Counter-Archive

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Abstract

This paper discusses theories and artistic practices that challenge classical notions of the archive. Since the early 1980s, postcolonial scholars alerted us to the fact that gaps and omissions form the problematic basis of any archive. Thus, counter-perspectives to hegemonic discourse, as well as new archives, have been established. Although alternative narratives came to the fore, the resulting multiplication of the archive followed more or less the same paths as before: Policies of restricted access led to a hierarchy of visibility. Currently, artists, filmmakers, and activists demand a far more radical archival policy. These models, which I group under the term "counter-archives", propose accessibility (a) as part of the Global North's commitment to decolonizing its institutions and (b) as part of a "Citizen Science" agenda that unbalances hierarchies between experts and laypeople.

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Introduction

"Migrant archives"[1], "queer archives"[2], "radical archives"[3], "partisan counter archives"[4], "decolonized archives" — as different as the theoretical backgrounds of these alternatives to classical conceptions of the archive are, they share a common goal: They aim to multiply the traces and voices of cultural memory production. While the conventional archive seems irrevocably discredited, guilty of reaffirming hegemonic power structures, counter-archives are said to have activist, utopian potential. Whether conceived as a physical location or a digital site, counter-archives are attributed to a specific agency — "empowerment" of communities.[5] Two strategies for possible counter-archives are widely debated in artistic and academic fields, both following the political plea of multiplying voices: Counter-archives should either follow a radical open access-policy — and in this way

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1 Arjun Appadurai, "Archive and Aspiration," in *Information Is Alive: Art and Theory on Archiving and Retrieving Data*, ed. Jake Brouwer and Arjen Mulder (Rotterdam: V2 Press, 2003), https://v2.nl/files/2017/pdf/information-is-alive-pdf-part-i.

2 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press 2003); Charles E. Morris III, "Archival Queer," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 9, no. 1 (Spring 2006).

3 Mariam Ghani, "'What We Left Unfinished': The Artist and the Archive," in *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, ed. Anthony Downey (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015).

4 Gal Kirn, *The Partisan Counter-Archive: Retracing the Ruptures of Art and Memory in the Yugoslav People's Liberation Struggle* (Berlin: De Gruyter 2020).

5 [Participants of the workshop "Everything passes, except the past,"] "Call for Action & Reflection on Decolonising Film Archives," (Lisbon 2019), https://www.goethe.de/prj/lat/en/spu/21885042.html.

contribute to a decolonization of institutions — or its holdings should be radically enlarged, updated and diversified by local communities and laypeople. The common thread between both methodological approaches is accessibility.

Parallel to a theoretical questioning of the archive, artists have used archival documents and restaged its architectures.[6] This ubiquitous physical presence of "quasi-archival" infrastructures in exhibitions is known to art history through Hal Foster, who identified an "archival impulse" in contemporary art.[7] With this concept, Foster summarized the art production of the established Western visual artists Tacita Dean, Thomas Hirschhorn, and Sam Durant; their installations are evidence of a fetish among contemporary artists for the aesthetics and formal dispositions of the archive. Updating the analysis from today's perspective would include artists such as Kader Attia, Susan Meiselas, Walid Raad, Vivan Sundaram, and Akram Zaatari. This broadening of the canon, however, foregrounds a second perspective on the notion of the "archival impulse" that highlights it as more than a playful, innocuous preference for an archival aesthetic. Such a view is at the heart of the current debate in the arts: Artists, archivists, curators, activists, and scholars are calling for action as they grapple with the archive's current and future role. Rather than viewing the archive as a place of storage and an exhibition format for objects from a foreclosed past, they envision it as a place of engagement and interaction. The counter-archive is such an institution of actualization, one that connects the (re)construction of diverse histories with people's contemporary experiences.

Engaged Art History and the Multiplication of the Archive

The goal of social art history — to confront artifacts with the social realities by which they are surrounded — has relied heavily on available sources to strengthen

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6   Cf. the exhibition catalogs: Ingrid Schaffner and Matthias Winzen, eds., *Deep Storage. Arsenale der Erinnerung: Sammeln, Speichern, Archivieren in der Kunst* (Munich: Prestel, 1997). Exhibition Catalog; Elisabeth Madlener and Elke Krasny, eds., *Archiv X: Investigations of Contemporary Art* (Linz: O.K. Center of Contemporary Art Upper Austria, 1998). Exhibition Catalog; Okwui Enwezor, ed., *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (Göttingen: Steidl 2008). Exhibition Catalog.

