to what had happened, keeping track of some fragments “transformed by the violence” before they disappeared. War or any other catastrophe is a rupture, a break in our history. How can we then conceive a continuation, a continuity or even a transmission in which we can believe? How can we produce representations closer to us, reappropriates our images, reclaim our imaginaries. We are thinking about images here more in relation to that breach defined by Hannah Arendt in the Crisis of Culture, that moment of rupture when, caught between the past and the future, we have to project ourselves into an uncertain future, to start something new, to invent ourselves in uncertainty.

During the civil wars, the various powers instrumentalised images, using different forms of propaganda. So we grew up and evolved in a world of suspicion and doubt, where we constantly had to question images, documents, facts and their uses. At the time, the archive was either missing, badly indexed, invisibilised or disrupted. It said that history is written by the victors, but in our Civil Wars, in which no history was written, there were no victors. The archive as such is not something that fascinates us and we have no fetish for it. But we invoke history, and archives as traces of that history, to reconfigure, experiment and perform anew in the present, but always in a critical, political and hopefully poetic way. We have developed various strategies to achieve this: Fiction, as in “Wonder Beirut,” with iconic images that populate our imaginations, which we borrow and transform. Latency, as in “Latent Images, the diary of a photographer,” and “Lasting Images” or “180 seconds of Lasting Images,” undeveloped images that come back to haunt us. The anecdotal, in the etymological sense of stories kept secret, which is really at the heart of our research and what we oppose to official history. But also performativity, for example in films like “Je veux voir” (*I want to see*) when we go with Catherine Deneuve and a film crew to southern Lebanon after the 2006 war and try to get a road opened and film at the border, or when we transport in the streets of Beirut a sculpture representing the Cedars 4 rocket in “The Lebanese Rocket Society,” the strange tale of the Lebanese Space race, to fight against the misunderstanding that saw them as missiles when they were produced for science experimentations.

The use of archives is to fight against shrinking possibilities. What does history choose to tell us, why do some facts disappear while others populate our imagination? Who writes history? Part of our challenges is to deconstruct a certain dominant representation that reinstrumentalise for political reasons. Stories kept secret can constitute an alternative History.

**Ana Catarina Pinho & Arola Valls Bofill** | Your work often blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction. How do you balance historical storytelling and artistic expression? The creation of fictional characters, as observed in *Wonder Beirut*, seems to act as an interesting mediator between fact and fiction. Does this allow you to create a certain distance to the event?

**Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige** | Borrowing a character from fiction is to say something about the close proximity that exists between fiction and reality, documentary and fiction. We both see ourselves as storytellers first and foremost, in film and in art. We like to create bridges between these two mediums, which are much more opaque than they seem. For “*Wonder Beirut*,” we created the character of Abdallah Farah, who is said to have photographed Beirut city centre and the Riviera in the 1960s, considered to be the country’s golden age and dubbed the Switzerland of the Middle East. We have attributed to him images from postcards that lulled our childhood and adolescent imaginations, and that reappeared after the Lebanese civil wars, when most of the places they represented no longer existed. “*Wonder Beirut*” was born out of this desire to deconstruct the images and icons represented by these postcards, this dangerous nostalgia that asserts that the war is a parenthesis that must be closed, ignoring the deeper reasons that divide the country to this day. These are very popular and accessible images that we burned following destruction and shellings of the civil wars to bring them closer to our reality and also to produce Postcards of war that denounce the amnesty and amnesia that followed the war years (and which, alas, as we can see, did not really lead to peace).



**Figure 1**  
From the series *Wonder Beirut*, 1997-2006.  
Courtesy of the artists.

Our relationship to what you separate as fiction and reality is very complex. Personally, we do very little to divert images and have a great deal of respect for the provenance of archive images because we come from places where history is not shared. It's not a question of inventing it, it's a question of deconstructing the manufacturing processes, the propaganda of the truths that clash. And this applies to every historical event. The case of Abdallah Farah was possible because the fictional element, Abdallah's life, was at the heart of it all, and we never played on ambiguity — on the contrary, we claimed this character who came from a generation other than our own and who was going to share his views and his life with us in "Latent Images, diary of a photographer." These images, for example, were taken and captured in his name but never developed. Their description creates this latent diary. It is not about fictionalising History, or throwing doubt or a suspicion about historical facts. Particularly in moments where we doubt images and narratives in the age of artificial intelligence, or in societies like ours where there is no shared history. Not a common narrative that enables us to overcome our divisions.

Art comes in place to question this situation. The writing of History or the construction of imaginaries that we have inherited and that we continue to produce. The idea is not simply to distance ourselves but to let an individual voice be heard, to add complexity to a reality that is far too binary. It also says a lot about our society, the representations we have of ourselves or want to impose. We call for innovative, playful or poetic forms because we want to leave room for others. The participation of the other is essential if we are to deconstruct situations together. How can the reality of the Lebanese space project, for example, has been considered a fiction and still seems unimaginable to some, while the fiction of internet scams, spam and scams, which we have explored at great length in many of our recent art installations, becomes real for some people and push the boundaries of belief?

The question is precisely how the history of an event is written, how a collective imagination is formed, and this question is crucial today in shaping our relationship with others and our representation of ourselves. What makes us believe in certain images? Why believe in an actor or a story? What makes us believe? This was at the heart of our research into internet scams, in our project "On Scams," these specific scams where the person writing pretends to be a well-known political figure or one of their descendants who has a sum of money and would like the recipient to help them recover it in exchange for a percentage... These stories are particularly effective, victims are numerous, and in 2018, the transactions and amounts scammed are estimated at several billion dollars. These scams are very old and take roots in the "Letters from Jerusalem," listed after the French Revolution by Vidocq.

We started to archive the scams we received over the Internet because, firstly, their imaginative stories fascinated us and, secondly, because the scammers were surfing on the major news events, such as wars, ecological



disasters or financial collapses. It was like a parallel history of the world, the kind we throw away in the dust bin of our computer. We then considered this material as texts to be performed by actors and the result was very disturbing. Because all of a sudden we believed it for a moment. It's this confusion, this complexity that is sometimes interesting and that has also enabled us here to denounce the imaginary corruption of the swindled but also of the swindlers who place their swindles in regions where corruption would be plausible. It creates a parallel History of the world made out of scams and junk. We published a book entitled "Rethinking Trust in The Age of Internet," edited by Dr Omar Kholeif, in which our work on SCAMs and Internet scams that led us to question the conditions of belief. This kind of narrative manifests itself at certain times, in certain situations, and presupposes an imaginary (made up of both fact and fiction) that authorizes a certain form of narration. It is this imaginary that enables forms of representation and belief. We're interested in the conditions of belief, the circumstances in which a narrative becomes possible and effective.

**Ana Catarina Pinho & Arola Valls Bofill** | Such fictional characters introduce us to the conflicts of History (with capital H). How do you interweave micro and macro history towards the making of a counter-memory?

**Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige** | If we had to speak in photographic terms, we'd say we're looking for focus and perspective. We always start from a precise point, not a general one, but this point must resonate with the larger story... We're looking for a point that concentrates, but isn't a reduction, because this point has to preserve diversities and possibilities. So it's a kind of nodal point that we scratch, dig until it becomes symptomatic, and the manifestation of a whole, a world. It is the result usually of a long enquiry that we can sometimes also revisit in a later stage.

We try to oppose to the official History, the anecdotal, in the etymological sense of the term, the stories kept secret. These are counter memory, a counter history. Putting the spotlight on a completely forgotten but real spacial adventure, that seemed first like fiction, is emblematic of this. Or revealing the story of Orthosia, a Roman city that disappeared buried by a tsunami in 551 and found in the north of Lebanon, completely preserved under the ruins of a Palestinian camp destroyed by war in 2007. These forgotten events are not part of the collective memory. These archives are there but they seem to be lying dormant, in a state of latency. They need to be told to be revealed.

In one of our latest project, "Unconformities," we explore this questions with archeologists and geologists and it challenges our conception of time and History. We realise that the traces of human or even natural presence are not successive, well-ordered layers or linear stratifications. These geological, anthropic, human or climatic actions reverse the chronology, and specifically



in contexts such as ours, which are prey to ruptures, wars and disasters, sedimentation is disrupted. It's as if we're witnessing a joint operation of rewinding and fast-forwarding, flashbacks, constant backward and forward projections, jumps cuts, ellipses, in a different relationship to history whose linearity, beginning and end have been turned upside down. We then realise that to understand this story, and History in general, we paradoxically need both the long and the short temporality, continuity and discontinuity, overviews and close-ups. We need the infinitely large, the macro, such as the drone images that affect the archaeological gesture... And the infinitely small, such as the microscopic images that analyse the transformations of stones and then appear as magnificent abstract paintings. It's a matter of vision, sometimes monstrous, what the human eye cannot see and what escapes it, which is the very definition of the fantastic. These changes of scale and shifts in time that we approach by working alongside archaeologists enable us to reconsider the way in which violence and destruction, ecological and climatic disturbances affect possible narratives, the construction of imaginary worlds. So in a way, it shakes our relationship to the world and to history, and our way of telling it and it is in these tensions and paradoxes that we have to work.



**Figure 2**

*Trilogies*, 2018-2021.

Part 5 of the project *Unconformities*,

2016-2020

Courtesy of the artists.

**Ana Catarina Pinho & Arola Valls Bofill** | Among the different media explored in your work — from installation to performance and film—, the photographic image seems to play a crucial role in your practice. Would you agree?

**Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige** | Whatever medium we use, strangely enough, we consider what we do is specifically, ontologically photographic. Even when it's not photography... For us, photography has been a formidable tool for understanding the world. It's through it that we came face to face with the world, that we discovered it even before turning it into an artistic practice. Through these media, a relationship with the world was established. How to perceive, interpret, transmit... Photography haunts our thinking and continues to haunt our works, even if they are not photographic. It allows us to experience, reflect on and form our relationship with the world and the present, but also with reality. Through photography, we are trying to create an image in a world that is crumbling under the weight of photographs and representations. At the same time, we are questioning representation and the photographic medium. The visible and the invisible, the trace that fades, the trace of a trace, the absence, the latency of images, their remanence, the imaginary and the non-recognition that reaches the image has constituted us. This non-recognition of images that are there even if we don't see them never ceases to question us. When, for example, we explore what lies beneath our feet, and when we resculpt core samples and exploratory drillings in the "Unconformities" project, we consider that these boxes of earth and stones that go back in time and into the depths are like archives or rushes from a film, contact sheets that we have to edit with archaeologists and geologists. For us, it's the same impetus around the tenuous secret history, its unveiling, making visible what we can't see, or revealing latencies. Or accepting that we can only imagine or describe them.

The relationship with analog photography is probably also articulated around the relationship to reality, analogy, symbolism, representation and its critique, and beyond that a relationship to indiciality, to direct trace. The perception of an inscription or a direct imprint, and at the same time a reflection on the modalities of its interpretation. In a certain way, photography appears through in all our practices, even if they don't seem directly photographic. As for the tapestries, "Message with(out) a code," that, after a arduous work to choose the colors and texture of the yarns, unravel and reveal itself to us when it is woven mechanically by the machine as the analogic photographic images were revealed and suddenly appeared before our eyes when we used to develop them.

**Ana Catarina Pinho & Arola Valls Bofill** | Technology plays a significant role in your work. For instance, "The Lebanese Rocket Society" reimagines Lebanon's space program through archival materials and personal narratives, thus articulating the themes of technology, memory, and national identity. In a different context, the work

“On Faces” reconstructs the faces of missing persons using forensic techniques and digital imaging, thus engaging with issues of visibility, memory, and justice. How do you see technological developments shaping contemporary perceptions of reality and memory?

**Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige** | It is undeniable that the tools we use are contemporary with our research. Our relationship with technology is transforming our relationship with narrative, reality and representation. These are issues that exist in our practices, even involuntarily or unconsciously. We then wanted to reflect on the issues at stake and how they are transformed by different technologies. Our work constantly takes into account modes of production and distribution.

In the “Faces” project, we photographed images of martyrs hung on out-of-reach lampposts but exposed to the weather, so the images evolved and disappeared. We are using a technology that has now evolved, other tools have been developed (today the use of AI would be obvious) but we use the possibilities offered to us at a particular time. And that raises questions about the very possibilities of our medium. The use of drawing to compensate for persistent images underlines the relationship we have with the modalities of representation, the promise of photography to keep a trace, a promise that is difficult to keep in certain situations. We photographed those images at various stages of their progressive disappearance. Then, with the help of a graphic designer and various drawers, we attempted to recover certain features, to accentuate others, to bring back the image, a trace, matter, a lasting image.

“Memory Box,” our feature film, confronts a form of chronicle based on analog photos and notebooks originally written by Joana between 1982 and 1988, with those of today’s social media networks and smart-phones. Analog photography presupposes a certain distance, an assimilation to the viewfinder and the body of the camera, whereas the smartphone will enable the selfie and its consequences, on self-presence and the relationship to the body. It is a sort of tribute to photography as we no longer see it, it is barely used, and to the various formats that existed and showed different perspectives. The video, the LCD screen, which made the eye and the body of the filmer autonomous, subtitling the point of view autonomous, were a revolution in the end of the 20th century.

Likewise today, there’s blockchain, AI, climate change, power transformations, deep fakes... everything has profound consequences. Enumerated like this, every technological change has political and medium-related consequences, on issues and relationships to the image, to power and to perception. Even if, of course, there remain some incredible invariants or recurrences. This question is always present in our work. Techniques are always symptomatic of a historical period, following technical developments and transformations is also a way of staying contemporary, sharing a same concern and temporalities and also of questioning each of these periods.





