

Archive in Flux: A Diffused Narrative of Material and Geo-History

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Abstract. Emerging from a socio-political urgency resultant from the current volatile situation of world politics, this article brings to the fore the age-old question of *what an archive is*. Spanning through the intellectual history of *arkheion* and the hegemonic structure of a daunting, cohesive building that reflects the ideologies of a singular authoritarian power that created it, this article explores the parallel structures of power that exist within the archival structure, at the same time rendering its structure and being rendered by it. The shift from the unidimensional power positions to this multiplicity of exchanges that make the archival structure fluid will be studied through certain eminent contemporary archival art practices.

This article proposes a *topology* of the archive, as a departure from studying the archive as a location, a container. The archival art practices, in this schema, are neither an external element to the archive nor a separate practice gaining meaning in discourses, but an essential element in the horizons of what the archives enact in their multiplicity. In doing so, this article will strive towards an indeterminacy of the structure of the archive, where it functions neither as a mere integration of a determinate matter in the archive discourse nor as a domiciliation of the hitherto unknown or unacknowledged documents in a new container like a museum. Leaving the discourse-oriented and material-oriented path, the action of *doing* will be discussed as the determinate factor behind the existence of the archive. Hence, the search for the answer to the question initially introduced, *what an archive is*, may only be contemplated by focusing on *how archives function*, as the function will be explored further as the key to its creation and sustenance.

Keywords: Archive; Photography; Power; Intra-action; Archival art practice; History; Flux.

[es] Archivo en flujo: una narrativa difusa de material y geohistoria

Resumen. Este artículo aborda el viejo problema de *qué es un archivo*, desde la urgencia sociopolítica resultante de la volátil situación de la política mundial. Recorriendo la historia intelectual del *arkheion* y la estructura hegemónica de lo que constituye un edificio imponente y cohesionado, que refleja las ideologías del particular poder autoritario que lo creó, este artículo explora las relaciones paralelas de poder que existen dentro de la estructura del archivo, las cuales dictan dicha estructura y al mismo tiempo son dictadas por ella. El desplazamiento desde una posición de poder unidimensional a esta pluralidad de intercambios que hacen que la estructura archivística sea fluida se estudiará a través de ciertas prácticas artísticas archivísticas contemporáneas y emblemáticas.

Este artículo propone una *topología* del archivo a partir del estudio del archivo como ubicación y contenedor. Conforme a este esquema, las prácticas artísticas archivísticas no son un elemento externo al archivo ni una práctica separada que adquiera sentido en los discursos, sino un elemento esencial en el horizonte de lo que los archivos representan en su multiplicidad. De este modo, este artículo se propone

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avanzar hacia una indeterminación de la estructura del archivo. No se trata con ello de llevar a cabo la mera integración de una materia determinada en el discurso del archivo, ni tampoco de proponer una domiciliación de los documentos hasta ahora desconocidos o no reconocidos en un nuevo receptáculo, como sería el museo. Abandonando la perspectiva orientada hacia el discurso y lo material, se argumentará que el factor determinante en la existencia del archivo es el acto de «hacer». Por lo tanto, la búsqueda de la respuesta a la pregunta inicial, *qué es un archivo*, sólo puede considerarse centrándose en *cómo funcionan los archivos*. Aquí, dicho funcionamiento se explorará a fondo como la clave de su creación y mantenimiento.

Palabras clave: archivo; fotografía; poder; Intra-acción; práctica de arte de archivo; historia; flujo.

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1. From *Arkheion* to Flux: Journey of the Archival Structure

Palayeshgah (Refinery)—flashing past windows, petrol tankers trembling the buildings—the morning air filled with the smell of petrol. The sun, though on the horizon, is blazing down on the people. Boxes are being pulled on the floor, from room to corridor to a repository. Phone rings.

We have been relocating to a new place.

(...)

Yes. Again.

(...)

Yes, sir. Now, it is replaced by a Science Park. Unfortunately, we could not find a space for those documents yet. We're trying everything to preserve them, but it is out of our control. They had to be moved.

From the author's field notes, 20th August 2021.