7   Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (Autumn 2004).

research on the position of minorities in history, whether workers or women: Contracts told the discipline about the value of labor in the Italian Renaissance, police files provided insight into everyday life in late 19th-century Paris, and letters and diaries mapped the networks of German women artists. But since the late 1980s, researchers became more suspicious of the records that former empires, rulers, and states had kept over the centuries. Archives thus became the object of a general overhaul: Postcolonial scholars asked about documents of the "subaltern" who, despite all the efforts of social history, had been excluded from historiography. The *topos* of the archive as a neutral container with collections being accumulated by the accidents of history was criticized. The gaps — or rather forced omissions — of the archive were carved out as its structurally inherent but problematic base. Scholars showed that, throughout history, non-Western archives have been marginalized or even actively destroyed. Scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Griselda Pollock, Ann Laura Stoler, and many others have since pointed out that the sources preserved in the archives are the result of deliberate choice based on the "desires of selected classes, cultures, and genders"[8]. They provided explanations as to why the stories of slaves, non-Western empires, and, again, women — this time from non-Western countries — had previously had no voice in the records or in the hegemonic discourses that had emerged from them. Calls for decolonizing the archive were made, with the aim of presenting sources that reconstruct histories outside of dominant historiographies. Postcolonial archive theories thus conquered nation-state archives by establishing historiographical accounts based on existing or decentralized counter-archives. Thus, the problem of a lack of alternative historiographies was marked as one of the sources.

A second outcome of the postcolonial discourse was a multiplication of archives founded by artists, filmmakers, art institutions, and NGOs, sometimes

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8   Griselda Pollock, "Trouble in the Archives," in *Griselda Pollock Essays: Looking Back to the Future. Essays on Art, Life and Death* (London: G+B Arts International, 2001), 31; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

within, but more often outside, existing institutions. This led to the acceptance of a wider range of memory techniques and media as valid historiographical sources. With this expansion, it became clear that dominant historiographies lacked not only alternative sources but also recognition of archival records beyond written sources. Thus, postcolonial archive theory seeks to equally integrate and account for a variety of artworks, oral records, poetry, documentary film practices, and other ephemeral worldviews. They are regarded as non-linguistic "documents" that preserve the subjugated knowledge and social realities of minorities. At times, a work of art itself becomes a counter-archive: US-artist Susan Hiller's video and sound installations *The Last Silent Movie* (2007/2008) and *Lost and Found* (2016) represent dying or dead languages as well as their translations into the language of their suppressors. The subtitles recall the colonial crimes of the erasure of cultural heritage, the shifting of meaning as well as the failure of translation that accompanies erasure.

Only recently, however, has the claim been made that the mere proliferation of archives does not better the unequal power relations on which they are based. Ariella Azoulay argues that if we want to challenge hegemonic histories, we need to get rid of the very archival terminology that would sell minority perspectives as a perspective to be *discovered*.[9] Thus, we need to think about methodologies and anti-colonial ethics that would allow us to counter archives in the first place.

Archivists as Activists: Radical Dissemination

Visual media such as photography, film, video, and, ultimately, digital media are kept in focused sections of archives, which gives them the status of special collections. As films, videos, slides, audiovisual and digital files do not reveal their contents at first glance, requiring apparatus to come to life, they are often left untouched or even abandoned for years. The parts of archives devoted to visual documents follow protocols that differ from the usual archive order, often

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9   Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 197.

queering the regulated system of archival order. Others, such as photographs of colonial heritage, are even seen as threats to contemporary institutions, according to Elizabeth Edwards. They can disrupt the narratives of contemporary nations that claim to be part of a multicultural present. In this respect, the archive unfolds as a troubling "dystopia" for former colonizers.[10]

This unruly, unclassified, and sometimes even forgotten visual media collections have recently provided a starting point to re-interrogate archives for their colonial and omitted histories, thereby proposing visual counter-archives within already existing infrastructures.

A high percentage of visual sources documenting colonial injustice are still kept in the archives of former colonial powers.[11] They have not yet returned to the liberated countries where they were once shot, thus repeating the imbalance of power. The joint initiative of a group of filmmakers, archivists, activists, scientists, and artists recently published the collective paper "Call for Action & Reflection on Decolonising Film Archives"[12]. A central demand is that archives make colonial and anti-colonial material fully accessible, available to researchers worldwide. In this way, access is granted not only to researchers who can work at the physical location of the archive, but to all those who cannot afford to travel to consult an archive — the reasons for this are manifold, whether economic, environmental, or due to visa regulations. Free accessibility, it is hoped, is a first step toward decolonizing archives. In 2015, artist Mariam Ghani called this commitment to open access a "radical archive" practice. She proposes a fundamentally democratized culture of sharing: "[T]he radical approach to preservation is projection: use it or lose it."[13]

This new archive policy goes hand in hand with a debate on de-regulated property, on free publication and reproduction rights. It does not come as a

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10 Elizabeth Edwards, "The Colonial Archival Imaginaire at Home," *Social Anthropology* 24, no. 1 (February 2016): 53.

11 A current overview of film archives with holdings of colonial and anti-colonial origin is provided by Teresa Alten and Nancy Schneider's map for the Goethe-Institut, https://www.goethe.de/prj/lat/de/spu/21879035.html (Jan. 27th, 2021).

12 [Participants of the workshop "Everything passes, except the past,"] "Call for Action & Reflection on Decolonising Film Archives."

