Book Review

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Critical addresses: the archive-in-practice.

In the same year that the TRC hearings commenced, Jacques Derrida's *Archive fever: a Freudian impression* (1996) was translated into English from French.[1] The work offers a rich and inclusive analysis which proffers the notion that the relationship between the archive and its contents is fluid – the structure, formulation and functioning of the archive are informed by its contents as well as external bodies of knowledge. To this end, the archive's objectivity, authorship and authenticity are in doubt. Nearly two decades on, the archive is still a primary source of investigation across various fields of inquiry including archaeology, anthropology, philosophy, literary studies and visual art.

Hal Foster (2004:3) identified the tendency of 'idiosyncratic probing' into various systems of knowledge as 'an archival impulse' with specific reference to contemporary art practice. This compulsion of visual artists to record manifests, according to Foster (2004:4), as aspects of the past brought to life again – often as an elaboration of (found) images, objects and texts – which upend notions of originality and authorship to offer new meaning.

It is within the ambit of these disruptive and subversive explorations into (local) archives and archival practices with a particular interest in 'lens-based technologies' that the book, *Critical addresses: the archive-in-practice* (hereafter *Critical addresses*) (Figure 1), is positioned. The 161-page, softcover book is published by Jacana Media under the auspices of the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre (VIAD), University of Johannesburg. The rigorous (dis)entanglement with the archive is gleaned from a number of contributing authors that emanate from papers, panel discussions and artists' presentations that formed part of the research platform, *Archival addresses: photographies, practices*, positionalities convened by VIAD.[2] Co-edited by Leora Farber and Claire Jorgensen, the volume presents itself as an indispensable contribution to local discourse, creative practice and critical
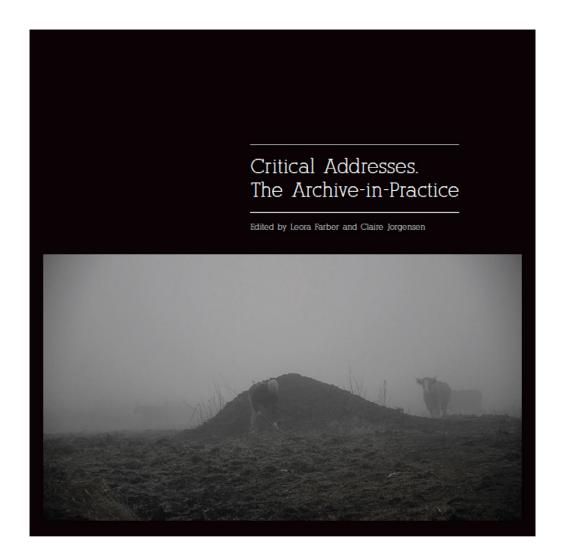
FIGURE Nº 1

Front cover of *Critical addresses: the archive-in-practice* bearing a video still of the artist, Michelle Monareng's artwork, *Removal to Radium* (2013). Image courtesy of Leora Farber, Claire Jorgensen and Michelle Monareng.

knowledge, and complements the extensive range of international scholarly research on the archive as a key site of inquiry in various fields.

This collection of 'addresses' offers unique interrogations with local and African archives explored by selected South African visual artists and theorists to unmask the archive's "objective" and "normative" operations. Farber and Jorgensen (2017:v) explain:

> Authors consider contemporary possibilities for, and practices, of, addressing archives in an African context; how these possibilities might impact on how archives are collated, disseminated, accessed and received; and what implications they may have for understanding the functions, meanings and significance of archives in this context.

To this end, *Critical addresses* engages the archive not merely as a source of inspiration or knowledge, but as a repository open to scrutiny. Here, archives are viewed as traces for verbal, visual and written statements whereby critical engagement yields potential for the construction of new forms of knowledge systems, identity and agency.

Following a Foucauldian understanding of the 'matrixial' correlation between discourse and power, the addresses emphasise not only that which is presented by the archive but most notably, that which it omits (Farber & Jorgensen 2017:vi). In addition, *Critical addresses* considers the archive as a multiplex 'system of propagation' built upon the logic of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's (1988:21) notion of the rhizome[3] as it offers multifarious orientations in motion to engage new possibilities for the narration of the self through its transgressive power. Farber and Jorgensen (2017:vi) therefore apply the archive in this volume as

> a range of multi-faceted, subtly nuanced, often disputed, differentiated yet interwoven definitions, conceptualisations and meanings, within each of which alliances and connectivities may be discerned.