This was our first encounter with the Iran Petroleum Documents Centre. The centre was undergoing a relocation, and we were uninvited guests. At the location of the former oil archive, a science park now stands, and the new repository is covered with dust. In the hurried shift from the previous location to the new, despite the best efforts made by the local archivists, the proper care could not be taken for the documents. The archivists describe this case as quite a usual one in developing countries. They interpret this situation as a tale of underdevelopment, where the so-called developing country falls short of the ideal *modus operandi* of a modern state with preservation as its pillar. The archive in their narrative is viewed as an asset of history, becoming an established space «where records and documents are kept»³. When the archival

³ Hill, R. (1943). Archival Terminology. *The American Archivist*, 6(4), 206-211. <https://doi.org/10.17723/aarc.6.4.q213j5n6k880672t> [Consulted: 26 June 2022].

materials are supposed to be preserved in *arkheion*—a building of the records, law, and authority—⁴ the failure to archive is perceived as the consequence of being in a state that is *not-yet-modern*⁵. But, what if the description above speaks of the instability of matter? What if it redefines the relationship between archives and spaces? What if it intertwines materials of archives with spatial (produced) geopolitics?

A conversation with the local archivist brought back memories and stories—stories of unknown archivists who spent 28 years (from 1951 to 1979) collecting records of oil workers in southwest Iran⁶. Among the records were newspaper illustrations, sketches and photographs depicting ghettos, railroads, pipelines, and the supposed locations where workers met during the period of nationalisation of the Iranian oil industry. In the period from 1980 to 1988, with the ominous shadow of the eight-year Iran-Iraq War looming overhead, it became necessary to disperse the documents for preservation. Since it was no longer possible to ensure their safety in one single location, the archived materials and the documents were distributed (whenever possible) to the people who were fleeing these war zones. These people were not necessarily trained as archivists, and neither were they part of a conscious, thematic restructuring of the archive. Rather, these people became vehicles for archived materials. In a desperate attempt to protect the work of the predecessors, the archivists of the time found it best to dismantle the structure of *the* formal archive and create multiple, scattered, and fluid fractions of archives. In this struggle for survival, archives became perpetually dovetailed with displacement. Hence, in a state of flux, when the *arkheion* is aflame, this act of dispersion, led by the (guardian) archivists' urgency to protect, possibly created another practice of the archive's political power—a practice of disseminated power that accompanied the displaced, most of whom could never return to their motherland. The privileged space of the *archons*—where the highest authority of the archive governed—existed no longer. What remained was an undetermined multiplicity that disrupted hierarchy and the domicile of authority.

A rebuttal to this proposition of dismantled archives could also be argued. The disbanded archive cannot be an archive per se, as the practice of diffused power was incapable of accumulating, storing, and preserving the archive as an integrated collection of various objects. As a basis for this article's argument, we propose that the archive is perpetually in motion as a result of the intermingling of material, time, and space. For instance, an artist visiting an archive does not visit a specific building or document; rather, the exchange between the artist, the physical materiality of the document, the temporal existence of the document, the spatial belonging of the document, the provenance and the narrative that emerges from it, all come together

⁴ *Arkheion*, as Derrida explains, is a building of the records, law, and authority where the political power commences. While Foucault's archive is discursive, Derrida's archive is the domicile of the *archon* (ruler) who also controls the interpretation of the archive. See: Derrida, J., Prenowitz, E. (2008). *Archive fever: A Freudian impression* (Paperback ed., [Nachdr.]). Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

⁵ «Our people [Iranian peoples] do not know their past, their archives, their property, and their history». Taken from a dialogue with an art historian discussing the history of oil in Iran, these words echo a trend of thought in sociology of Iran that interprets modernity by a lacuna compared to the imagined ideal of western paradigms of modernity. For a critical overview, see: Tawfiq, I. (2019). *Nāmīdan-i ta'liq (Naming the Suspension)*. Tehran: Māniyā Hunar; and Behdad, A. (2016). *Camera Orientalis: Reflections on photography of the Middle East*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press.

