

The Archive in Contemporary Art: a literature review

Louise Boscacci ^a

^a School of the Arts, English and Media, University of Wollongong,
Northfields Avenue, Wollongong NSW 2522, Australia.

Email: ljb850@uowmail.edu.au

Abstract

The will to archive continues to be a powerful impulse in contemporary culture (Featherstone 2006). This literature review critically reviews and reflects on literature on the topic of the Archive and the engagement of contemporary artists with ideas about archives and archive-making. A refrain heard in the course of this review was a contemporary preoccupation with memory, particularly with the advent of a possible new age of forgetting as global digital connectivity promotes an unprecedented externalisation of personal and social memory into the virtual memory spaces of the Internet. Selective artistic responses entering and exploring this site of ephemeral potential and emergent creativity are introduced.

Keywords: Archive, contemporary art, forgetting, counter-archive, material trace, sound archive, ephemerality

1. An Impulse to Archive

One of the defining characteristics of the modern era has been the increasing significance given to the archives as the means by which historical knowledge and forms of remembrance are accumulated, stored and retrieved (Merewether 2006). The will to archive continues to be a powerful impulse in contemporary culture (Featherstone 2006). This literature review summarises and critically reviews literature on the topic of the Archive and the engagement of contemporary artists with ideas about archives and archive-making. Particular focus is given to art practices from the past decade. These encompass two-dimensional and three-dimensional disciplines and genres, principally photography, mixed media installation, assemblage, objects and sound works. Artists-as-archivists is one subtopic that will be given priority in the broader topic review. This sources definitions and concepts from disciplines where salient literature pertains, including cultural history, art theory and philosophy, art criticism and review, and the practices/ texts of contemporary artists. Whilst most literature relates to British, American and European artists, several Australian artists who use or engage with the archives in different ways are also considered here.

The review was engendered by a creative-critical investigation of an intergenerational, familial collection of photographs and pictorial postcards accrued and kept safe for more than a century. In entering this affective cache, however, I had yet to critically reflect on the possible meanings, histories of thought or treatment of the subject of the archive in the broader field of the contemporary visual arts. To this extent,

I suggest the choice of literature to review was influenced by my unfolding inquiry, as well as an expanded answer to the 'call of the archival' at a juncture in practice-led research and composition.¹

2. Derrida's Fever

A useful place to start in the labyrinth of literature on the archives is philosopher and theorist Derrida's (1996) account 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression' which began with an excavation of the origin and earliest meanings of the word 'archive'. The word is derived from the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, who ruled the Greek city states. Derrida observed that the concept of the archive shelters in itself the memory of the name *arkhé* (p 2) and derived two meanings relevant to the latter: the 'commencement' and the 'commandment'. (Derrida (1996) went further though, to propose that the word archive also 'shelters' itself from this memory which it shelters, in that it also forgets it). Thus, the archons who housed the documents and legal records of the city state's operations, were the first of all the documents' guardians, and had the power to interpret the archives. Modern cultural historians define the archive as a place in which public records are kept (Steedman 2002; Velody 1998). Steedman (2002) contends that the archive, in a proper and expanded definition, includes the system of recording (listing), storage and retrieval, and that modern English and French archives instituted since the late eighteenth century had the right of public access simultaneously ascribed to them. Traditionally, as Spieker (2008) summarised, the archives served a legal function, and over time changed from legal depositories to being institutions of historical research, the storehouse for material from which national memories were constructed (Featherstone 2006). By the end of the nineteenth century, the archive had morphed into a hybrid institution based in public administration and historical research alike: the Janus head of the archives (Spieker 2008).