The latter yields subversive potential, bolstered by creative practice, for the reading and interpretation of the institutionalised archive. It is here, in the disruption of these reservoirs of supposed objective records, that *Critical Addresses* offers its insight and positions itself as valuable scholarly work that fills a significant void of literature in local discourse.

Critical Addresses is organised into four thematically 'interwoven' sections to promote dialogue between the writers 'to allow for a dynamic interplay between a plurality of addresses … and the archive under discussion' (Farber & Jorgensen 2017:vii). The first of these, 'The (im)materiality of the archive', renders three addresses that consider the archive as 'emerg[ing] in fragments, regions, and levels' (Foucault 1972 [1969]:130). The opening chapter orients the volume's emphasis on notions of partiality and fluidity through Maureen de Jager's visceral essay. 'Proposal for THE BOOK OF HOLES' offers an immersive experience of the "holes" found in 'history, in memory, in archival reserves, in the very language through which the traumas of the past are articulated' to yield a meaningful, subjective experience of the past (De Jager 2017:3). Divided into two parts, De Jager masterfully guides the reader through 'Part A: 'Artefact'' of the essay by offering an illustrative account of her confrontation with a plain solander box. The author describes the contents of the box (white cotton gloves, an ornate paper knife and a hardcover book), the opening of the book with its uncut pages that require slicing open to disclose 172 sequential colour photographs that document a pile of official documents bearing holes made for binding the pages together with treasury tags (Figure 2). These seemingly non-descript documents depicted by the author's photographs reveal fragments of its

FIGURE **Nº 2** ‹

Maureen de Jager, *Record WO 32/8061* (2a) detail (2016). Digital photograph, 30.48 x 40.64 cm. Image courtesy Maureen de Jager.

possible contents through the visible words, "refugee camps" and "confidential". This, along with the sense of violence and urgency conveyed by the metaphors De Jager invokes, allude to the incompleteness of archives and the traumas these attempt to elide. 'Part B: 'Essay'' is offered alongside the artefact and attempts to ruminate on the occurrence of holes 'as a metaphor of the gaps, slippages, exclusions, inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the archive itself' (Farber & Jorgensen 2017:vii).

Say Burgin continues De Jager's ideas in ''Evok[ing] the whole': re-thinking archival exclusions' by drawing attention to the 'gaps' or 'silences' evident in archives. The author contemplates how omissions could be re-deployed to attend to inequality, with particular reference to race, ethnicity and gender, produced through recording practices. Burgin references the London-based archival platform, Autograph ABP and its curatorial research project, *The missing chapter*. The project scoured British archives to locate photographs (previously inaccessible or not seen) that speak to the black experience in Britain before 1945. The chapter also considers the work of Vanley Burke who employs a documentary format to comment on black lives in Britain through his photographs.

Kent Williams (2017:29) explores postapartheid archiving practices' inability to 'challenge apartheid master narratives sufficiently'. 'Uncritical optimism: archive, access and dialogue in a new democratic South Africa' investigates the inequalities and silences that practices of, what Williams (2017:29) names 'uncritical optimism', maintain through his consideration of lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender, intersex, queer (LGBTI+) visual activist Zanele Muholi's involvement with the Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action (GALA) archive (Williams 2017:29). Williams argues that the collaboration between Muholi and GALA serves as an example of the opportunities for engagement opened up by the gaps evident in the archive to render a space where social transformation and dialogue may be possible.

The second section of the volume, 'Public intimacies, personal exposures', presents two chapters that evoke the complex engagement between public and private realms with particular reference to archives produced by lens-based technologies. Karin Preller surveys personal photographic archives of family albums and home-video stills, transformed into the painterly records of her photorealist canvases, to set-up a practice-led investigation of memory and nostalgia (Figure 3). Growing up during the apartheid period in South Africa, 'Inscribing 'whiteness' in paint: engaging a personal archive' considers the artist's 'uncomfortable complicities and a "charmed life"' recorded 'disquietly between the painted and photographic layers' of her intricate artworks (Preller 2017:43). There is a sense of unease that prevails as she excavates her archive to narrate the whiteness of her identity in-between memories retrieved and those unrecorded or lost. For Preller, the curation of her artworks alongside an artist such as Santo Mofokeng in the exhibition *Past imperfect // future present* (2015, FADA Gallery, Johannesburg) – the juxtaposition of her paintings alongside other histories and knowledge systems – propels her private struggles into the public domain. For the artist, this does not merely uncover her personal memories but also amplifies her malaise and the complex positioning of her personal narrative.