**Figure 3**  
*Memory Box* (film still), 2021.  
 Courtesy of the artists.

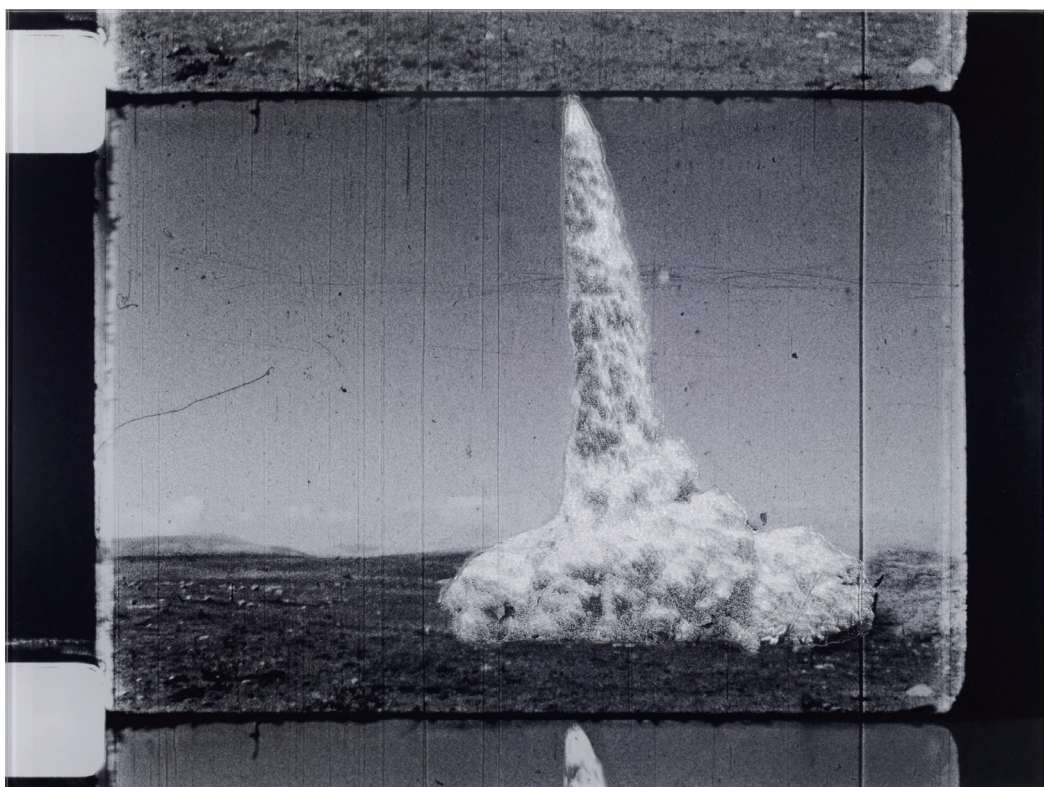
We love collaboration and borrowing other people's knowledge, like that of archaeologists or geologists, but also exploring other mediums and technologies. There's very little we don't allow ourselves if it serves the story or, rather, the investigation. Each time we have borrowed the gaze or the knowledge of other, points of view and crossed disciplines, we have learned to see our own realities differently, through other expertises and techniques. Every time we have to work with a technique, we're going to collaborate with experts, whereas we're just novices or amateurs (in the truest sense of the word). This encounter allows us to push the technique further, as we displace traditional expectations and uses of a technique or medium, and this allows us to develop other techniques, the lab (it's the experimentation with experts and the encounter with novices that allows them to look at and perceive their medium differently). This is the case with scientists, musicians, archaeologists, curators, dancers, actors...

For the "Lebanese Rocket Society," we tried to reconstruct this story in the absence of archives at the beginning of our research. It's not that there were no images at all, but that we didn't recognise them because we didn't really have access to the story, to how it unfolded. It was like a withdrawal from the image, a lost imagination. The film and the art projects tell the story of a group of students led by their mathematics teacher, Manoug Manouguian, who designed, produced and launched more than a dozen rockets that went on to



become increasingly powerful, reaching distances of over 600 km. This project, aimed at space exploration and scientific research, began in 1960 and came to an abrupt halt in 1967. Then, strangely enough, this story, which made the headlines in all the media, fell completely into oblivion. It was only when we met Manoug Manougian, who had kept the archives of this adventure for him, that we were able to pick up the thread of this story. Faced with the real absence of the Lebanese rocket adventure in our history and, above all, in our imagination, we felt the desire to tell this story, but to avoid nostalgia and the weight of the past. And to do that, we felt the need to activate the past in the present. This gave us the idea of re-enacting what had already been re-enacted.

First, we made and then gave to the Haigazian University, where this space adventure began, an identical reproduction of the Cedar 4 rocket, the most emblematic of all. Reconstructing the rocket, 8 meters long, more than 50 years later and taking it across the city is an essential part of our project, to show that this is not a weapon but a commemorative monument of science. An artistic sculpture in homage to the dreamers of the Rocket Society. And it's at the University and in the art world that this rocket can be recognised for what it is, an artistic and scientific project. Then we re-enacted it in the "Restaged" series, a photographic re-enactment of the rocket transport event. The photographic act becomes performative. It's a work that is once again ontologically photographic, returning to the act itself without recourse to digital software. Instead of transporting the rocket as we had done the first time, we replaced it with its two-dimensional white wooden silhouette, and once again took the same route, with the same convoy and the same (many!) authorisations that we had needed to block off



**Figure 4**

*Dust in the Wind*, 2013.

Part 6 of the project *Lebanese Rocket*

*Society*, 2011-2018.

Courtesy of the artists.

the streets when the real sculpture passed through. With the help of two other photographers with digital equipment and ourselves with film, we photographed the passage of the rocket in the field, or rather in the frame, during the exposure time of the photo. This exposure time was determined by the passage of the rocket, i.e. it depended on the speed at which the convoy crossed, the field covered and the distance at which the photograph was taken. As the silhouette of the rocket is white, the trail of light it causes is in turn ghostly, like the trace of a trace. The idea is often to replay things, knowledge and truths, sometimes with the help of technology. Especially in a world where propaganda reigns and subversion is often recuperated. It's about escaping definitions and a certain form of dogmatism, even among artists.

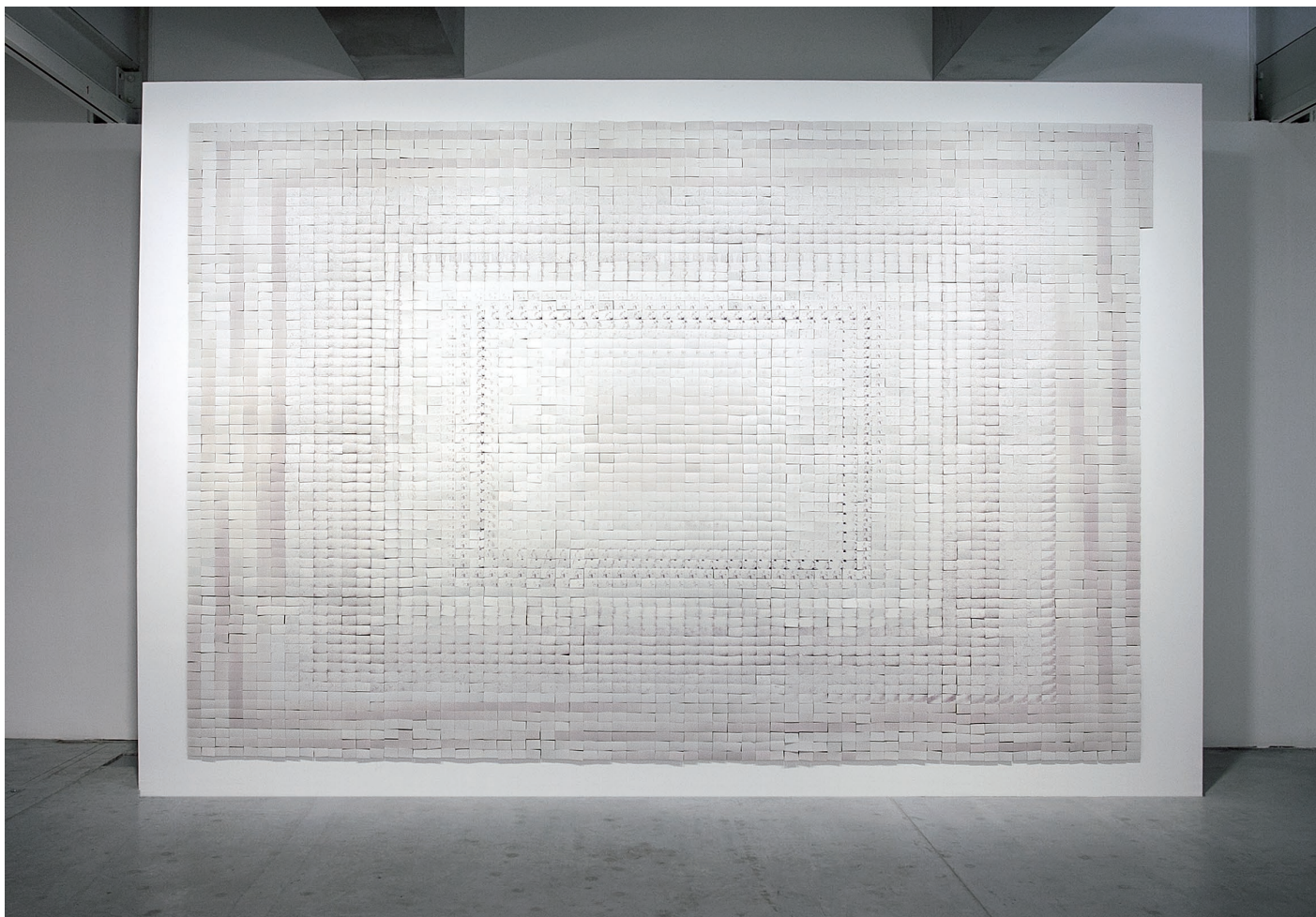
**Ana Catarina Pinho & Arola Valls Bofill** | Your work often puts to the fore the question of the materiality of the photographic image, which becomes tied to the idea of memory survival. We can see this relationship in "Lasting images" or "The story of a pyromaniac photographer". Which nuances of history do you think could emerge from the photography's materiality? And how do you think this fragility of the analogue photographic image can be related to the digital?

**Joana Hadjithomas & Khalil Joreige** | Our position in history is one of resistance through the deconstruction of knowledge and power, of dominant positions and voices. So under no circumstances is it possible for us to repeat things or position ourselves in places or comfort zones. So fragility is essential for us, and is even at the heart of many of our experiments. This has been the case since our first installation, "Circle of Confusion," where we cut an aerial image of the city into 3,000 pieces, glued to a mirror and allowing visitors to take a fragment away, which led to the destruction of the work. In "180 seconds of Lasting Images," we printed and cut a film that we stuck onto fragile, shaky Velcro. The fragility of this materiality, whether analogue or digital, raises questions,

It is interesting to confront the fragility of an analog photography to attempts to surpass a systematic process of disappearance or negation. In a way, our work has consisted in rendering absences and latencies a physicality.

They are also contexts that require a certain attention or preposition to receive the manifestation or even revelation of something differently. It allows us to pay more attention to invisible stories, to give physicality and form to what we can't or don't know how to see anymore, to give substance and existence to a certain imagination, sometimes even in absence, as in the latent images that can be read but haven't yet been revealed. Yes, that's specifically analogue and impossible to do in the digital age, but it's representative of our practice over more than 10 years of images taken but not developed, but also described in such a way as to be evoked and imagined by the reader. We have always wanted to capture the complexity of our realities and the 'ghostly' or sometimes latent presences that do





**Figure 5**  
*180 seconds of Lasting Images*, 2006.  
 Courtesy of the artists.

not meet the conditions for visibility. Because we also need a context that allows this perception, this revelation in the photographic sense, a process that allows the images and the narrative to appear but also to find a certain performativity.

Our project, “Unconformities/Discordances,” is concerned with what we leave behind us, the sediments of underground passages, archaeology and geology. A discordance refers to the forced and unexpected meeting of two distinct geological units following a natural disaster, sometimes creating a regeneracy. It is a break in time, a hiatus. In cinema, we would speak of a false connection or an ellipsis. In a context of ruptures and disasters, actions are neither linear nor chronological. “Unconformities/Discordances” aims to tell the story that lies beneath our feet in a poetic rather than scientific way, through a material that evokes these temporal ruptures but also the lasting impact of human actions on our planet. It’s a different kind of materiality, one that seems far removed from photography, but which for us, as we said earlier, is entirely in keeping with that continuity.

All this shakes up our relationship with time, memory, History and its representation, like a palimpsest of continuous and discontinuous layers, destruction and regeneration.



VISUAL ESSAY

# QUEER FUTURITIES

## ARTISTIC STRATEGIES FOR THE DYNAMIZATION OF ARCHIVES

DIEGO MARCHANTE "GENDERHACKER" 

University of Barcelona, Spain

### Abstract

"Gendernaut. Queering the Future" is a project influenced by queer theories, transfeminist activism and science fiction. It reflects on the potential of various strategies related to accessibility, distribution, socialization and playful reinterpretation of feminist and queer archives. The creation of archives, software programming, audiovisual production, performing performances or developing games all serve as artistic strategies aimed at invigorating archives. They share a clear intent to enhance accessibility to archives that document the memories of feminist and gender and sexuality dissident communities. Through transmedia and performative experiences, we envision the archive as a living, interactive space, devoid of heteropatriarchal codes, inhabited by multiple bodies and subjectivities linking past, present and future to come.

Keywords: Art, Archive, Queer, Performance, Videoart

## INTRODUCTION

"Gendernaut" is an English term that could be translated as "navigator of the genre," invoking the image of Jason's Argonauts. It first appears in the documentary "Gendernauts: A Journey through Shifting Identities" (1999), directed by Monika Treut. "Queer", on the other hand, originally meant strange or outside the norm. Seen as an insult, and reclaimed and redefined by dissident gender and sexuality groups in the 1990s, it has also evolved into a gerund verb denoting mobility, change, and transformation.

This artistic research project, in its initial phase titled "Queering the software," challenges the power dynamics inherent in hegemonic archival structures. It does so through the design of a plugin that enables collective file creation via an online interactive multimedia experience. In its second phase, "Queering the Archive," the project proposes new forms of visualization for narratives based on transfeminist and queer genealogies through transmedia and performative experiences to reimagine the archive as a living interactive space, free of heteropatriarchal codes, inhabited by bodies and multiple subjectivities connecting past, present and future.

The entire series articulates an extensive historical investigation weaving together various thematic threads from the feminist, queer and trans movements in the Spanish political and artistic landscape over recent decades. These genealogies link historical, artistic, and collective events, including actions, campaigns, exhibitions, interviews, fanzines, and performances, forming a complex tapestry of relationships between art, politics, memory and activism. This research culminates in the creation of two archives with a pronounced activist character: "Archivo T. A Transfeminist and Queer Archive" (2011-2023), an archive of social movements and artistic practices that focusses on gender issues from a queer and transfeminist perspective in Spain, and "Arxiva FF" (2017-2024), a collective research archive on the history of the feminist movement in Catalonia.