Derrida's meditation on the roots and the idea of the archive was originally delivered as part of a paper to an international colloquium entitled "Memory: the Question of Archives" (Derrida 1996). English cultural historian Steedman (2002) observed that 'the archival turn' (an increased interest in the archives in Western culture in the second half of the twentieth century) as suggested by Derrida was well underway by 1994, and that his 'Archive Fever' was less about the archives than an exploration of Sigmund Freud's psycho-analytic concepts, particularly that related to the nature of memory.² She notes that the philosopher Michel Foucault had raised the question of the archive as early as the 1960's, defining the archive as the system that establishes statements as events and things (Foucault 1969 in Steedman 2002). For Derrida, the archive stands in for the idea of what can and cannot be said (a form or symbol of state power). Thus, several themes were suggested: the relationship between the archive and power (inhering in its historical roots), the archive and knowledge/ truth, and a tangled relationship between the archives, memory and forgetting.

Arguably, these themes subsequently influenced contemporary curators and artists who have engaged with the archive or the making of personal archives from the late 1990's through the first decade of the twenty-first century just ended (Foster 2004; Merewether 2006; Maimon 2008). A new politics of the

¹This review was catalysed during a PhD research project, 'The Trace of an Affective Object Encounter', in the School of the Arts, English and Media, University of Wollongong, Australia, 2012-2015.

²Freud's metaphor of the *Wunderblock* - the mystic writing pad - is discussed by Derrida in this text, making links between Memory and writing (Steedman 2002). In turn, it is suggested that this forged a powerful metaphor of the archive as the processes of collecting traces of the past and forgetting them (*ibid.*, p 7).

archive was initiated (Steedman 2002). The "fever" or sickness referred to by Derrida, as Steedman (2002) suggests, is to do with the establishment of state power as well as the feverish desire - a kind of sickness - for the archive: not so much as to enter it, as to possess it, for it to be there in the first place. The archive fever - the desire for the archive - is the desire to find or locate or possess the moment of origin or the beginnings of things. Derrida uses Freud's psychoanalytic concept that the compulsion to repeat - to recollect/ re-collect in memory - represents the drive towards death. The desire to make an archive in the first place, then, is to want to repeat; the fever, the sickness of the archive is a form of this death drive (Steedman 2002; Merewether 2006). One other thematic thread is worth highlighting here: the association between an archive and a house or domestic place of keeping in the earliest roots of the word via the *arkheion* (Velody 1998, Steedman 2002). Indeed, Derrida's 'Archive Fever' was created in a specific context - the family house and extensive object collections of Freud remaining in his former home turned public museum (Derrida 1996).

3. Contemporary Contingencies

The archive, Spieker (2008) contends, formed a crucible of twentieth century modernism, closely linked to evolving attitudes toward contingent time in both science and art. His consideration of archivally-driven art in relation to changing media technologies over the course of the century, from the typewriter, the telephone, the telegraph and film connects artistic interest in the archive to emerging interest in modern visuality, whereby the avant garde - Dadists, Constructivist and Surrealists - used the nineteenth century idea of the archive as a laboratory for experimental inquiries into the nature of vision and its relation to time. As Enwezor (2007 in Maimon 2008) noted, interest in the critical logic of the archive was also prevalent in postmodern art, and that the concept of the archive in the philosophical work of Michel Foucault (1972), provided the theoretical ground for the postmodern critique of authorship and originality.

The focus at hand, however, is on the contemporary. That there is a powerful 'archival impulse' also at play in contemporary visual art was noted by art historian and theorist Foster (2004).³Spieker (2008, in Nygard & Sonseteby 2009) points out that within the artistic community, there seems to be little consensus as to what an archive is, how it might be distinguished from other types of artists' collections, and contends that archives do not record experience so much as its absence. Contemporary art curator Merewether (2006) contextualised the ways in which concepts of the archive have been defined, examined, contested and re-invented by artists and cultural observers (curators, critics, theorists) from the early twentieth century to the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first. In what is a form of archive-making itself in the selection and compilation of texts from artist statements (however poetic or obtuse), critical reviews, and theoretical overviews into a print anthology, four main themes of engagement were proposed: Traces, Inscriptions, Contestations and Retravings (Merewether 2006). It is evident that contemporary artists have used, critiqued and re-interpreted existing archives, as well as become archivists themselves - making new archives as alternative or counter-archives or create personal collections that reference the archive as a repository of memory and knowledge. The literature is dense, the ways are multiple and the different stresses placed by writers on the art works or art practices arguably reflect their own interests and biases on this topic. Of most interest and relevance to this review are contemporary artists as archive makers. Artists make own collections for a plurality of intentions (Foster 2004; Merewether 2006; Gibbons 2007). Foster (2004) has also suggested that archives made by artists as a gesture of alternative knowledge or counter-memory might be described as an anarchival impulse. Counter-archives (and counter-monuments) are