⁶ This information arose from oral history; nonetheless, the efforts to track these archives and individuals have so far been in vain. However, the purpose of quoting this narrative is not to examine its reliability but to refer to the complexity and entanglement of discourse and material in every singular archive.

to create a network within which the archive functions. An archive is born in flux. The power of the archive does not emerge from the togetherness of the collection but from the participation of the archival counterparts in *intra-action*. Focusing exclusively on visual archives from this point onwards, this essay will develop a cohesive conception of archives as fluid structures.

The *material-discursive intra-activity* of Karen Barad that draws on «difference / diffraction patterns»⁷ in the construct of the world offers a way to chart the power dynamics⁸ of archival art practice in flux. Power dynamics in the archive are not only defined by physical, social, human, non-human, or inhuman forces, but are also enmeshed in inseparable spatial, temporal, and material counterparts in constant motion. The visual archival practices are constituted, in Baradian vocabulary, in *intra-action* of discourses and materials (of history, archive, image); bodies (human, nonhumans, cyborgs), and physical and virtual spatial configuration (of locality, nationality, globality).

Archive topology is not an attempt of the contemporary to reconstruct the past and resurrect it from the depths of silence to read «history against the grain»⁹. It is not interested in a proposal to redefine the spatial alignment of the archive either. Archive topology, in this paper, refers to a nested network of *intra-activities* that acknowledges the agency of various components of the archive. It is argued that the question of the archive requires a shift. Archives are often viewed as inert locations containing documents and thus serving as an extension of history-retention spaces, which requires a re-examination. We examine the possibility of understanding it in terms of a relational space, constantly emerging and always in flux. In other words, the «itinerancy» in space, as articulated by Cadava and Nouzeilles, is what can be altered by topology, toward the *intra-relationship* between space-time-matter *within* the archive. In this discussion of flow, the nature of fluidity must be clarified further. The fluidity here does not refer to the existence of a subject that is already defined and in existence¹⁰, interacting with other already situated objects or newly available

⁷ Barad, K. M. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Durham: Duke University Press, 184.

⁸ Different variables coming together and changing over time as a consequence of multiple forces interacting is how Barad defines her idea of «Dynamics» as. Time and space are not part of the creation of «Dynamics» as external bodies, rather the repetitive performances of the *intra-actions* become the «Dynamics» which in turn produces temporality and spatiality. Barad does not look at «Dynamics» as immutable, rather she adds: «The changing topologies of the world entail an ongoing reworking of the notion of dynamics itself. Dynamics are a matter not merely of properties changing in time but of what matters in the ongoing materializing of different spacetime topologies». *Ibid*, 141. See also: Barad, K. (2001). *Re(con)figuring Space, Time, and Matter*. In M. DeKoven (Ed.), *Feminist locations: Global and local, theory and practice* (pp. 75-109). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

⁹ Enwezor, O. (2008). *Archive fever: Uses of the document in contemporary art; [in conjunction with the Exhibition Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art]* (1. ed). Göttingen: Steidl.

¹⁰ An example may be provided here to illustrate the point. Consider a scenario in which a 21st-century anthropologist visits a colonial archive and discovers a set of «documents» pertaining to colonial researchers' examination of the «new savage». The anthropologist does not expect to find concrete facts in the works of these early coloniser anthropologists, rather the task is to find the coloniser himself who documented these elements. So, the contemporary archival practices take these materials and places them in museums, creates a film and demonstrates them in a collaborative-interactive art project that invokes various kinds of reactions from audiences. This allows for a critique of the archive. We seek to develop a space for exploring the new dynamics of power that lie beneath these new interactions rather than excluding the powers that made the documents possible in the first place.

objects in differing contexts. Rather, there is a shift towards understanding the fluidity that is always in the making, in production and continuation parallelly in this material-spatial-temporal construction.

In this re-articulation, there is, perhaps, also a shift towards viewing the archive as a metaphysical question, as one of the great philosophers of our time, Gilles Deleuze, had indicated. The archive can be viewed as an *agencement* in which several «objects» may be gathered in a non-unified space¹¹. This may account for the possibility of the intra-relationships / intra-actions / reflections / diffractions that get enacted within the archive. The possibility of innumerable effects might evolve from there. We do not intend to place the archive in a position of stability, but rather one of flux, as within the conception of the archive as an *agencement*, there can be a never-ending cycle of becomings as continuous change and movement within the whole. In other words, the *whole* of the archive is always emergent and held in place by the shifting, intra-active and alive bodies within. This might provide the much-needed vocabulary to construct the archive in a new light. Thus, archive topology makes it possible to elucidate the internal and intrinsic dynamics of power, rather than the positions of powers and their embedded multitude. According to Barad, «proximity and location become ineffective measures of spatiality». This in turn enables the study of archival art practices to explore and expand on «questions of connectivity and boundaries»¹², instead of the geometric and geographic, in other words, spatially motivated studies.