The final phase of the series, "Queering the future," draws heavily from queer theories, transfeminist activism and science fiction. "Gendernaut," portrayed as a transtemporal and transspatial traveller, guides viewers through a genealogy of key events in feminist and LGBTQ+ movement history, offering a transmedia and performative experience to explore alternative visions of the future from a transfeminist and queer perspective. This journey prompts a reevaluation of promises made regarding future representations and their alignment with present realities.

In contrast with male-dominated narratives of traditional science fiction cinema, the protagonist delves into stories highlighting pioneering women such as Ada Lovelace, the first woman programmer, Hedy Lamarr, the inventor of Wi-Fi, Radia Joy Pearlman, "the mother of the internet", Jude Milhon "St. Jude", hacker and inventor of the term Cyberpunk. is fascinated by feminist science fiction novels like "Frankenstein" (1818) by Mary Shelley, "The Sultana's Dream" (1905) by Roquia Sakhawat Hussain, "The Left Hand of Darkness" (1969) by Ursula K. Le Guin, "The

Female Man" (1970) by Joana Russ or "The Handmaid's Tale" (1985) by Margaret Atwood. Our cyborg is bored by Robocop's testosterone-saturated fantasy and delights in the image of a vulnerable, cross-dressing E.T. the Extraterrestrial. On the one hand, it invites envisioning new political, social and creative conditions, while proposing, on the other hand, imaginative frameworks where the symbolic and the imaginary intertwine.

The creation of archives, software programming, audiovisual production, performances, and development of games serves as artistic strategies for revitalizing archives. These strategies, viewed through a transfeminist and queer lens, aim to democratize access to feminist and LGBTI movement archives. "La Lloca Loca," a board game depicting the history of the feminist movement in Catalonia, marks the culmination of a decade-long reflection on accessibility, distribution, socialization, personalization, and playful reinterpretation of how the archives are generating feminisms themselves.

The archive, in this context, operates as a counter-history —a disruptive discourse against the dominant narratives that acknowledges, deconstructs and ultimately challenges it. The proposed artistic strategies for archive revitalization call upon our capacity for action, encouraging active participation in the creation and cultivation of diverse and inclusive archival communities, with a distinctly political underpinning.











INFO  
ARCHIVO T  
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ARCHIVA COLECCIONES



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2015 · CORPOGRAFÍAS  
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2015 · ¿ARCHIVO QUEER?



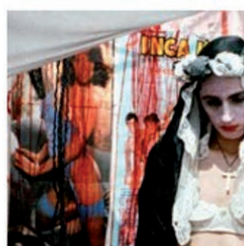
2014 · MÚLTIPLO DE 100



2013 · MUJERES BAJO  
SOSPECHA



2013 · JORNADAS POS  
APOCALÍPTICAS



2012 ·  
CONCEPTUALISMOS DEL  
SUR



2011 · OFF SCENE: SI YO  
FUERA...



2011 · OCAÑA (1973-  
1983)



2011 · LA LOKAL KUIR



2011 · LA  
INTERNACIONAL KUIR



2011 · CUERPO  
IMPROPIO



2011 · CLAUDE CAHUN



2011 · ASSUME NOTHING



2010 · SICK 80'S



2010 · PELIGROSA  
SOCIAL

```

67  * @param string $textdomain Textdomain to use in translation. Defaults to 'plugin_name'.
68  */
69  public function __construct( $plugin_name, $version, $textdomain = null ) {
70
71      $this->plugin_name = $plugin_name;
72      $this->version = $version;
73      $this->textdomain = $textdomain ? $textdomain : $plugin_name;
74      $this->page_title = 'Gendernaut Archive Settings';
75  }
76
77  /**
78   * Register Settings for this plugin.
79   */
80  * @since 1.0.0
81  */
82  public function register_options() {
83      $this->settings = new WeDevs_Settings_API();
84      //set the settings
85
86      $post_types = $this->post_type_labels();
87
88      $sections = array(
89          array(
90              'id' => 'gendernaut_post_type',
91              'title' => __( 'Custom Post Type', $this->textdomain ),
92          ),
93          array(
94              'id' => 'gendernaut_shortcode',
95              'title' => __( 'Shortcode Defaults', $this->textdomain ),
96          ),
97      );
98
99      $settings = array(
100          'gendernaut_post_type' => array(
101              array(
102                  'name' => 'create_post_type',
103                  'label' => __( 'Create Custom Post Type', $this->textdomain ),
104                  'type' => 'checkbox',
105              ),
106          ),
107          'gendernaut_shortcode' => array(
108              array(
109                  'name' => 'default_post_type',
110                  'label' => __( 'Default Archive Post Type', $this->textdomain ),
111                  'type' => 'select',