³Foster also uses the term to differentiate the motivations of contemporary artists (late 1990's and 2000's) from those of the 1970's and 1980's described by art critic and historian Owens (1980) as 'an allegorical impulse'.

collections of that which has been silenced or buried. Here also, practices of artists living in or investigating the histories of contemporary post-colonial nations predominate (Foster 2004).

All archives are subjective and partial constructions that raise questions about the adequacy, propriety and truthfulness of the accumulated materials and objects (Velody 1998). Playful critique of the exactitude - the visual truth - of the photographic trace is one vivid strand of contemporary archive art (Maimon 2008; Hobbs 1998; McGurren 2010; Gibbons 2007; Rizk 2008; Avgikos 2008). The uncertain authority and authenticity of an archive is both critiqued and celebrated by the visual archives-installations of French installation artist Christian Boltanski (Velody 1998; Hobbs 1998; McGurren 2010) and the English artist Tacita Dean (Maimon 2008; Iversen 2010). A conflation of the personal and historical dimensions of the archive is one method by which Boltanski's oeuvre problematizes its authority (Hobbs 1998). For example, Boltanski's early works performed rites of loss and recovery: 'Search for and Presentation of Everything that remains of my Childhood, 1944-1950' (1969) collected and presented a vast collection of photographs and photographs of objects pertaining to early childhood - an archive of recovered identity. However, 'relics' assembled in this recovery included fakes (a new shirt, a recently cut lock of hair) and fake photographs - not of Boltanski at all. This planting of fakes in the archive revealed the potential inauthenticity of not only the personal archive but also the authority/ truth of the photograph, shown to be more icon than document (Hobbs 1998). In Boltanski's most recent installation for Monumenta 2010, 'Personnes' 2010, no photographs were used. Archival traces of 'pastness' included worn pieces of clothing (analogous to photographs in an album), sampled squares of cloth (almost 'snap shots' of a person) and human heartbeats. A companion project "Archives du coeur" (2010) invited viewers to make and donate recordings of their heartbeats in a nearby room. For what is an ongoing archival project, these are now stored in a sound library on uninhabited Teshima Island in Japan. These recordings, like photographs, are another re-presentation of a posthumous existence (McGurren 2010), an archive of human transience. In the British artist Tacita Dean's work Floh (2000) a framed collection of family photographs were in fact found objects collected from flea markets in Europe and the USA, then enlarged, grouped and framed as art photography. What might be interpreted as personal family history was a constructed fiction using the archive of the photographic trace. While the photograph archives the non-reproducible present, a non-replaceable place (Derrida 2010), fictional narratives of memory and history may be easily created.

4. Remembering ... Forgetting ... Re-presenting

The archive, memory and forgetting is a recurring theme explored in a plurality of ways in contemporary archive art (Green 2002 in Merewether 2006; Gibbons 2007; Maimon 2008; Avgikos 2008). Memory as an analysis of forgetting was explicitly linked in the archive-making book projects of the Provoke and Vivo groups of avant-garde photographers in post-war 1950's Japan (Merewether 2002 in Merewether 2006). In post-nuclear Nagasaki, a place where all pre-existing material archives had been atomised, the place itself became the archive, and the repository of history was in the survivors, remnants and relics of the living that surrounded them. They used the book form as a counter-archival practice with which to document the silence - from media and state - in the aftermath of the war and the effects of new industrialisation. The blast scars on faces and across place became a form of citation, and by repetition - rephotographing for years afterwards - the archive remained in the present, or the present progressing time. The new archive and its meaning was made out of scraps and traces: photographs badly printed, blotched and scarred by chemicals and scratched by lines across its surface, like the place, the faces and bodies (Merewether 2002 in Merewether 2006). As curator of the exhibition 'Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art', Enwezor (2007, in Maimon 2008) argues that the critique of the archive in recent artistic production has shifted from the museum and aesthetic ideas about authenticity and autonomy (which