In a similar vein, albeit less subjective, Ernst van der Wal considers how personal photographs produced for the family album or display in the home narrates the self. 'Personal photographic archives and the recollection of trans masculinities' assess, through the archives of three transgender men, how the roles of author, archivist and photographer as part of the action of recording the self photographically negotiate their identities – a 'creative' and 'transformative' act which Van der Wal (2017:57) views as a means to make visible transgender masculinities. The chapter focuses on the ability of the visual medium of photography to signal to others both that which exist and that which the photographer wishes to invoke. These archives therefore successfully intersect the public and the private and offer the transformation of subjects through their ability to 'narrate and visualise a particular version of self into being' (Van der Wal 2017:68).

FIGURE **Nº 3**

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Karin Preller, *Chinese restaurant, 1970* (2014). Oil on canvas, 130 x 112 cm (framed). Private collection. Image courtesy of Karin Preller.

'Photographies, complicities and possibilities' introduces the third section and draws attention to the faculties of lens-based media employed by creative practitioners to simultaneously reinforce and counter archives of power. Here, photography and its redeployment offer an ambiguous position: the medium is complicit in the creation of institutionalised archives through its documentary ability, but could also yield possibilities for transformation through offering a counter-argument. In 'Unseaming images: the limits and possibilities for reconfiguring albums of complicity', Heidi Grunebaum explores her sense of complicity in apartheid South Africa as read through the counter-archival

strategy employed in the process of co-authoring the documentary film, *The village under the forest* (2013), alongside Mark J Kaplan. The film offers a personal meditation from the Jewish diaspora through the exploration of the hidden ruins of the Palestinian village of Lubya buried under the carefully cultivated South Africa Forest. While the film comprises archival footage and stills drawn from a range of film and photographic archives (of which some were sourced from personal albums), Grunebaum's personal travel snapshots serve as the impetus for this chapter. The author's personal archive was populated with photos taken during visits made to Israel during the 1980s at the height of the apartheid era in South Africa. These snapshots are editorially 'unseamed' in the film – a montage of snapshots, footage and voice-overs with Palestinians – to narrate Grunebaum's (2017:73-74) 'affiliation with Israel and its transnational promise to non-Israeli Jewish people to belong to its ethnic polity'. It is through the unravelling and repurposing of these travel snapshots that the author reads her archive as 'an album of complicity', despite the fact that South Africa does not feature in the film directly (Grunebaum 2017:74). To this end, this chapter explores the limits and possibilities of the 're-constellation' of these travel photographs through counter-archival strategies.

Photography's dubious investment in upholding and dismantling archives of power is probed in 'Confounded subjectivities and 'fundamental ambiguities': Ayana V Jackson's performance of colonial-era photographic subject in the Archival impulse exhibition'. Shashi Cullinan Cook (2017:85) considers two of the African-American artist Ayana V Jackson's artworks (Figure 4) which, she argues, deploy 'archives as sites of construction rather than excavation'. These artworks, displayed as part of the exhibition *Archival impulse* (2013, Gallery MOMO, Johannesburg), repetitively positions the artist's body in high-definition photographic montages premised on colonial-era photography representing black subjects. Cullinan Cook (2017:85) maintains that these representations of the self run the risk of compounding the 'lack of subjectivity that is historically associated with representations of the naked black female body'. The chapter also explores the possibilities of the seductive nature of Jackson's images as it intersects with her unyielding gaze and how these might construe new possibilities for the representation of black female identities.

The commodification of the colonial archive forms the premise of Annemi Conradi's contribution, 'Colonial specimen / neocolonial chic: commodification of archival portraits in South African textile design'. Contemplating a range of fabrics by the South African textile company Design Team, Conradi (2017:99) investigates the 'appropriation and commodification of colonial photographic portraits' gleaned from the archival project *Surviving the lens, photographic studies of South and East African people, 1870-1920* (2001-2002). It is argued that the commodification of these colonial photographic portraits – 'cannibalism' and 'plunder' – masks and mythologises history – a strategy that reifies difference and highlights otherness (Conradi 2017:105).