```



2013 · GENEALOGÍAS FEMINISTAS



2013 · AGENCIAMIENTOS CONTRA-NEOLIBERALES



2012 · JORNADAS POR LA DIVERSIDAD



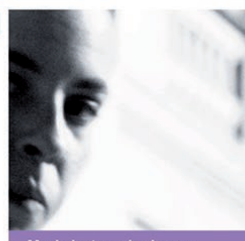
2011 · KICK IN THE EYE



2011 · JORNADAS ACTIVISTAS TRANSFEMINISTAS



2011 · ECOSEX SILVER WEDDING



2010 · MOVIMIENTO EN LAS BASES



2010 · I JORNADAS TRANSFEMINISTAS



2010 · I JORNADAS DE DESOBEDIENCIA SEXUAL





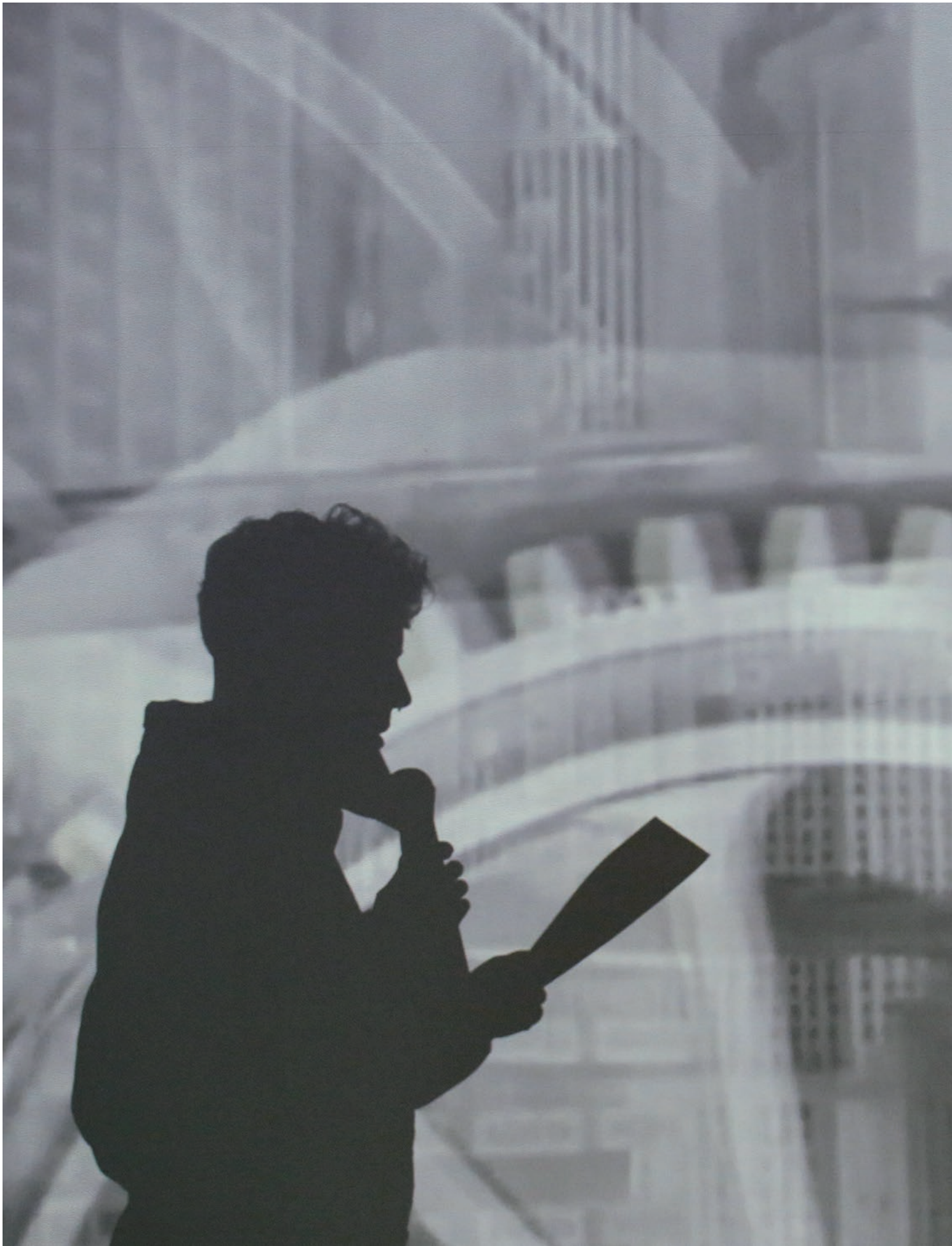


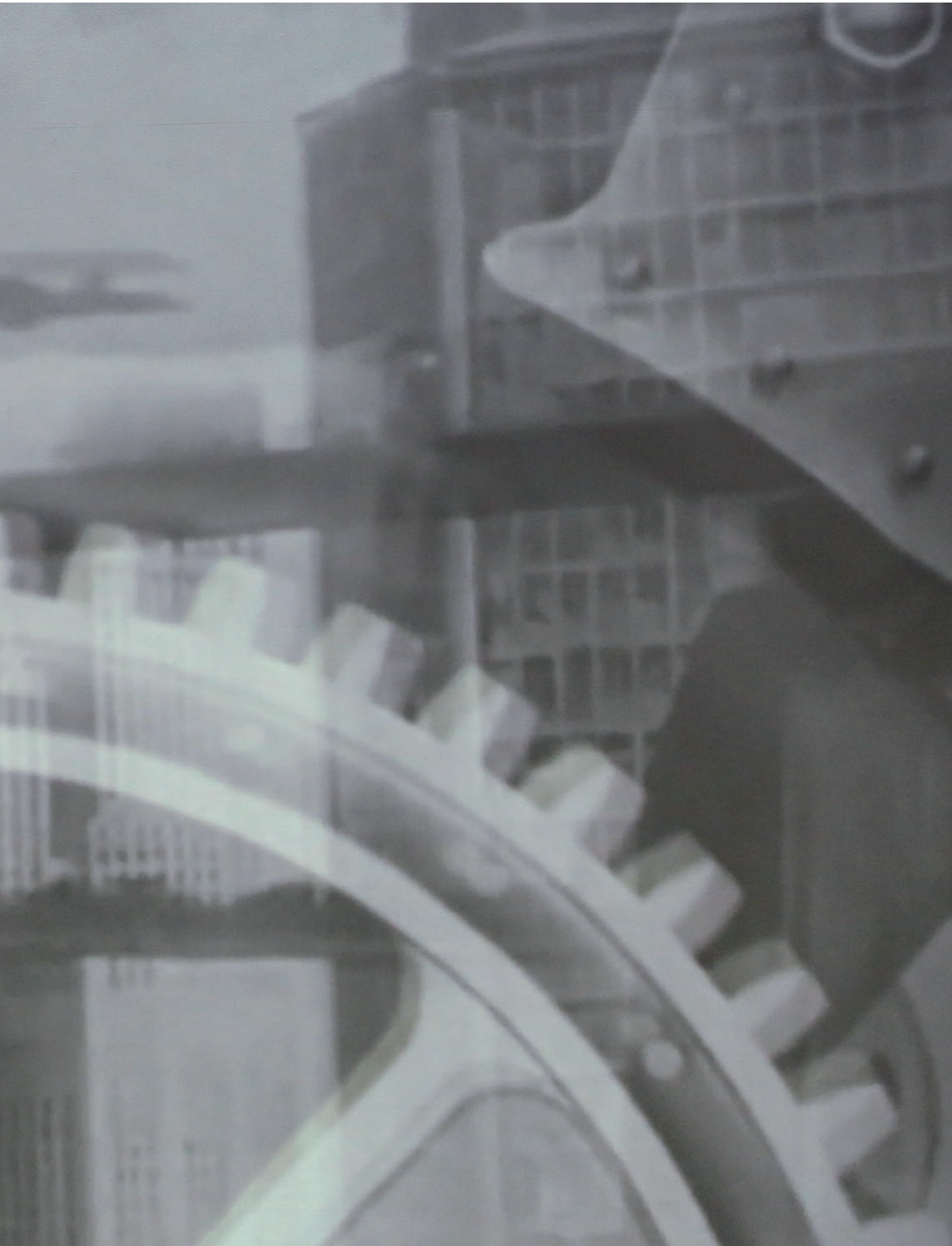










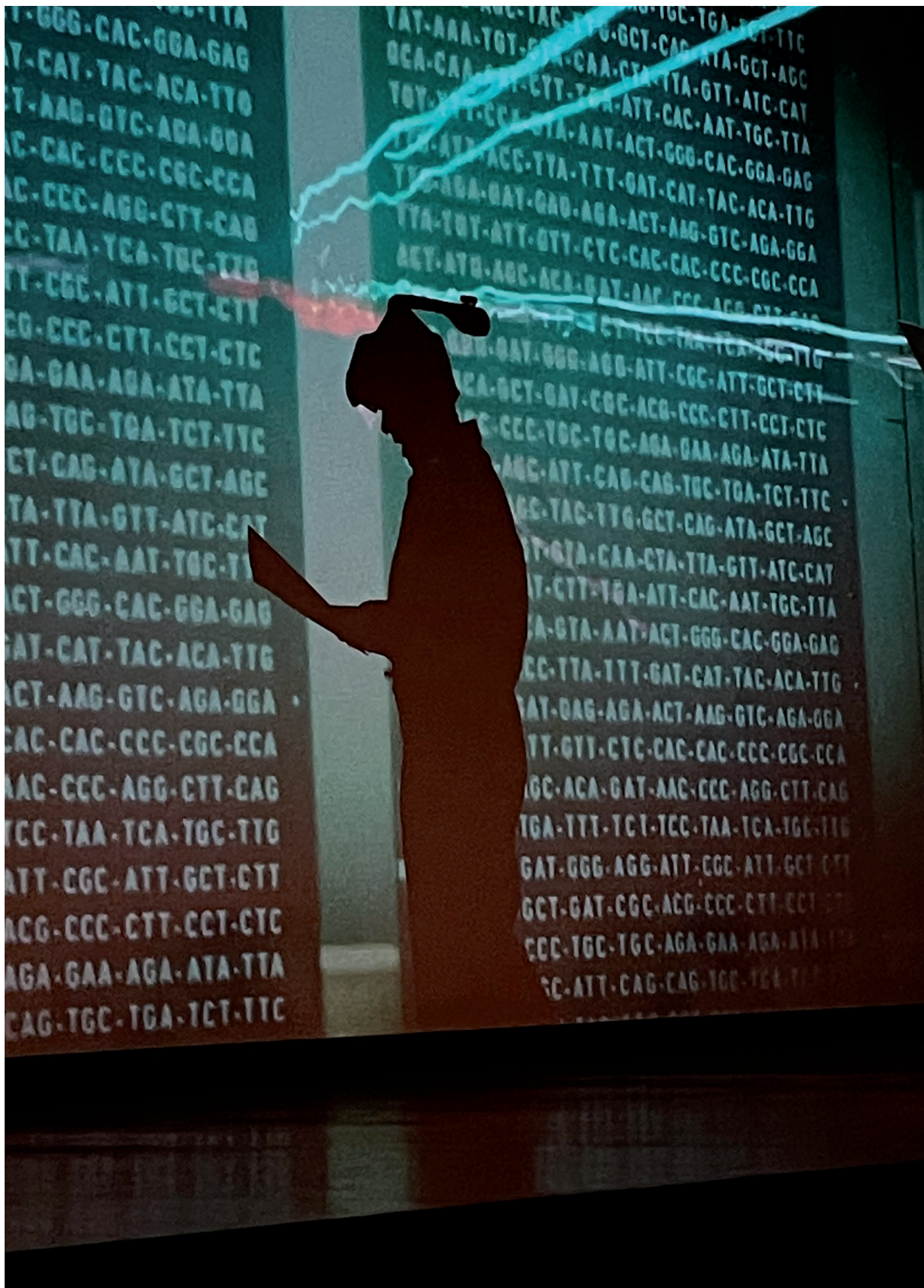














# LA LLOCA LOCA. FILS FEMINISTES.



## Objectiu del joc

Sé la primera a arribar a la casella central del jardí de La Lloca Loca saltant posicions, segons la tirada del dau i sota les regles de joc establertes en cada casella. Passa-ho bé aprenent i representant la història del moviment feminista i LGTBIQ+ a Catalunya d'una forma lúdica.

## Material

1 Tauler  
63 Cartes  
5 Fitxes de colors  
1 Dau

## Regles de la Lloca Loca



**LLOCA:** Caselles 1, 5, 9, 14, 18, 23, 27, 32, 36, 41, 45, 50, 54 y 59. Si cau en una d'aquestes caselles pots avançar fins a la següent casella en la qual hi ha una lloca i tornar a tirar.



**PONT:** Casella 6 i 12. Si cau en aquestes caselles saltes a la casella 19 (Tensió Interna) i aquestes un torn sense jugar.



**TENSÍO INTERNA:** Casella 19. Si cau aquesta casella et quedas un torn sense jugar.



**RELACIÓ TÒXICA:** Casella 31. Si cau en aquesta casella, NO es pot tornar a jugar fins que no passi un altre jugador per aquesta casella.



**REPRESSIÓ:** Casella 42. Si cau en aquesta casella, s'està obligat a retrocedir a la casella 30.



**PRESÓ:** Casella 56. Si cau en aquesta casella, cal romandre dos torns sense jugar.



**DAUS:** Caselles 26 i 53. Si cau en aquestes caselles, se suma la marcadura de la casella dels daus (26 o 53) i s'avança tant com resulti.



**MORT:** Casella 58. Si cau en aquesta casella, cal tornar a la Casella 1.



**JARDÍ DE LA LLOCA:** Casella 63. Per entrar al jardí de la Lloca és necessari treure els punts justos per a entrar, en cas d'exces es retrocedeixen tantes caselles com punts sobrants.

Les cartes numerades segons la casella et diran quina acció realitzar en cadascuna d'aelles. Si desitges tenir una experiència més performativa i audiovisual escaneja el codi QR que trobaràs en cada carta.

## FUNDING

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## IMAGE CAPTIONS

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- Page 155** Diego Marchante "Genderhacker", *Gendernaut. Timecapsule 1931*, Performance at the exhibition "Archiva Republicana" in the LGTBI Center of Barcelona, 2019. From the series *Gendernaut. Queering the Archive*. Courtesy of the author.
- Page 156-157** Diego Marchante "Genderhacker", *Back to the Future*, Performance at the exhibition "New(Ego) Cuerpos conectados" in ETOPIA Center of Art and technologie, 2021. From the series *Gendernaut. Queering the Future*. Courtesy of the author.
- Page 158-159** Diego Marchante "Genderhacker", *The Futurist Manifesto*, Performance at the exhibition "New(Ego) Cuerpos conectados" in ETOPIA Center of Art and technologie, 2021. From the series *Gendernaut. Queering the Future*. Courtesy of the author.
- Page 160-161** Diego Marchante "Genderhacker", *Bitch Mutant Manifesto*, Performance at the conference "Archivos del común IV. Archivos por/venir" in the MNCARS, 2021. From the series *Gendernaut. Queering the Future*. Courtesy of the author.
- Page 162** Diego Marchante "Genderhacker", *Queer Connected Bodies*. Performance at the conference "Archivos del común IV. Archivos por/venir" in the MNCARS, 2021. From the series *Gendernaut. Queering the Future*. Courtesy of the author.
- Page 163** Fils Feministas, *La Lloca Loca*. Board game about the archive of the feminist movement in Catalonia (Spain), 2023. From the series *Arxives FF*. Courtesy of the authors.



VISUAL ESSAY

# PERMEABLE MEMBRANES

## THE ARCHIVE IN VISUAL ATLAS

### CONSTRUCTIONS

AMALIA CAPUTO

Visual Artist

#### Abstract

This study examines two large photo-based installations in which the role of memory construction in photography is explored, with emphasis on the concept of image accumulation in the digital era. These installations aim to restore photography as object while exploring the immersive and experiential qualities of physical environments filled with images, in opposition to the digital experience through screens. The visual essay delves into the evolving relationship between photography, the archive and its transformative nature, as it transitions from a digital transient realm, and returns to a physical manifestation (Art Installation, Atlas). The focus on building thematic “Atlases” that serve as spaces for interpretation, draws inspiration from Georges Didi-Huberman’s take on Aby Warburg’s *Mnemosyne Atlas*. The works created aim to contextualize the symbolic universe of images, and the construction of visual atlases as historical archives creating permeable and tangible membranes that provide evidence of our contemporary visual experience.

Keywords: Photography, Memory, Archive, Material Culture, Visual Atlas

## INTRODUCTION

In the following two bodies of work, I aim to reflect upon our material coexistence with photography in today's world from a phenomenological perspective, while exploring the notion of permeable archives in the context of a photographic-centered digital society. In the last two decades, the transition from physical photographs to digital images meant losing tangible objects and the related frameworks and experiences from the past that the physicality of the image implies. This complex system of circulation lacks the physical interaction individuals had with physical photographs. By conceiving large-scale photo installations, I intend to contrast the ongoing dematerialization of photography due to digital technology, favoring an experiential or phenomenological approach. Didi-Huberman, interpreting images based on what they "have been" in relation to what we "are being" invites us to consider the temporal dimension, and the connection between the past and present created by photographic objects in a physical or digital state.<sup>1</sup>

*Transferences* (2000-2012) and *Transferences v2.0* (2019)<sup>2</sup> constitute a photographic project that serves as an atlas of personal objects maintained since childhood, brought into exile, and subsequently photographed and displayed both, the physical objects and their photographic counterparts. Each object was meticulously photographed, creating a raw visual link to a specific memory. According to Elizabeth Edwards, photographs as objects "create the focus for memory and evocation."<sup>3</sup> These collections of objects compose a self-portrait, a living archive, a testimony of a specific time and collective identity that play with both, memory, the construction of archives and a sense of belonging. The installation delves into the construction of memory, the passage of time, decay and selective retention. The photographic documentation ensured the preservation of the object's memory, even if the physical object were to disappear. The objects, both in their physical form and as photographic representations, exemplify the transient nature of human memory, serving as conduits to the past. Visitors to the show were encouraged to select an object to keep for themselves and, over the course of the exhibition, the objects would gradually vanish, leaving behind a photographic archive. The digital archive materializes as the photographs are printed and displayed, thus transforming the photographs into new transitional objects that bridge and acknowledge the presence of the original subjects.

Building on Warburg's terminology of *Bilderfahrzeuge* (image-vehicles),<sup>4</sup> *Bilderwanderung* (migration of images), and *Pathosformel* (pathos-formula), I produced *mutatis mutandis* (2017-18) (Latin for "things having been changed that have to be changed"),<sup>5</sup> conceived considering the experience of physically entering a space saturated with images. It reunites a vast collection of photographs on long scrolls to mirror digital streams, and derives from my personal extensive digital archive, including artwork, art history materials for teaching, family photos, and downloaded images that relate to the Venezuelan revolt and social conflict from

2015-2018. Since 1999, freedom of the press in my homeland has progressively deteriorated under the Chavez-Maduro regime. Accessing information about street protests and the humanitarian crisis was suspended by the government, which required the population to turn to social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram for news. These downloaded photographic documents progressively merged with my personal archive and connected the memories of others by relating to our own experiences.

Following Joan Fontcuberta's concept of post-photography<sup>6</sup> and the dematerialization of authorship, *mutatis mutandis* raises questions about our responses when confronted with a vast array of disparate images including those depicting extreme violence and the possible desensitization to human violence resulting from the constant influx of diverse and conflicting photographs and the potential for new interpretations of the newly permeated archive.

Aligning with Caraffa, photographs, photo-objects, and photo archives eventually become objects of research in their own right.<sup>7</sup> Both atlases' photo installations explore the concept of an open archive as case-studies, challenging not only the role of memory fixed within the archive, but also question whose memories do these new added images or disappearing objects belong to? Do they become part of one's own memory? The disappearing objects from the exhibition that were my personal property in the *Transferences* installation now have a new ownership, highlighting the ephemerality and subjective nature of not only memory, but belongings, especially in the context of exile. It reflects on what we can carry with us and what we lose along the way, and the remaining photographic atlas serves as a testament to the memory bridge inherent of photography. In *mutatis mutandis*, the 'borrowed' photographs, taken from the internet and the public realm, now become part of a personal asset, ergo, my archive. It is in this sense that I speculate that archives (both, material and digital) function as permeable membranes in which important issues such as copyright, owner and authorship, as well as memory are questioned here after the uncontrollable appropriation of images that we are now able to possess and blend into our private archives.

Photography is an ubiquitous presence in our lives today. However, it is essential to recognize that its omnipresence like our own as humans, is not assured to endure, even with material manifestations. Over time, our archives, memories, and even we ourselves may undergo evolution or decline, both intertwining like permeable membranes.