dominated postmodern practices) to concerns about art's relationship to historical reflections of the past, and the active use of historical documents and photographs by artists to negotiate the zone between trauma and public memory. A prominent example of the latter is Hans-Peter Feldmann's wall installation of 117 front pages collected from international newspapers published a day after the destruction of the 2001 World Trade Centre in New York. His new archive selectively assembled and displayed the plurality of interpretations in different countries of the same traumatic event; the affective power of the visual repetition of photographs taken at the time of destruction added to the exposed contingency of these cultural records (Maimon 2008; Avgikos 2008).

That the archive is not one and the same as forms of remembrance, or as history, is a refrain of consensus in the recent literature across disciplines surveyed here (Derrida 1996; Steedman 2002; Merewether 2006; Gibbons, 2007). Indeed, how traces - the residual marks or index left behind by events or experiences - are perceived and understood is posited as a key theme in the relation between art and the archive (Merewether 2006). Traces are un-covered and re-presented in the mixed-media installation practice of Tasmanian Julie Gough who researches archives of colonial government records, newspaper accounts, images and artefacts from the first European contacts of the 18th century to the present day. As well she has been described as an obsessive collector of other found objects especially those associated with her Tasmanian Aboriginal ancestry: shells, birds, postcards, green things, kitchen tools, souvenirs from the 1950s, kelp, cuttlefish, sticks of tea-tree and books with the word "black" in the title (Ozolins 2007). These new archives re-presented as installed spaces are concerned with reconfiguring and describing an alternative version of the past that questions the authority and veracity of official recorded history (Ozolins 2007; Boyce et al 2011). Green (2002 in Merewether 2006) writes of looking for the absences, lacunae, holes in the archives to apprehend what is not said or recorded, and asks what role chance might play in what is remembered and what is archived as memory, both personal and cultural.⁴

Little discussed in the literature have been radical material translations or the transformations of archival content such as paper-based documents and photographic images in the creation of alternative or new types of archives. By this is meant the rendering in a material or format that is radically different to the original. In most of the archive art discussed, photography, installation, re-assemblage formats and film predominate. But there are a small number of examples referred to in the literature on ceramics artists, for example, who have engaged with archival material or create new archives in various ways. English artist Neil Brownsword collects the shards and remnants of the once-thriving but now almost extinct ceramics industry in Staffordshire by combing abandoned factories and literally digging in his own backyard as many house foundations were built on factory discards (Adamson 2008, Stewart 2010). He sources the material failures found on factory floors, as well as traces of making that he deems carry - a form of absence in the present - the centuries of labour and tacit knowledge now being lost over the last twenty years of factory closures in his home region. These found material traces of a social and creative past, some of which are reworked and refired by Brownsword are assembled in large scale installations that evoke industrial wastelands (Adamson 2008; Stewart 2010); part archaeological recovery, his practice materially witnesses and records social and creative loss, as well as refusing to forget what is being forgotten. Conceptual links

⁴In relation to the archive and memory, resonance is heard here with Ricoeur's (2004) comprehensive work on memory, history and forgetting, in particular the emerging consensus that memory is more easily retained if physically located in a locality or site.

'Retracing one's steps' in minds-eye of thinking is a literal and metaphorical relocating of the cortical trace/s that constitute stored memory (Ricoeur *ibid.*).

between the physical durability of vitrified clay (as evidenced by the archaeological persistence of clay objects) and archival possibilities have been articulated and used by the present author to materially archive selective transience and present-day accelerations of ecological loss. This has been a continuum in practice over the past decade and has taken prominence as a larger exploratory site in most recent practice (Ballard 2008; Jones 2010).⁵ Institutional archival collections of documents have also been used by Australian ceramicist Mel Robson who sampled a library heritage collection on local women's history; selected narratives about female labour and the everyday were then printed onto newly rendered vessel forms that referenced the largely invisible daily cycle of domestic work (Ostling 2007).