Shifting the focus to Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, Alexander Opper (2017:111) advocates the potential of photography to institute a counter-archive to disrupt the instrumentalised 'framing of the official archive of city-making'. Working from a practice-led position, Opper's photographic records document official forced removals in and around the city of Abidjan – an archive employed to produce a video projected onto a 'billboard-like object' (Opper 2017:112). 'Derrière les panneux publicitaires / Behind the billboards: deconstructing photography's instrumentalisation and potential for un(building) Abidjan' considers the dual function of the photographic medium as both complicit (through its ready-made application of desirable imagery that aids the erasure of forced removals) and defiant (through the indexical images of obliterated informal settlements) in its archival impulse. The dual function of photography is explored through the interplay between theory and practice for its potential to construct 'comfortable archives of power' and to deconstruct these through counter-archival practices.

In the final thematic section, 'Affective encounters', authors meditate on the subjective experiences that emanate from engaging with archives. These intimate ruminations demonstrate the transformative possibilities for new meaning that could derive from a subjective reading of archives of power and aptly serves as a concluding section for the volume. 'Ephemeral and site-specific encounters with the Freud Museum (London): Penny Siopis's *Three essays on shame* (2005)' deliberates Yvette Greslé's subjective navigation of the archival space as a historical source and site of inquiry. The author narrates her retrospective encounter with Penny Siopis's site-specific exhibition, *Three essays on shame* (2005, Freud Museum, London) curated by Jennifer Law. Through her intentionally staged 'subjective encounter', Greslé (2017:125) meditates on her positionality regarding histories of apartheid as a white South African woman. Working through affective engagement with the archives proffered by the Freud Museum and Siopis respectively, the author suggests that 'simultaneously imaginative and critical engagement' opens up a possibility to disrupt conventional thinking and institutionalised knowledge formations.

Similarly, in a visceral narration of her encounter with the Death in Detention files in the Historical Papers Archive at the University of the Witwatersrand, Ruth Lipschitz (2017:139) recounts the 'archival aftershock' of her experience. 'Archival aftershock: On spectral justice, non-criminal death and infinite responsibility' considers this archive not merely for the epistemological knowledge it presents – the names of prisoners held during the apartheid era and the official causes of their "accidental" deaths – but the 'bodily and psychic' violence that emanates from such institutionalised statements in their efforts to conceal "truth" (Lipschitz 2017:139). Lipschitz (2017:140), drawing on Derrida (1994), 'write[s] with the ghosts that haunt[s] [her]' to consider the archive as she engages with notions of alterity, justice and responsibility.

Equally poignant is Same Mduli's investigation of justice in the work of the Johannesburg-based artist Michelle Moraneng. 'Curating the archive: rhythms of memory and justice in the video work of Michelle Moraneng' contemplates the artist's utilisation of the archive in the 'restitution for loss of land' (Mdluli 2017:151). Mdluli (2017:152) contemplates Monareng's affective encounter with the archive as a form of artistic expression that is restorative in its articulation of the video medium through 'remembering, excavating and recording'. Also, the author reads the video work, *Removal to radium* (2003), as a 'visual metaphor for restitution' as the artist relays her narrative through her grandfather's archive. Here, while memory is presented through the subjective accounts of Moraneng's grandfather and her emotive artwork, Mdluli considers the actualisation of justice possible through the archive as evidence.

Critical addresses is exceptional beyond the distinguished essays of its editors and contributors. Editorially, the volume offers a representative exploration of creative and critical approaches to the convention of the archive – an aspect enhanced by its thematic organisation. The book also offers well-researched insight of current debates relating to the archival impulse while offering a localised consideration of contemporary visual art practice in South Africa.

Notes

1. The original title, *Mal d'archive: une impression Freudienne*, was published in 1995 following a series of lectures Derrida presented in 1994.

2. The platform also extended to an exhibition, *Past imperfect // Future* present hosted in 2015 by the FADA Gallery, Johannesburg.

3. The rhizome is explored by Deleuze and Guattari's (1988:6-13) as a transgressive element to which they attribute six organising principles: connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, 'a signifying rupture', cartography and decalcomania. The term is defined as an entity having no end and no beginning, but as existing always in the middle and between things (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:6). Rhizomes embody 'a centred, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system' and are related to all manner of becomings, in other words, they open the potential for multiple subject positions in which the self can be asserted (Deleuze & Guattari 1988:21).

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