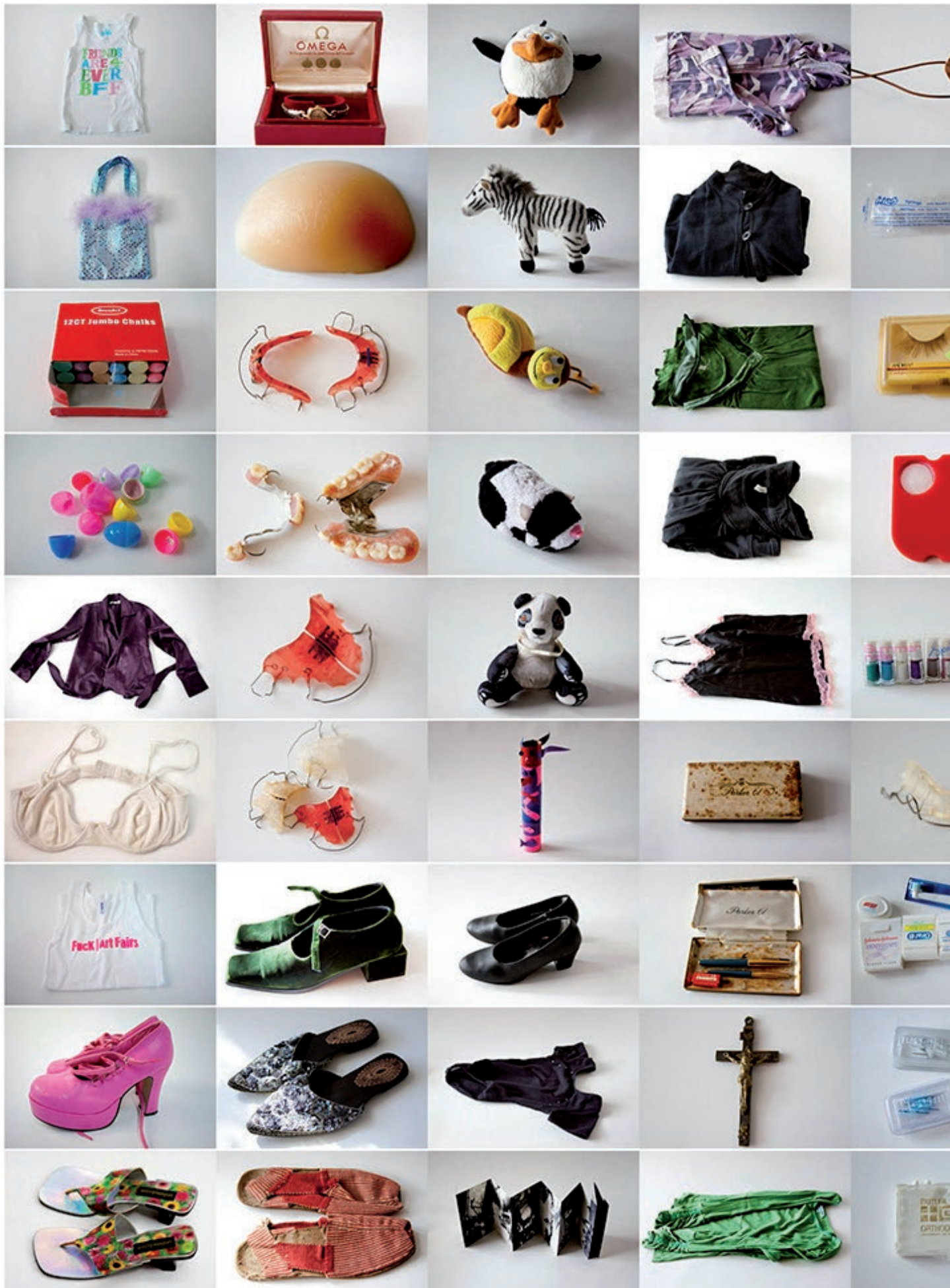




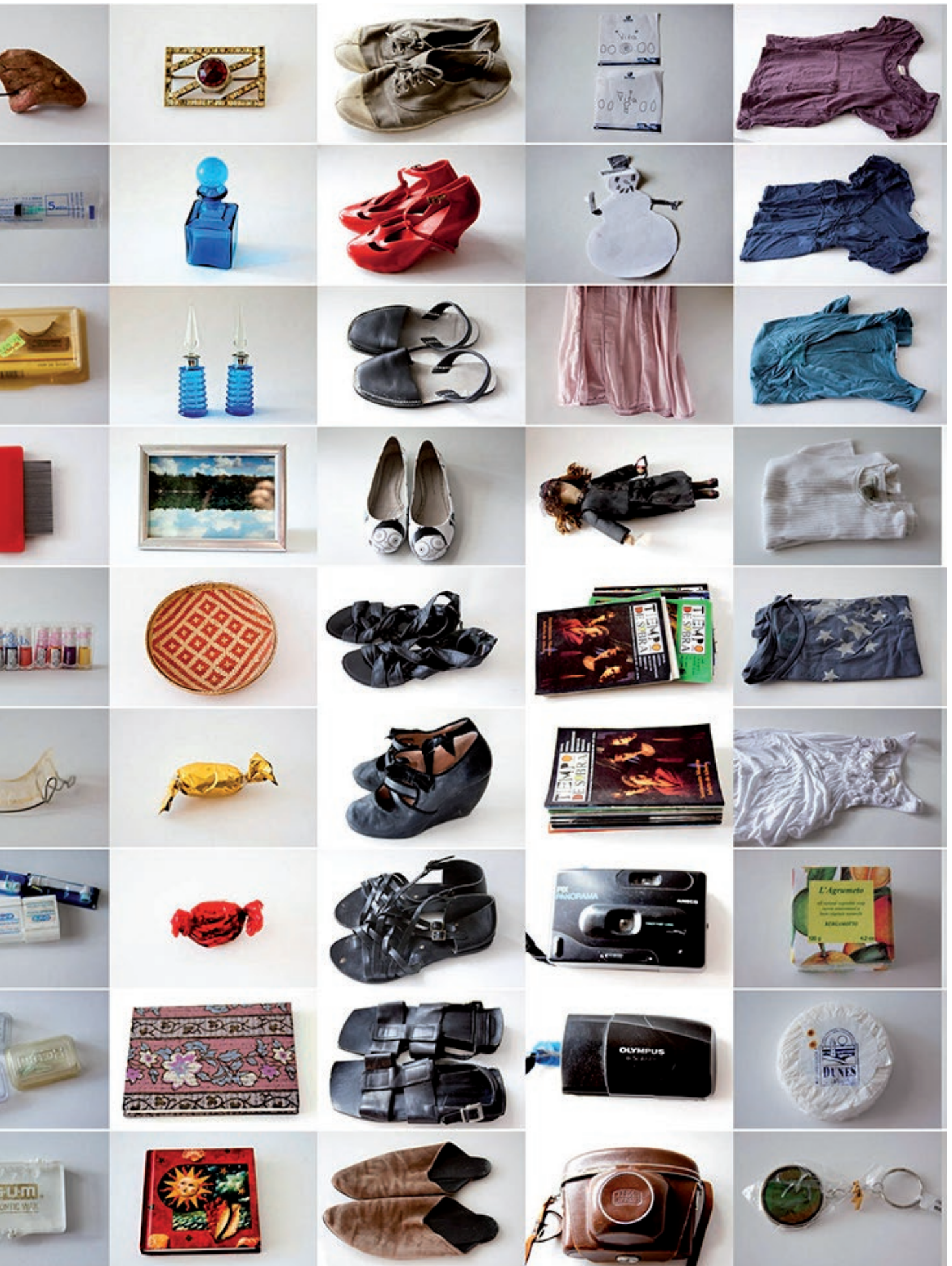












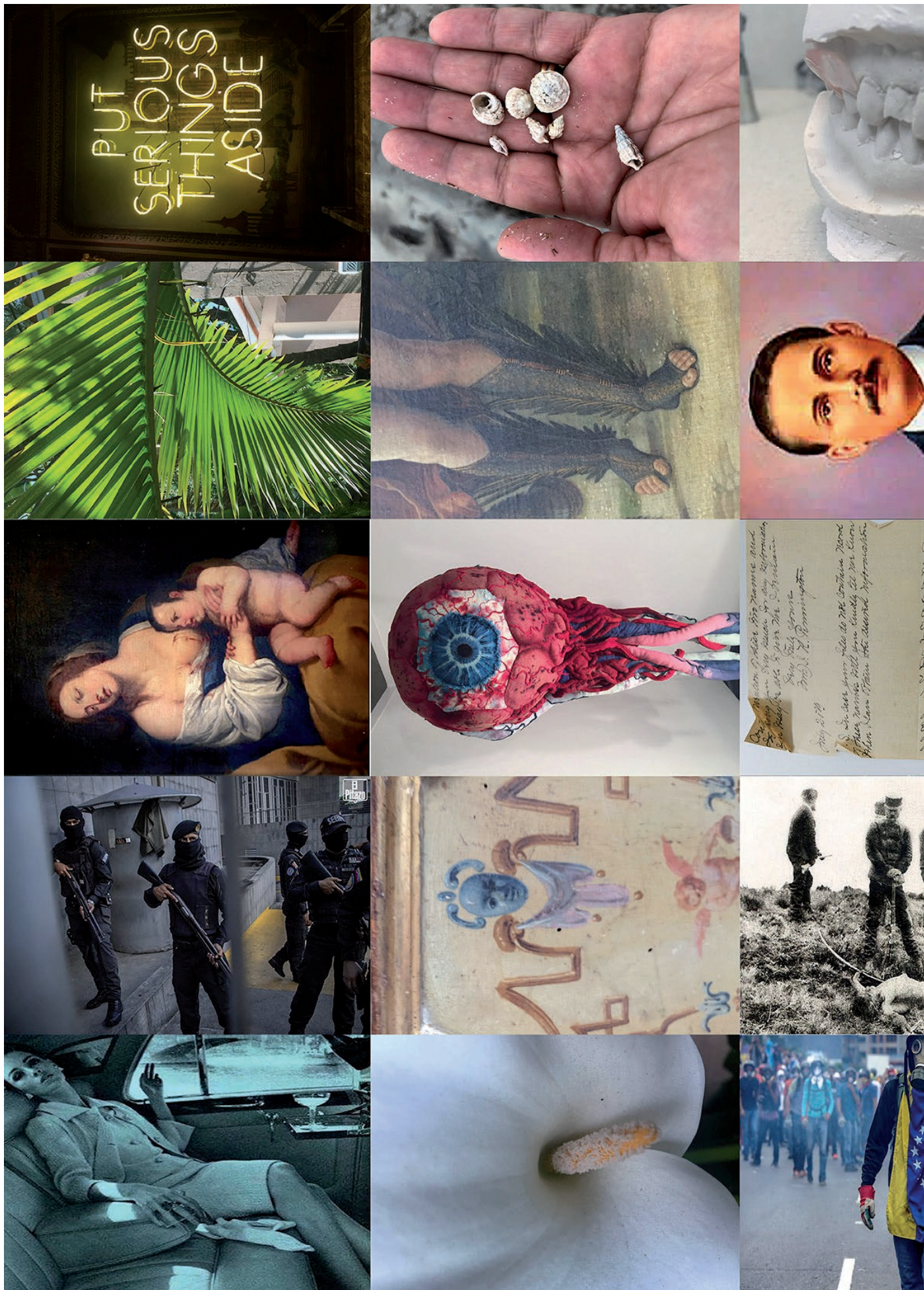




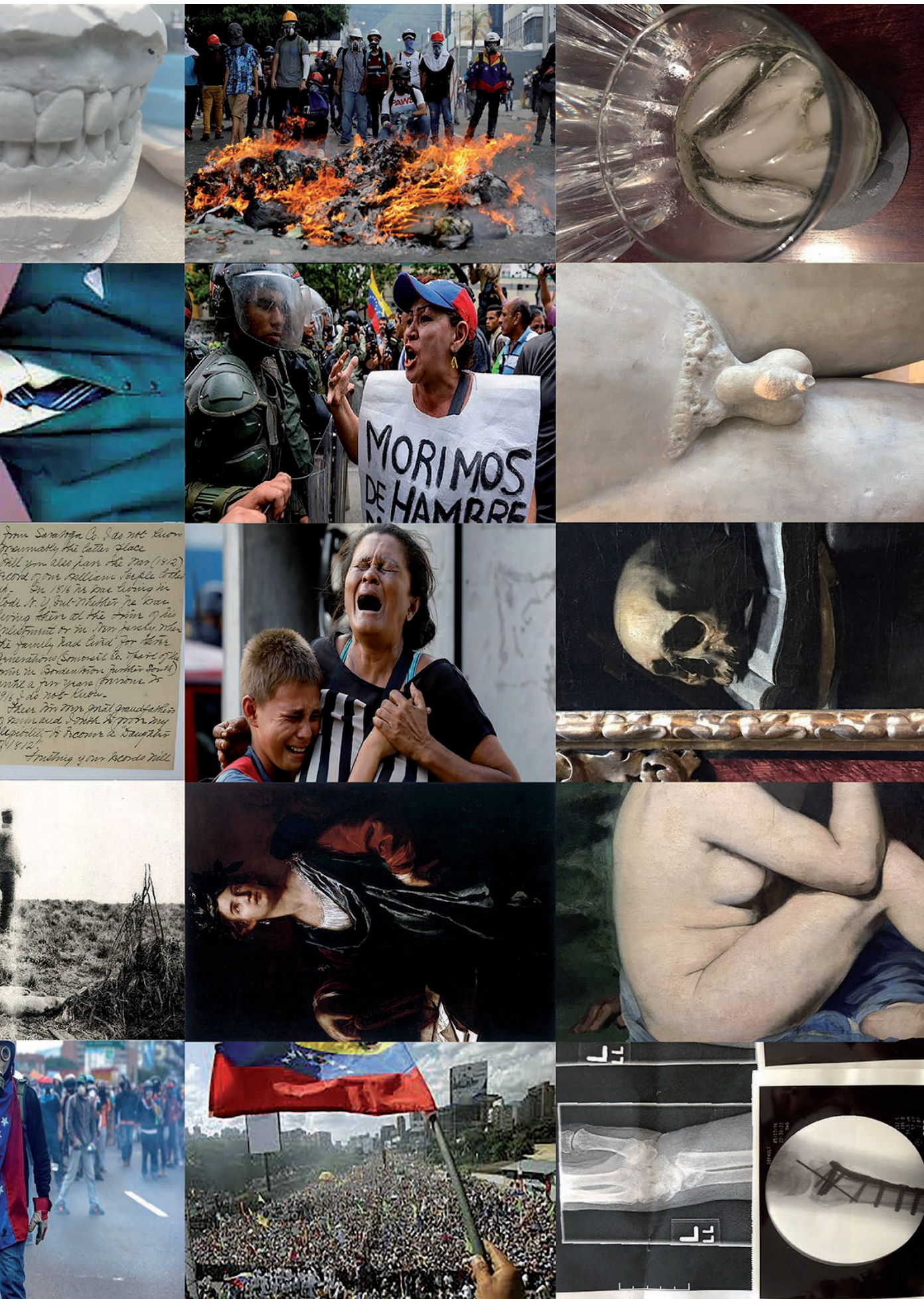




















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- 1 Chari Larsson, "The Materiality of Images," In *Didi-Huberman and the Image* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020).
  - 2 The language difference between Spanish and English of the same project is due to the fact that the first iteration of it was exhibited in Caracas, Venezuela in 2012, and the second, in Hollywood, Florida, in 2019.
  - 3 Elizabeth Edwards, "Photographs as Objects of Memory," in *The Object Reader*, ed. Fiona Candlin (London; New York: Routledge, 2009), 332.
  - 4 Warburg explored in his *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1924-1929) the notion of images as vehicles, studied the migration and of images, emotion, while analyzing the cultural history, provenance and emotional impact images would acquire when placed together.
  - 5 From Oxford Reference: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/search?q=mutatis+mutandis&searchBtn=Search&isQuickSearch=true>.
  - 6 Joan Fontcuberta, *La furia de las imágenes. Notas sobre la postfotografía* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg S.L., 2016), 40-41.
  - 7 Costanza Caraffa, "Photographic Itineraries in Time and Space," in *The Handbook of Photography Studies*, ed. Gil Pasternak (London, New York: Routledge, 2020), 85.



## IMAGE CAPTIONS

|              |                                                                                                                                                  |
|--------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Page 170-171 | Amalia Caputo, <i>Transferences v 2.0.</i> , 2019. Installation view. Image courtesy of Oriol Tarridas Photography.                              |
| Page 172-173 | Amalia Caputo, <i>Transferencias o la Infidelidad de la memoria, Atlas I</i> , 2009-2012 (detail). Image courtesy of Oriol Tarridas Photography. |
| Page 174-175 | Amalia Caputo, <i>mutatis mutandis (Atlas III)</i> , 2017-2018. Installation view (detail). Image courtesy of Oriol Tarridas Photography.        |
| Page 176-177 | Amalia Caputo. <i>mutatis mutandis (Atlas III)</i> , 2017-2018. Model composite. Image courtesy of the artist.                                   |
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| Page 179     | Amalia Caputo. <i>mutatis mutandis (Atlas III)</i> , 2017-2018 (detail). Image courtesy of the artist.                                           |





## PORTFOLIO

## BY AN EYE-WITNESS THE WORK OF AZADEH AKHLAGHI

AROLA VALLS BOFILL · AZADEH AKHLAGHI  
*University of Barcelona, Spain      Visual Artist*

On June 20, 2009, philosophy student Neda Agha Soltan was shot and killed by a Basij paramilitary officer in the city of Tehran during the electoral protests. Her death was broadcast on YouTube through the camera of a bystander, allowing real-time witnessing of the young woman's demise. This event serves as the conceptual trigger for the artwork "By an Eye-Witness" by artist Azadeh Akhlaghi (Shiraz, Iran, 1978), in which she examines the documentation of past deaths that establish a genealogical relationship where violence and trauma emerge as defining tropes in the modern history of Iran.