5. The Digital and the Ephemeral

Literature (in the conventional forms of publication) is still scant on contemporary artists' engagement with the realm of the digital archive - the vast repositories of data being stored as data files and on the Internet. Featherstone (2006) notes that the digital archive moves the concept of the archive as a physical place that stores records to that of the archive as a virtual site facilitating immediate transfer and movement of data. As such, it provides a fluid and dynamic archival space in which the topology of documents can be reconfigured again and again; paradoxically, the decentred digital archive appears to cut through many of the themes found in contemporary art critiques of the archive discussed above. Surveying the creative potential of the interdisciplinary digital archive, Arthurs (2008) notes the emerging democratisation of historical narrative making, particularly via experimental 'mashups' - websites that combine content from several different sources (photographs, accounts and testimonies, maps) which can be reconfigured into an integrated experience at any point in time by an interactive participant. In relation to the contemporary art field, Gibbons (2007) refers to the potential for a new memory culture - which might be called emergent memory - created by webs of multi-linear and serendipitous interconnections of data. Of relevance to the archive, she asserts that digital technologies offer reminders of the fluidity and instability of memory, and that although predicated on the past, memory is always constructed in the present. It is worth noting, however, that Gibbons' (2007) concluding thoughts on contemporary art and memory, including the archival practices, focus on forgetting as a fruitful space for new aesthetic inquiry; an echo of Huyssen's (1995) allusion to a culture of amnesia and the temporal space of twilight as a metaphor for the fleeting, yet marvellous zone between remembering and forgetting.

In the peripheral vision of the literature on the archives and the contemporary visual arts lies the medium - the materials of its making. Whilst memory surfaces repeatedly in artist's concerns, alongside the contingent veracity of the trace, overwhelmingly the carriers of the new archives made by artists are transitory or ephemeral - whether photograph, text on paper, film, and even the virtual data file. To the extent that this is part of aesthetic intent - the archive returns to dust and forgetting allows new remembrance - is unclear in many cases; Boltanski is one of the few artists in this field who is now explicitly creating new archives of the ephemeral with his collected recordings of human heartbeats. It is curious that contemporary conversation with the age of the Greek archons who housed the earliest archives (by definition) in their domestic milieu is most commonly conducted through the archaeological remnants of fired clay objects. Even the shards of pots (ostraca) once used like scraps of paper to inscribe everyday notes and records still carry these traces of the prosaic and the poetic into the present day via museum object collections. The long-

⁵For example, porcelain forms engraved with the list of threatened Australian fauna over the past 240 years of European

colonisation as part of a ceramic archiving project begun in 2005, and described as instalments of an austral time capsule (Ballard 2008; Boscacci 2008,2010).

term material memory of vitrified clay is by its physical nature a long-term archiver of the everyday and the hyper-local in a wider cultural worlding. I suggest that this perceived lacuna (after Green 2002) opens a space for original contributions to the topic of both the archives and memory/ remembering and forgetting. Indeed, a refrain heard in the course of researching the literature on the topic of the archive was the contemporary preoccupation with memory in Western culture, particularly with a possible new age of forgetting as global digital connectivity promotes an unprecedented externalisation of personal and social memory into the virtual memory spaces of the Internet.