2. Archival art practices: lens and means to question the geo-historical motion

For nearly two decades, collections of modern Western art have been withdrawn from public view in a post-revolutionary Islamic country.

A pile of prints, stacks of developed-undeveloped negatives, bricked up against one another, pressed into a set of dusty cabinets. A wall is torn down to hide these cabinets within and re-built again.

A National Archive hides its most precious archaeological treasures in concrete blocks and keeps the blocks camouflaged in plain sight in the museum. Almost as if re-enacting the reversal of the act of resurrection of the objects from the soil by returning them to concrete.

For five consecutive days after an uprising, the demonstrators occupy a television studio and continually record and broadcast for five days. At the same time, all around the city, in every important location, a set of cameras recorded everything, day and night, constantly. This event not only imparted curious historicity to the materials of visual archiving (i.e., television studios, cameras, even the televisions in homes), but it also created a contrast with the day of the revolt when there was only a single camera that dared to record.

From the author's field notes, September 2021

¹¹ Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1980). *Mille plateaux*. Paris: Éditions de minuit.

¹² Barad, K. M. (2007) op. cit., 223, 436.

Contemporary art has been influenced by practices developed in response to geopolitical disasters¹³. As distinctive in their relationship to space, time, matter, form, and method, geopolitical disasters are at the heart of the work of Nasrin Tabatabai/Babak Afrassiabi, Mariam Ghani, Akram Zaatari, and Harun Farocki/Andrei Ujica. For each, the archives can be viewed as a site of geopolitical catastrophes that evolve from sedentary to nomadic forces, through burial for potential preservation, a defecation for a possible resurrection. What does migration mean for the power dynamics of the archive? Can it determine the condition of practice?

For contemporary art practitioners, Jacques Derrida's *Mal d'archive* and Hal Foster's *An Archival Impulse* are essential texts for a deeper understanding of archives. Hal Foster observes that the fluidity and non-hierarchical nature of power can be observed in the rhizomatic network of archive. He described archival art as a trajectory toward building up an «alternative knowledge and counter-memory»¹⁴ from historical documents. Ariella Azoulay has used Derrida's question of the archive—«the question of a response, of a promise, and of a responsibility for tomorrow»¹⁵ to engage with the archive as that which has been «deposited there» that cannot and should not be replaced by history. In her view, the concept of archive fever in contemporary art must compensate for the legitimate right of those excluded from archives to develop a new understanding of archives in opposition to «the dominant type of archive, the one founded by the sovereign state to go on determining what an archive is»¹⁶. The reintroduction of the absent public in the «shared space» of the archive is one way the archive fever can recompense the right to archive, says Azoulay. She stresses the importance of collaboration within the common space of the archive to reinstate the rights of those who have disappeared. The question of the archive arises out of, and accordingly, is shaped by, various histories, geographies, contexts, forms, and discourses to demonstrate a non-binary practice of power and a non-linear practice of history within an archive. Accordingly, in this paper, the attempt is not to reveal merely the gaps and cracks in the symbolic order of the archive, but also to negotiate the non-unified forms of power

¹³ Geopolitical disasters refer to situations in which bodies and materials are produced in a climate of constant flux, where death or life are neither guaranteed nor certain but rather occur in a state of limbo between them. The geopolitical, including body politics, borders, displacement, citizenship, ecology, etc., does not see geography as a parallel process or as an inevitable result of (global) politics, but rather as an integral component of the de-territorializing and re-territorializing of space through time and materiality.