13 Ghani, "What We Left Unfinished," 62.

surprise that visual and audiovisual archives are at the center of such a debate. Films are a highly mobile heritage that could easily become a shared heritage through the circulation of copies. The "Liberate the Image" manifesto, launched in 2019 by a second group of filmmakers and academics, points to the economies of archives: Visual material of the Global South and the Arab World is in the possession of institutions and corporations that monetize its circulation, thereby consolidating their status.[14] Maintaining control over access through monetary means is intricately linked to maintaining control over narratives told primarily from a privileged perspective. This second manifesto calls on archives to make their holdings freely accessible. Such a liberal open access policy will only be possible through a rigid digitization of existing archives and through the establishment of non-commercial, de-centralized platforms that allow the sharing of digital/digitized copies.

Crowdsourcing the Archive: Open Access, Citizen Archiving, Instant Historiography

Open access (OA) is the central ethical and political obligation for counter-archives. Thus, highly mobile documents from the past, such as film, that are still tied to the archive's location, are put back into motion. The physical boundaries of the archive are dissolved in order to re-mobilize cultural heritage: A counter-archive will no longer necessarily be tied to a building, as nation-state archives have been.[15] Instead, non-commercial platforms can serve the purpose of counter-archives, allowing for accessibility, portability, and supranational exchange. They enable crowdsourcing techniques, allow mass uploads and the storage of archival content. Regardless of their status as professional archivists or one-time visitors,

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14 Liberate the Image Collective, "Liberate the Image. A Manifesto to Restitute Collective Memory," 2019, https://themanifesto.documentary-convention.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Liberate-The-Image.Engl_.pdf.

15 Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publication, 2002).

people should be able to share archival finds on specified platforms. However, OA policies will not only apply to the publication of finds. Ariella Azoulay argued that a future archival strategy needs to establish OA policies to acquire content. People must be granted "the right to be involved in producing and depositing material in the archive" [16]. This challenges the notion of the archive as a highly protected place that provides insight primarily to — and is maintained by — experts. Instead, online communities shape and update archives according to their needs. The diversification of archives through crowds would thus be the programmatic core of a future archival strategy, ideally leading to a re-calibration of the archive's categories of order. The circulation of material online will diversify existing data sets and films, videos, and digital content of unknown authorship will circulate in the same channels as the objects designated as artworks.

This vision of a future counter-archive is part of a broader debate about a necessary shift in the role of archivists toward online communities that complement their role.[17] The Citizen Science movement has been thinking about methods to engage communities online and offline, to make the archive a place "of acting and interacting" [18]. Various degrees of public involvement have been tested, from minimal freedom in co-creating topics to maximum. I will briefly outline the two poles of debate. One of the first collaborative projects to pilot crowdsourced transcription of documentation for an art institution was "AnnoTate" by the Tate Gallery. The project launched in 2012 and aimed to recruit volunteer transcribers for the Tate Archives. Here, citizen participation was limited to assisting the archivists and the entire transcription process ended with a verification of the

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16   Azoulay, *Potential History*, 198.

17   Bastian Gillner, "Archive im digitalen Nutzerkontakt: Virtuelle Lesesäle, soziale Medien und mentale Veränderungszwänge," *Archivar*, no. 66 (2013); Per Hetland, Palmyre Pierroux, and Line Esborg, eds., *A History of Participation in Museums and Archives: Traversing Citizen Science and Citizen Humanities* (New York: Routledge 2020); Anssi Jääskeläinen and Liisa Uosukainen, "Citizen Archive: My Precious Information," *New Review of Information Networking* 26, no. 1–2 (2018), https://doi.org/10.1080/13614576.2018.1537800; Denny Becker, "Citizen Science in Archiven: Möglichkeiten und Grenzen von Crowdsourcing bei der archivischen Erschliessung von Fotografien," *ABI Technik* 40, no. 1 (2020).

18   Azoulay, *Potential History*, 178.

volunteer's work. This is an example of minimal freedom in co-creation of research topics: The expert provides tasks and an online community of laypeople delivers.

The other side of the pole opts for a more radical understanding of co-creation and takes the notion of crowdsourcing further: The source literally is the crowd. For Citizen Science projects to satisfy the needs of a community, not solely those of the archivist, the research field must be co-defined by communities and reflect aspects, themes, and formats of popular memory — such as content that would be found in social media. It helps the successful development of a Citizen Science project in the arts if interest in a topic is initiated by a community; there has to be a public interest first. Only then is volunteer engagement grounded and only then can it feed into genuine, high value counter-archival narratives. If these conditions are taken seriously, insights that are markedly different become possible and, ultimately, provide true counter-narratives. That, after all, is what Citizen Science is for: to bring perspectives to the fore that are different from those of experts.

The crucial point, however, is who will own and maintain these platforms. The restricted rules of conduct and a current critical debate in art history about content moderation and the data agenda of platform companies make it clear that the initial euphoria towards social media platforms has now recognized their commercial reality.[19] Thus, archives today urgently need to address the question of how they will handle the highly ephemeral data already in personal collections on social media platforms and those yet to come. For future generations of art historical research, this data will provide invaluable insights into the visual culture that shapes public opinion today. This is based on archiving strategies and methods that run parallel to events of public interest, thus to a concept of simultaneous, instant historiography. To simply let this data drift into the social media abyss ignores its potential as valid counter-archives for future generations.

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19   Katja Müller-Helle, ed., *Bildzensur: Löschung technischer Bilder*. Bildwelten des Wissens, vol. 16 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020).

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