With this series, Akhlaghi opens the possibility for her own generation, born around 1979 and known as *Nasl-e sevvom* or the third generation (which has only known the official version of national history), to embody their collective memory and challenge the post-revolutionary imagery of the country.

The artist, whose practice explores media such as video, photography, and cinema (having worked as an assistant director to Abbas Kiarostami and Manijeh Hekmat), adopts for this series a strategy of staging events that span a 90-year time frame (1908-1998), from the Constitutional Revolution to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, including the Iran-Iraq War. All depicted scenes feature the violent, traumatic, or controversial demise of poets, journalists, students, intellectuals, or political activists, whose deaths have marked a turning point in the country's historical trajectory. What would have been the impact of these deaths if, at that time, mobile phone cameras had existed? How has the omnipresence of photography changed the recording of events we experience? These are some of the questions that Akhlaghi's work poses, urging us to listen to the voices that fill the blind spots of institutional archives (which have shaped the official history of the country) by leading us to the realm of the sensible and lived experience.



*Baghe - Shah, Tehran - Jahangir Khan Sur- e -Esrafil, Nasrollah Malek-al-Motekallemin / 24 June 1908*  
Azadeh Akhlaghi, from the series *By an Eye-Witness*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.





|                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                                                                                                        |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| There are many inconsistent narratives. But as we have heard it from Mirza Ali Akbar Khan Ardaghi himself, who had been chained in Bagh-e Shah with those two and other prisoners, we quote his account here.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                                                                                                        |
| <div>●●●●●</div> <div>He says: "We spent a restless night on that Wednesday. We woke up at dawn. The Cossack soldiers took chained prisoners out in groups of eight, and after they brought one group back, they took the next one out. Haji Malek-al-motekallemin and Qazi, my brother, were opium addicts. They gave them some. After a while, two guardsmen came to take Malek and Mirza Jahangir- khan; they pulled them out of the line, then put a chain around their neck and told them to come along. It seemed to me that both of them knew that this was the end and they were going to execute them.</div> |                                                                                                        |
| <div>Before stepping out of the door, Malek recited these lines with his strong beautiful voice:<br/>We who were the court of justice, see what has befallen us / Imagine what will befall the court of injustice</div>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                                                                                                        |
| Having recited this poem, he left the room. We were totally devastated, and our grief increased much more when they brought back the chains that they had put around their necks, and threw them on the pile of chains in the room. There was no doubt in our minds that those poor fellows had been killed." [...]                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |                                                                                                        |
| Mamontov writes: "Their fate was sealed very simply. They took them to the garden and kept them beside the fountain. Two executors put ropes around their neck and pulled the ropes in opposite directions. Blood gushed out of their mouths, and then, the third executioner stabbed their chests with a dagger. The chief editor of the newspaper was also killed in the same way."                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                        |
| [Ardaghi:] And that was when they took all of us who were 22 prisoners chained to each other out and in that miserable condition stood us to take some photos. [...] Just imagine our plight and the shame we felt in the presence of each other. And they kept torturing us the whole time.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                        |
| Ref. ↑                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | <div>●</div> <div>جهانگیرخان<br/>صوراسرافیل</div> <div>JAHANGIR - KHAN<br/>SUR - E - ESRAFIL</div>     |
| Kasravi, Ahmad                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                        |
| The History of                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |                                                                                                        |
| Iranian Constitutional Revolution                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                                                                                                        |
| Vol. 2                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                        |
| Tehran: AmirKabir Publishers                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | <div>●</div> <div>نصیرالله<br/>ملک المتکلمین</div> <div>NASROLLAH<br/>MALEK-AL-<br/>MOTEKALLEMIN</div> |
| 13th edition                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                                        |
| 1977. (in Persian)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |                                                                                                        |
| pp. 657-663                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                        |



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24-JUN

در این باره سخنان پراکنده بسیار است. ولی ما چون داستان را از میرزا علی اکبرخان ارداقی، که خود در باغشاه با آن دو تن و با دیگران هم زنجیر می‌بوده، پرسیده‌ایم همان گفته‌های او را می‌آوریم. می‌گوید: «شب چهارشنبه را که با آن سختی به پایان رسانیدیم بامدادان از خواب برخاستیم و قزاقان هر هشت تن را به یک زنجیر بسته بودند بیرون می‌بردند و چون آنان را برمی‌گردانیدند هشت تن دیگری را می‌بردند. حاجی ملک‌المکملین و برادرش قاضی به خوردن تریاک عادت می‌داشتند برای هر دو تریاک آوردند. و چون اندکی گذشت دو تن فراش برای بردن ملک و میرزا جهانگیرخان آمدند و ایشان را از قطار بیرون آورده به گردن هریکی زنجیر دستی (شکاری) زده گفتند: برخیزید بیایید، گویا هر دو دانستند که برای کشتن می‌برندشان.

ملک دم در با آواز دلکش و بلند خود این شعر را خواند:  
ما بارگه دادیم این رفت ستم بر ما    بر بارگه عدوان آیا چه رسد خذلان

این را خوانده پا از در بیرون گذاشت. ما همگی اندوهگین گردیدیم و این اندوه چند برابر شد هنگامی که دیدیم آن دو فراش زنجیرهایی را که به گردن ملک و میرزا جهانگیرخان زده و ایشان را برده بودند برگردانیده در جلو اتاق به روی دیگر زنجیرها انداختند و ما بی‌گمان شدیم که کار آن بیچارگان به پایان رسیده.» [...] مامون‌توف نیز می‌نویسد: «سرگذشت این دو تن بسیار ساده بود. امروز ایشان را به باغ بردند و پهلوی فواره نگاه داشتند. دو دژخیم طناب به گردن ایشان انداخته از دو سو کشیدند. خون از دهان ایشان آمد و این زمان دژخیم سومی خنجر به دل‌های ایشان فرو کرد. مدیر روزنامه را هم بدین سان کشتند.»

[ارداقی:] و این هنگام بود که همه را که بیست و دو تن بودیم با زنجیر و آن حال آسیب‌دیدگی برده، نهاده پیکرها از ما برداشتند [...] و باید اندیشید که ما چه رنجی می‌کشیدیم و چه شرمندگی نزد هم می‌داشتیم. در این میان شکنجه و آزار هم دریغ نمی‌کردند.

منبع

کسروی، احمد

تاریخ مشروطه‌ی ایران

ج ۲، تهران

انتشارات امیرکبیر

چاپ سیزدهم، ۱۳۵۶

صص ۶۶۳-۶۵۷



*Faculty of Engineering, Tehran University – Azar Shariat Razavi, Ahmad Ghandchi, Mostafa Bozorgnia / 7 December 1953*  
Azadeh Akhlaghi, from the series *By an Eye-Witness*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.





احمد قندچی

AHMAD  
GHANDCHI

About 10 A.m, we heard the untimely ring of the faculty bell and rushed out. I had been teaching his civil engineering course when two soldiers and the soldiers had pointed out two students to the officer and said that the commander had ordered the soldiers to arrest them.[...] They had the dean of the faculty, and he had the bell rung in protest. On hearing the bell, "Down with the martial law! In this atmosphere of suppression and under the possible". Then he had thrown away his books and had gone to the corridor. He shouted down with the Shah, down with Zahedi the dictator, hail to Mo

The campus was full of armed soldiers. The commander ordered the students to continue to shout slogans against the Shah. The commander threatened the students with shooting at the students inside the campus, let alone, inside the building. But the soldiers refused to shoot, and suddenly the clamor of students mingled with the roar of guns. The students were not wounded tried to help the wounded who could move to leave so that the others and some were lying on the floor. Azar was one of the students who in spite of the danger who stabbed his leg with his bayonet and he fell down, but to the very last moment

In the corridor, blood was mixed with the hot water gushing from pipes. The scene was a horrible scene! Those of us who were alive fled.

THE CORONER OFFICE ANNOUNCED THE THREE TEHRAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Ref. → ↓  
Ettela'at Daily  
8 Dec 1953

1. Mostafa Bozorgnia, the student, entered his right chest and died completely and he died as the result of the back of his right shoulder.

2. Shariat Razavi, the other student, disintegrated his right thigh and died. Furthermore, a bullet cannot be the cause of his death.

3. The other victim, Ahmad Ghandchi, died of his viscera. Since Yesterday, the representative of Military Pro

Ref. ↑ The Coroner Office's report on



ut to the corridor. We found out that Professor Shams Malekara  
their commanding officer had come into the classroom and  
ese had been the guys who had mocked and insulted them.  
dragged the students out. Professor Shams had informed the  
bell, one of the students had gone up a desk and had shouted:  
the shadow of military boots of armed soldiers no education is  
dor with other students. They started an indoor demonstration,  
saddegh and demanded the release of their fellow students.

ts to leave the faculty building, but the students ignored him and  
at they will be shot at, but nobody believed that they might start  
t the students did not know that he had already received the order  
The soldiers had invaded the building. Some of the students who  
they wouldn't be arrested. Some were grappling with the soldiers  
of having been shot in chest and arm, was tussling with a soldier  
oment he didn't stop shouting "down with the Shah".

ced radiators and the red current was running downstairs. It

**STUDENTS' CAUSE OF DEATH AFTER CONDUCTING THE AUTOPSY:**

dent of the engineerig department passed away after a bullet  
exited from his left armpit. The bullet broke his arm's bone  
he result of severe bleeding. A bayonet was also pushed into  
r which penetrated 15 cm in the body and caused a deep scar.

student, died primarily of a bayonet struck which totally  
n, cut off his arteries, caused severe bleeding which led to  
ullet hit his right arm and produced a cutaneous scar which  
eath.

Ghandchi, died after a bullet penetrated his stomach and tore  
he Coroner Office examined the corpses at the presence of the  
secutor's Office, but the official report is yet to be provided.

*how three students of engineering department of Tehran university were martyred.*

.....

مصطفی بزرگ نیا

MOSTAFA  
BOZORGNIA

← Ref.

Shariat Razavi, Gholam Reza

Memoirs of an Odd Physician

Tehran

Ghasideh-sara Publishers

2005. (in Persian)

pp. 16-20

ISBN. 964-8618-31-3

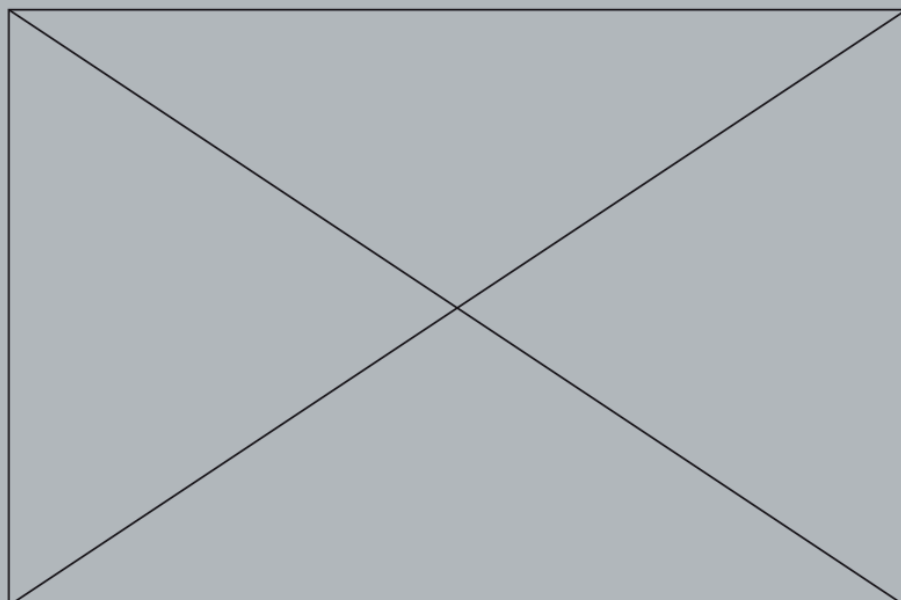


*Atlantic Hotel, Tehran – Gholam Reza Takhti / 7 January 1968*

Azadeh Akhlaghi, from the series *By an Eye-Witness*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.







فاقی تاریخ وقوع: ۱۳۴۶/۱۰/۱۷ تاریخ گزارش: ۱۳۴۶/۱۰/۱۹  
مهرمان کشتی ایران

ز تاریخ ۱۳۴۶/۱۰/۱۵ در هتل آتلانتیک اقامت داشت ماده‌ی سمی خودکشی نمود و موقعی که نماینده و انتظامی از اتاق نام‌برده بازدید می‌نمایند از جیب کت ی‌آید که در آن نوشته است در جریان مرگ من هیچ‌کس خود معرفی و در تقویم بغلی وی ضمن بررسی مشاهده مسرم اختلاف خانوادگی داشتم چندین مرتبه به مادر من اظهار داشت من از ابتدا با این ازدواج موافق نبودم چه‌گذا ازدواج کرد و حال زندگی‌ام مثل یهودی سرگردان برای کالبدشکافی به پزشکی قانونی حمل گردیده است.

سند ۶۹ خیلی محرمانه منبع: ۴۰۲ تاریخ وقوع: از چند روز قبل تاریخ گزارش: ۱۳۴۶/۱۰/۲۶  
موضوع: شایعات در مورد مرگ تختی

[...] عده‌ای از مردم نیز اظهار می‌دارند چه دلیل دارد که پزشکی قانونی نوع سمی که تختی به وسیله‌ی آن خودکشی کرده تاکنون افشا ننموده و اضافه می‌کنند که جسد تختی را در هتل به طرزی یافتند که پتو بر روی خود داشته و چنان چه سم خورده باشد مسلماً تشنجاتی به وی دست می‌دهد و در این جا این سؤال پیش می‌آید که به چه ترتیب پتو را بر روی خود کشیده است.