References

- Adamson, G.(2008).Neil Brownsword: Up from the Ashes.*Ceramics, Art and Perception*, 73, 67-70.
- Arthur, P.(2008).The Digital Archive as interdisciplinary creative resource. *reCollections: Journal of the National Museum of Australia*, 3(1),33-50.
- Avgikos, J. (2008). Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art. *ArtforumInternational*, 46(8), 364.
- Ballard, B.(2008). Louise Boscacci: Form and Idea.*Ceramics: Art and Perception*, 74(4), 41-45.
- Barthes, R.(2010). *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*(R. Howard, Trans.).New York, NY: Hill & Wang.
- Boscacci, L.(2008). Hold, Trace, Listen.*Australian Ceramic StoriesForum*. Dubbo Regional Gallery, New South Wales [12 April 2008]. Artist Lecture. Unpublished: the Artist.
- Boscacci, L.(2010). New Empiricists. *Clay Energy Symposium*, Gulgong, Australia (29 April 2010). Artist Lecture. Unpublished: the Artist.
- Boyce, J., Gough, J.& Ozolins, B.(2011). *Julie Gough*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.
- Derrida, J.(1998). *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (2nd edn., E. Prenowitz, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1995)
- Derrida, J.(2010).*Copy, Archive, Signature: A Conversation on Photography*. (G.Richter, Ed., & J Fort, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Enwezor, O.(2007). Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art. Exhibition catalogue, International Centre of Photography, New York. In Maimon, V. (2008), *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, *CAA Reviews*, 4/21/2008, 1- 3. New York, NY: College Art Association Inc.
- Featherstone, M.(2006). Archive. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23(2-3), 591-596.
<http://tcs.sagepub.com/content/23/2-3/591>
- Foster, H.(2004). An Archival Impulse. *October* 110 (Autumn), 3-22. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3397555>
- Foucault, M. (1972). *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (2nd edn., A Smith, Trans.). London: Tavistock.
- Gibbons, J. (2007). *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- Green, R.(2002). Survival: Ruminations on Archival Lacunae. In C. Merewether (Ed.), (2006), *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art* (pp. 49-55).London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.
- Hobbs, R.(1998). Boltanski's visual archives. *History of the Human sciences*, 11(4), 21-140.
<http://hhs.sagepub.com.ezproxy.uow.edu.au/content/11/4/121>

- Huysen, A.(1995).*Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Iversen, M. (Ed.).(2010). *Chance: Documents of Contemporary Art*. London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.
- Jones, J.(2010). Post-pastoral Ceramics: A Distinctive Ecological Language. *The International Journal of Arts in Society*, 4(5), 429-436.
- Maimon, V. (2008). Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art. *CAA Reviews*, 4/21/2008: 1-3. New York, NY: College Art Association Inc.
- McGurren, D. (2010). Becoming mythical: Existence and Representation in the Work of Christian Boltanski. *Afterimage*, 38(1),9-13.
- Merewether, C. (2002). A Language to Come: Japanese Photography After the Event. In C. Merewether (Ed.), (2006), *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art* (pp. 121- 138). London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.
- Merewether, C. (Ed.).(2006). *The Archive: Documents of Contemporary Art*. London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge MA: The MIT Press.
- Nygaard, T., & Sonstebj, A. (2009). Artist as Archivist. *Afterimage*, 37(1), 48. Art & Architecture Complete, EBSCOhost.
- Ostling, S.(2007). Inspiration from the Archive: Recent Work of Mel Robson. *Ceramics, Art and Perception*,69 (November), 13-17.
- Owens, C.(1980). The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism.*October*, 12 (Spring), 67-86. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778575>
- Ozolins, B.(2007). Truth, history and transformation in the work of Richard Flanagan, Julie Gough, Anne Ferran and Henry Savery. *Revelation: symposium 26-27 March 2007*, Tasmanian School of Art, University of Tasmania. <http://eprints.utas.edu.au/4786/1/4786.pdf>
- Ricoeur, P. (2004). *Memory, History and Forgetting* (K. Blamey&D. Paellauer, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rizk, M. (2010). The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy. *Technology and Culture*, 51(3), 773- 775. <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/tech/summary/v051/51.3.rizk.html>
- Spieker, S. (2008). *The Big Archive: Art From Bureaucracy*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Steedman, C.(2002). *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Stewart, M. (2010). The First British Ceramics Biennial. *Ceramics, Art and Perception*, 79:106- 108.
- Velody, I. (1998). The archive and the human sciences: notes towards a theory of the archive. *History of the Human Sciences*, 11(1), 1-16. <http://hhs.sagepub.com/content/11/4/1>