منبع: فاطمی نویسی، عباس زندگی و مرگ جهان پهلوان تختی در آیین‌های اسناد  
جهان کتاب ۱۳۷۷ بخش اسناد، صص ۳۵-۶۹ شابک: ۹۶۴-۹۰۳۱۱-۴-۶

Takhti, the Iranian champion wrestler had been staying at Hotel Atlantic since 05 Jan 1968 and on the night of 07 Jan 1968 committed suicide by taking poison. When the attorney representative together with the police inspected the room, they found his last will and testament in the pocket of his coat in which he had written that no one was to be blamed for his death and he had assigned his brother as his executor. In his pocket was also found a calendar in which he had written that because of his marital problems, he had gone to his mother-in-law several times and she had told him that she was against their marriage from the beginning and she still wondered why her daughter had married a pauper. The body of the deceased was then taken to the coroner's office for autopsy.

Document No 35 Top Secret Source: anonymous  
Date of event: 07-01-1968 Date of report: 09-01-1968  
Subject: Suicide of Gholam Reza Takhti, the world champion wrestler

The news of Takhti's suicide was circulated quickly. After his body was taken to the coroner's office, a crowd of members of National Front, merchants of Bazaar, athletes and ordinary people gathered in front of the office. Different comments were made, but they were all on the basis that "Takhti hasn't committed suicide; he has been killed". There were others who said "He was not a mere child, he wouldn't commit suicide over petty marital differences. He could easily divorce her, if he thought she had been unfaithful to him. [...] They sure have poisoned him somewhere else and then transferred the body to the hotel room". [...] During the funeral, some people started murmuring "Our Takhti has been killed", and the slogan spread over quickly and the whole crowd chanted it.

Document No 36 Top Secret Source: No 581  
Date of event: 08-01-1968 Date of report: 09-01-1968  
Subject: Suicide of Gholam Reza Takhti, the world champion wrestler



سند ۳۵ خیلی محرمانه منبع: اتنه  
موضوع: خودکشی غلامرضا تختی قم

تختی قهرمان کشتی ایران ا  
و در شب ۱۳۴۶/۱۰/۱۷ با م  
دادستان در معیت مأمورین  
وی وصیت نامه‌ای به دست م  
مقصر نیست و برادرش را قیم  
می‌شود که نوشته چون با ه  
همسر مراجعه کردم. ایشان به  
و نمی‌دانم چرا دخترم با تو بچ  
شده است. ضمناً جسد نام برده

سند ۳۶ خیلی محرمانه منبع: ۵۸۱ تاریخ وقوع: ۱۳۴۶/۱۰/۱۸ تاریخ گزارش: ۱۳۴۶/۱۰/۱۹  
موضوع: خودکشی غلامرضا تختی قهرمان کشتی ایران

۳۴۶  
ادی ۱۷  
968  
7-JAN

موضوع خودکشی غلامرضا تختی قهرمان سابق کشتی به سرعت در همه جا پخش شد. بعد از آن که جسد او را به پزشکی قانونی منتقل کردند گروه زیادی از عناصر جبهه‌ی ملی، بازاریان، ورزشکاران و مردم رهگذر در جلوی پزشکی قانونی اجتماع کرده بودند. در این اجتماع اظهار نظرهای مختلفی می‌شد که همه‌ی آن‌ها در اطراف موضوع «تختی خودکشی نکرده بلکه او را کشته‌اند» دور می‌زد. گروه دیگری می‌گفتند: «تختی بچه نبود که بر سر یک مقدار اختلافات جزیی خانوادگی دست به خودکشی بزند او یک قهرمان بود و اگر زنش بد یا منحرف می‌بود طلاقش می‌داد. [...] حتماً او را در جای دیگری مسموم کرده‌اند و بعد جسدش را به هتل آتلانتیک آورده‌اند.» [...] هنگامی که جسد تختی به گورستان منتقل می‌شد ابتدا چند نفر شعار «تختی ما کشته شد.» را زمزمه کردند و بعد این شعار به طور ناخودآگاه همگانی شد و همه‌ی مردم این شعار را می‌دادند.

Some people are also asking  
y the coroner hasn't revealed  
autopsy results including the  
e of poison he has supposedly  
en to kill himself. They say  
en the body was discovered, he  
s covered up with a blanket. But  
e were poisoned, he would have  
l convulsions, so one could ask  
v he could have covered up his  
ly with the blanket.

Ref. <  
Fateminevisi, Abbas  
*The Life and Death*  
*of the World*  
*Champion Takhti*  
*in the SAVAK Documents*  
Tehran  
Jahan Ketab Publishers  
1998. (in Persian)  
pp. 35-69  
ISBN. 964 - 90311-4-6

Document No 69 Top Secret Source: No 402  
Event: a few days ago Date of report: 16-01-1968  
Subject: rumors about Takhti's death

8  
Champion wrestler



*Evin Hills, Tehran – Bijan Jazani / 18 April 1975*  
Azadeh Akhlaghi, from the series *By an Eye-Witness*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.









منبع ↓ روزنامه‌ی اطلاعات ۳۱ فروردین ۱۳۵۴ ص ۱ P.1 20 April 1975 Ettela'at Daily

## نه زندانی در حین فرار کشته شدند

پی  
جز  
JAN JAZANI

روز پنج‌شنبه ۲۹ فروردین، ۹ زندانی در حین فرار کشته شدند. این زندانیان در حین جابه‌جایی آن‌ها از یک زندان به زندانی دیگر اقدام به فرار نمودند که همگی کشته شدند. نام‌های این افراد به شرح زیر است: محمد چوپان‌زاده، احمد جلیل افشار، عزیز سرمدی، بیژن جزنی، حسن ضیا ظریفی، کاظم ذوالانوار، مصطفی جوان خوش‌دل، مشعوف کلانتری، عباس سورکی.

[تهرانی مأمور ساواک:] بعد از ترور سرتیپ رضا زندی پور، رئیس وقت کمیته‌ی مشترک در اوایل فروردین ۵۴، ساواک به قصد انتقام جویی، نقشه‌ی وحشتناکی طرح کرد که همه‌ی عوامل اجرای آن تا آخرین دقیق اجرای نقشه از چگونگی آن آگاه نبودند. پنج‌شنبه ۲۸ یا ۲۹ فروردین بود که رضا عطارپور (دکتر حسین زاده‌ی معروف) از من خواست ترتیب انتقال کاظم ذوالانوار را از زندان قصر به زندان اوین بدهم. من هم نامه‌اش را نوشتم و به امضا رساندم. به زندان اوین رفتیم و قرار شد شعبانی (حسینی) و نوذری زندانیان را تحویل بگیرند. ما نیز به قهوه‌خانه‌ی اکبر اوینی رفتیم و به انتظار نشستیم. مینی بوس حامل زندانیان، در حالی که سرهنگ وزیری با لباس ارتشی در اتومبیل بود رسید و سربازی را که آن جا پاس می‌داد مرخص کرد. زندانیان را به بالای ارتفاعات بازداشتگاه اوین بردیم و در حالی [که] چشم‌ها و دست‌های شان بسته بود، آن‌ها را ردیف روی زمین نشانیدیم. بعد عطارپور برای شان سخنرانی کرد و گفت: "همان‌طور که دوستان و همکاران شما که شما رهبران فکری آن‌ها هستید و از زندان با آنان ارتباط دارید، همکاران و دوستان ما را اعدام می‌کنند و از بین می‌برند، ما نیز شما را محکوم به اعدام کرده‌ایم."

بیژن جزنی و چند نفر دیگر، شدیداً اعتراض کردند اما نمی‌دانم عطارپور یا سرهنگ وزیری با مسلسل یوزی به روی آنان آتش گشود و مسلسل را یکی یکی به ما داد. من نفر چهارم یا پنجم بودم که مسلسل به من رسید و وقتی من هم شلیک کردم دیگر آن‌ها زنده نبودند. البته نمی‌خواهم بگویم که در کشتن آن‌ها دخالت نداشتم، چون نفس عمل مهم است که من هم در این جنایت عمل کردم. بعد هم سعدی جلیل اصفهانی با مسلسل، بالای سر آن‌ها رفت و هر کدام شان را که نیمه‌جان بودند با مسلسل خلاص کرد. [...] پس از این ماجرا من و رسولی چشم‌بند و دست‌بندهای شهدا را سوزاندیم و از بین بردیم و اجساد را داخل مینی بوس گذاشتیم و حسینی و رسولی اجساد را به بیمارستان ۵۰۱ ارتش منتقل کردند. روز بعد، متنی به وسیله‌ی عطارپور برای روزنامه‌ها تهیه شد که در آن عنوان شده بود این ۹ نفر در جریان انتقال از زندان به زندان دیگر، قصد فرار داشتند که مورد هدف گلوله‌ی مأموران قرار گرفتند. این متن به دو دلیل بسیار ناشایانه تهیه شده بود اولاً همه‌ی آن‌ها از روبه‌رو هدف گلوله قرار گرفته بودند، پس قصد فرار نداشتند. ثانیاً نحوه‌ی انتقال زندانی طوری نبود که بتوان قبول کرد که قصد فرار در بین بوده است.

منبع ↑ "تهرانی، جلال ساواک، اعتراف می‌کند" روزنامه‌ی اطلاعات ۱ خرداد ۱۳۵۸ ص ۳



*Majnoon Island, Iraq – Mehdi Bakeri / 14 February 1985*

Azadeh Akhlaghi, from the series *By an Eye-Witness*, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.





Ref. →  
 Nazemi, Ghasem  
*Goodbye Commander* | Tabriz  
 Setad Congereh Shohada Publishers  
 2004. (in Persian)  
 pp. 119- 123  
 ISBN. 964-06-6303-04

[Mehdi Bakeri's last speech:] Dear brothers! We have a very hard mission ahead. [...] If from a platoon only one man survives, he must resist to the end. If from a 300 hundred company only one man survives, he must resist to the end. Even if your commander is killed, do not say that we no longer have any one to command us, do not falter, this is the temptation of the devil. [...] Don't shoot before you are ordered to. Even if you are wounded, bite on something so that you won't cry out loud as crying out is a sign of weakness.

**[Martyr Ghanbarlou:] In the heat of the battle, commander Mehdi fell. I ran to him and turned his body. He was shot in the forehead and was bleeding. I called him, kissed him, screamed. No reaction. He was martyred. [...] I thought, what are we going to do now? I told the other fighters, let's go back. I carried the body to the boat. [...] I laid it in the boat and drove into the Tigris River. They were shooting at us from all directions. We could do nothing but pray. The boat was riddled with bullets. Meanwhile, an Iraqi came to the river bank and fired an RPG at us. The boat exploded. I don't remember anything; I just remember that I found myself in the water, alone. The boat was on fire. I watched while the bodies of Mehdi and other comrades were burning in the boat. At nightfall we went back to that point. There was no trace of the bodies.**

Ref. ↑ Akbari, Ali *He could not stay alive* | Tehran | Siam Publishers | 2009. (in Persian)  
 pp.108-110 | ISBN. 978-964-8026-10-8

[Mostafa Al-Mousavi:] I remember the last time that I told him to go back, he replied "Asghar is gone, Ali is gone, and everybody is gone. What is left for me back there? What is the point in going back?"

Ref. ↑  
 Khezri, Farhad  
*I told Majnoon to stay alive* | Tehran  
 Revayat Fath Publishers  
 2001. (in Persian)  
 pp. 53-55  
 ISBN. 964-90935-9-1

۱۳۶۳

۲۵ بهمن

1985

14-FEB

سته ی  
 آن یک  
 که این  
 مجروح  
 ماست.

دی  
ریMEHDI  
BAKERI



|                                  |       |
|----------------------------------|-------|
| منبع                             | ←     |
| ناظمی، سید قاسم                  |       |
| خدا حافظ سردار                   | تبریز |
| ستاد کنگره‌ی شهدا و سرداران شهید |       |
| آذربایجان شرقی                   |       |
| صص ۱۱۹-۱۲۳                       | ۱۳۸۳  |
| شابک ۹۶۴-۰۶-۶۳۰۳-۴               | شابک  |

[آخرین سخنرانی مهدی باکری]: برادران! عملیات، عملیات سختی خواهد بود. [...] اگر از یک د سی نفری، یک نفر بماند آن یک نفر باید مقاومت کند. و اگر از گردان سیصد نفری یک نفر بماند نفر باید مقاومت کند. حتی اگر فرماندهی شما شهید شد، نگویید فرمانده نداریم و سست شوید و سوسه‌ی شیطان است. [...] تا موقعی که دستور حمله داده نشده، کسی تیراندازی نکند. حتی اگر شود باید دستمال در دهانش بگذارد، دندان‌ها را به هم بفشارد و فریاد نکند. فریاد نشانه‌ی ضعف ش

[شهید قنبرلو]: درگیری شدت بیشتری پیدا کرده بود که ناگهان آقا مهدی نقش زمین شد. دویدم سمت او و او را برگرداندم. تیر خورده بود به پیشانی اش و از آن خون بیرون می‌زد. هر چه صدایش کردم، بوسیدمش، فریاد زدم، فایده‌ای نداشت. آقا مهدی شهید شده بود. [...] به خودم گفتم حالا چه کار کنم توی این بی‌کسی و تنهایی؟ به بچه‌ها گفتم بلند شوید برویم عقب. آقا مهدی را بلند کردم بردم رساندم به قایقی که آن جا بود. [...] آقا مهدی را گذاشتیم توی قایق، زدیم به دجله حرکت کردیم رفتیم. به قایق و ما و آب از هر طرف تیر می‌زدند. آرپی‌جی هم می‌زدند. ما هیچ کاری از دست‌مان برنمی‌آمد جز دعا. دشمن قایق را زیر رگبار گرفته بود، به طوری که بدنه‌ی قایق سوراخ سوراخ شده بود. در این گیرودار، یکی از عراقی‌ها آمد کنار دجله و با آرپی‌جی خود قایق را نشانه گرفت و بعد شلیک کرد. قایق منفجر شد. از انفجار چیز زیادی در ذهنم نیست. فقط یک دفعه خودم را در آب احساس کردم و کسی را همراه خودم ندیدم. بر اثر بنزینی که در باک قایق بود، قایق آتش گرفته بود. با یک دنیا غم و درد سوختن آقا مهدی و چند نفر دیگر از بچه‌ها را مشاهده می‌کردم. بر اثر اصابت موشک، قایق به سمت شرق دجله رفت و قایق سوخته در نقطه‌ای از خشکی متوقف شد. به دلیل شدت و حجم آتش دشمن، نتوانستم خود را به قایق برسانم. شب به همراه چند نفر از بچه‌ها به آن جا رفتیم اما اثری از آقا مهدی و بقیه نبود.

|      |   |             |                         |                  |            |      |                         |
|------|---|-------------|-------------------------|------------------|------------|------|-------------------------|
| منبع | ↑ | اکبری، علی  | نمی‌توانست زنده بماند   | تهران: صیام      | صص ۱۱۰-۱۰۸ | ۱۳۸۸ | ۸-۱۰-۸۰۲۶-۹۶۴-۹۷۸. شابک |
| منبع | ← | خضری، فرهاد | به مجنون گفتم زنده بمان | تهران: روایت فتح | صص ۵۳-۵۵   | ۱۳۸۰ | ۹-۱-۹۰۳۵-۹۶۴. شابک      |

[مصطفی الموسوی]: یادم هست آخرین باری که به او گفتم: «برگرد عقب» به ترکی گفت: «اصغر گدیپ، علی گدیپ، اوشاخلار هامسی گدیپ، دای منه نمنه گالیپ، نیه گلیم؟» می‌گفت: «اصغر رفته، علی رفته، بچه‌ها همه شون رفتن، برای من چی مونده، برای چی برگردم؟»



## PORTFOLIO

# INDEPENDENCE DAYS

## THE WORK OF MARYAM JAFRI

ANA CATARINA PINHO  · MARYAM JAFRI  
 IHA, University of Lisbon, Portugal Visual Artist

Maryam Jafri has worked across varied media including video, sculpture and photography, to interrogate cultural and visual representations of history and political economy and their impact on everyday life. Her works often combine found and original material, whether in installation or moving image. As stated by the artist, her practice is grounded in an engagement with the formal and conceptual qualities of each media, periods of extensive research and planning, and the mysterious but crucial role played by forces that lie outside deliberation and preparation such as accident, chance, and intuition.

Jafri's work, "Independence Day 1934-1975" (2009-2019), reflects her interest in heritage, archives, and the role of photography in shaping national narratives during the decolonization of Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. This project comprises over 60 archival photos from more than 30 archives, depicting the first Independence Day ceremonies of various nations across these regions. Notably, the photos are primarily sourced from public archives within the respective Asian and African countries. The first Independence Day, including its ceremonial events, is portrayed as a series of codified rituals and elaborate speeches enacted in both public and elite spaces. These events, including the swearing-in of new leadership, document signings, VIP parades, stadium salutes, and inaugural addresses, are orchestrated by the departing colonial powers. Despite their diverse geographical and temporal origins, the photographs reveal striking similarities, highlighting a political model exported from Europe and replicated globally. The photo installation is arranged as a typology, positioned between a grid and a storyboard, exploring the transitional twilight period when a territory becomes a nation-state—a topic often overlooked in colonial and post-colonial studies. The artist book *Independence Days* (2022) emerges as an expanded version of the "Independence Day 1934-1975" photo installation. Published by Buchhandlung Walther König, the book



juxtaposes 234 photographs over 10 years of research in several archives across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, including many from rare and at-risk collections.

More recent works by Jafri, such as “Disappearance Online” (2021), address the digitization of historical images and its implications for cultural memory and copyright law. This project traces the status of key historical images from national archives in Iraq, Syria, and Jordan, examining their presence, absence, and non-appearance in both public and commercial image banks. This work complements her earlier project “Getty vs. Ghana” (2012). While browsing the Getty Images website, Jafri discovered several historical photographs from Ghana, copyrighted by Getty, which also existed in the Ghana Ministry of Information archives. These images, documenting Ghana’s independence on March 6, 1957, mark the first instance of sub-Saharan Africa’s liberation from Western rule. Jafri’s investigation revealed errors and manipulation of the original photographs, ranging from accidental to deliberate. “Getty vs. Ghana” juxtaposes these overlapping images to address contemporary issues of copyright, digitization, and foreign ownership of national heritage.

Jafri’s work highlights the lasting influence of archives and emphasizes the importance of critically engaging with historical narratives. Her artistic inquiries prompt us to reconsider our approaches to remembering, interpreting, and representing the past, advocating for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of our shared histories.

*Sri Lanka – Ghana - Botswana 1948-1966.*

From the photo series “Independence Day 1934-1975” (2009-2019) Maryam Jafri.

Courtesy of the artist.







The left image is from the Ghana Ministry of Information, the right from Getty Images. The Ministry identifies their image as G/1180/1, Getty identifies theirs as 50405305. The caption accompanying the Getty image states *Duchess of Kent (L) dancing with Ghana Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah (C) at the Ghana independence ceremonies*. A special note accompanying the Getty image states: *No resale application use without the prior permission of Time, Inc. Contact your local office to see if we can clear this image for you*. The back of photo G/1180/1 bears a purple stamp stating *Copyright Photographic Services, Ministry of Information, PO Box 745, Accra. All rights reserved*. The Ghana Ministry of Information charges \$4 per photograph for reproduction and licensing. Licensee must credit the Ministry.



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**Maryam Jafri, *Getty vs Ghana* (2012), detail.**  
Courtesy of the artist.

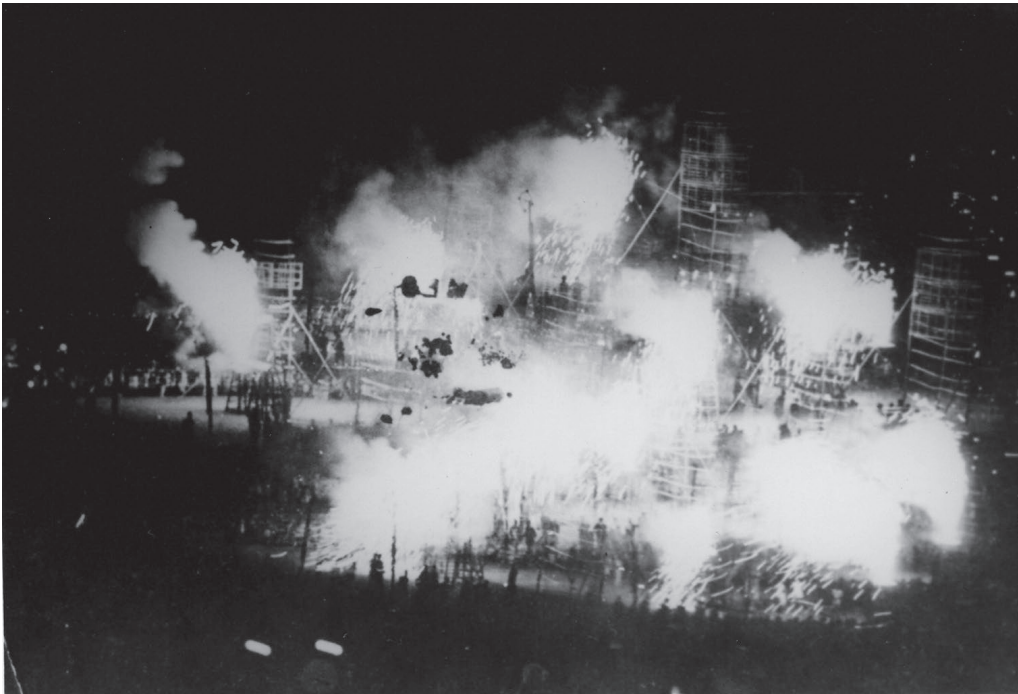


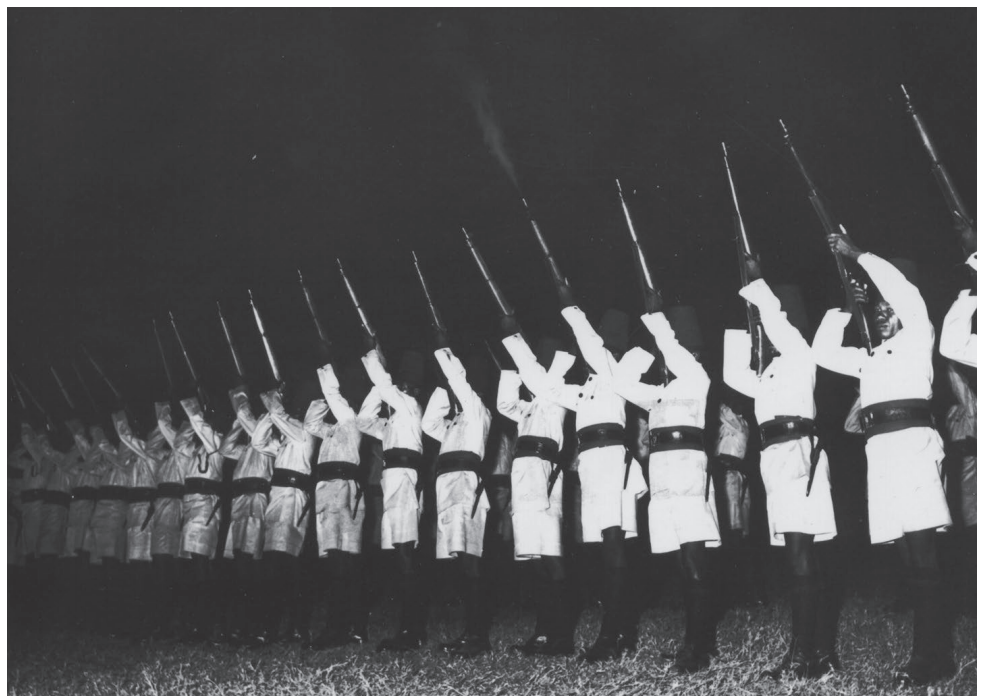




*Burundi-Syria-Burkina Faso 1946-1962.*  
From the photo series "Independence Day 1934-1975" (2009-2019), Maryam Jafri.  
Courtesy of the artist.







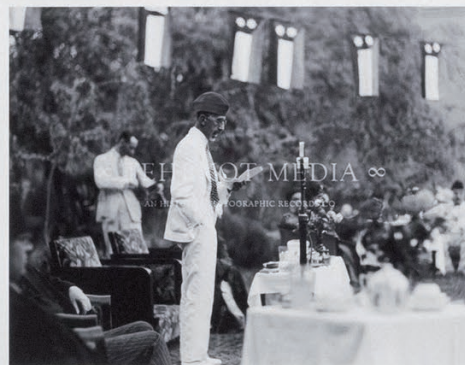
*India-Philippines-Tanzania 1947-1961.*  
From the photo series "Independence Day 1934-1975" (2009-2019), Maryam Jafri.  
Courtesy of the artist.





The top image shows Faisal I of Syria at the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919 with French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau. Shortly after this photograph was taken, Faisal I founded the National Museum in Damascus, where this photograph now rests in its archives. Faisal reigned as King of Syria for five months before being deposed by the French in 1920. The bottom image shows Faisal I, ex-King of Syria, being crowned by the British as Faisal I, King of Iraq. Low-resolution versions of the 1921 coronation image circulate widely online, but the photograph is presumed destroyed after the burning of the Iraq National Library and Archive under the US-led invasion. According to US authorities, senior staff from the Library of Congress would aid their Iraqi counterparts to rebuild the library just as the National Endowment for the Arts would spearhead the resurrection of Iraq's devastated museum sector. However, after an initial visit by a team from the Library of Congress in October 2003, no further contact has been reported.

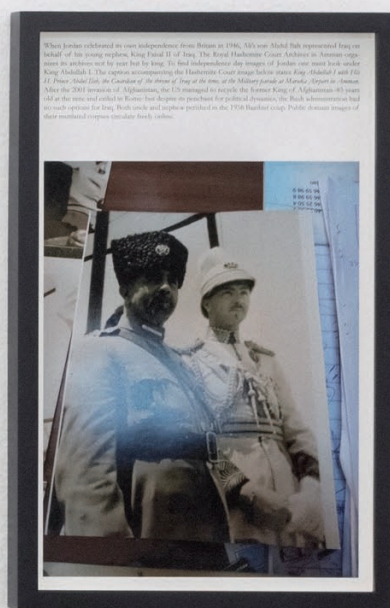
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In 2010, South Carolina-based Tehrkot Media began selling images online allegedly depicting Iraq's 1932 independence from Britain. Best known for turning Alexander Gardner's photographs of the US Civil War into an app, Tehrkot Media pitched itself as a boutique stock photo agency specializing in historical imagery and an alternative to behemoths such as Getty Images and Alamy. A 2012 screenshot shows King Faisal I of Iraq ostensibly broadcasting Iraq's independence. In 2013, Tehrkot Media went out of business and the image disappeared from the internet. No further information is provided on the current status of the image and an online search reveals no results, not even at the wayback machine. At the Library of Congress, a photograph from the same event is available as a public domain image. The caption states *King Faysal (Faisal) I of Iraq (left) probably with his brother Emir Abdullah of Transjordan, at the palace, Baghdad, Iraq*. However, the man with Faisal is not his brother Abdullah but instead his other brother, ex-King Ali, who had fled from Mecca after being deposed by the House of Saud. Both Faisal and Ali died not long after this photograph was taken, officially of natural causes. Abdullah would go on to become King of Jordan.

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When Jordan celebrated its own independence from Britain in 1946, Ali's son Abdul Ilah represented Iraq on behalf of his young nephew, King Faisal II of Iraq. The Royal Hashemite Court Archives in Amman organizes its archives not by year but by king. To find independence day images of Jordan one must look under Abdullah I. The caption accompanying the Hashemite Court image states *King Abdullah I with His H. Prince Abdul Ilah, the Guardian of the throne of Iraq at the time, at the Military parade at Maraka Airport in Ammam*. After the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, the US managed to recycle the former King of Afghanistan—83 years old at the time and exiled in Rome—but despite its penchant for political dynasties, the Bush administration had no such options for Iraq. Both uncle and nephew perished in the 1958 Baathist coup. Public domain images of their mutilated bodies circulate freely online.

Maryam Jafri, *(Dis)appearance Online* (2021).  
Installation view: The Blaffer Museum, Houston (2021).  
Courtesy of the artist

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