Conflicts, invasions, occupations, and colonial settlements contribute to geopolitical disasters. Nevertheless, disasters are not simply the result of occurrences. In many cases, geopolitical disasters are perceived as disasters that are yet to occur. There is a suspension of the present, the past, and the future as a result of being exposed to turbulence. As Azoulay argues, «for the protected population, disaster is exceptional—an event that creates a state of emergency; the other type of population is comprised of those for whom the state of exception has become the rule, those who are themselves excepted, and therefore constantly exposed to chronic disaster». Therefore, geopolitical disaster has the potential to be viewed as an exposure to turbulence, as well as a suspension of the present, past, and future. For a critical overview, see: Azoulay, A., Danieli, R., & Skomra, A. (2005). Citizens of Disaster. *Qui Parle*, 15(2), 105-137. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20685694> [Consulted: 26 June 2022]; and Mbembe, A. & Corcoran, S. (2019). *Necropolitics*. Durham: Duke University Press.

¹⁴ Foster, H. (2004). An Archival Impulse. *October*, 110, 3-22. <https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379847>.

¹⁵ Derrida, J., Prenowitz, E. (2008). *Archive fever: A Freudian impression* (Paperback ed., [Nachdr.]). Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, p.36.

¹⁶ Azoulay, A. (2015). Archive. In A. Downey (Ed.), *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East* (pp. 194-214). London: I.B.Tauris. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9780755607419>; and Azoulay, A. (2019). *Potential history: Unlearning imperialism*. London; Brooklyn, NY: Verso.

in the archive, in which the practice of power is neither embedded in institutional state power nor sealed in the past.

In *The Itinerant Language of Photography*, Eduardo Cadava and Gabriela Nouzeilles discuss the «itineracy» of images within a paradoxical relationship to domestication. The authors argue that photographic images resist being sedentary in a fixed spatial, temporal, and material scope. This constant movement, however, can endanger the archive with the threat of being erased and demolished. According to the authors, archival images are «at once a repository and a proteiform memorial, a record and a mechanism of transformation, a passive means of storage and a *performative event*» (emphasis added)¹⁷. While the authors' frame of a performative event of the archive is designed to enable one to acknowledge archives in a multifaceted manner, the frame still carries the antagonism of fixity versus mutability, determinacy versus indeterminacy, and preservation versus destruction in the archives. In this article, the movement is not based on a Cartesian universal order—mind vs. body, subject vs. object, meaning vs. material, motion vs. sedentariness—but rather on a multidirectional anisotropy in which the values may vary depending on the orientation. The geographical, historical, and material movements are not tied to two positions or contexts. They are fluid and diffuse¹⁸.

Walid Raad's *The Atlas Group*, a project examining the Lebanese War of 1975–1990, will likely introduce the concept of geo-historical motion as it pertains to archives. An imaginary foundation and a quasi-archival project, *The Atlas Group* consist of several documents, photographs, audios, video footage, and other materials that are attributed to fictitious, anonymous, or real individuals. A mode of contestation is becoming imaginary to challenge the archive as a domicile. In an interview with Allan Gilbert, Raad discusses the establishment of *The Atlas Group*:

In different places and at different times I have called the Atlas Group an imaginary foundation, a foundation I established in 1976, and a foundation established in 1976 by Maha Traboulsi. In Lebanon in 1999, I stated, 'The Atlas Group is a nonprofit foundation established in Beirut in 1967'. In New York in 2000 and in Beirut in 2002, I stated, 'The Atlas Group is an imaginary foundation that I established in 1999'. I say different things at different times and in different places according to personal, historical, cultural, and political considerations¹⁹.

An absence of a precise description of *The Atlas Group* suggests the mobility of institutions where power dynamics are based on constant displacement. Thus, in a sense, these works can be described as carrying a geo-history of the Lebanese War as an interrelated parameter that changes with time and space.

The challenge posed by the fluidity of the space components in *The Atlas Group* has been addressed by the scholars regarding blurring the lines between fact and fiction. A third space (the space of resistance) or what Lambert-Beatty calls the «parafictional» is debated in *The Atlas Group*, as a means of destabilising the fact-fic-

¹⁷ Cadava, E., Nouzeilles, G., & Princeton University (Eds.). (2013). *The itinerant languages of photography*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Art Museum, 20.

¹⁸ What is discussed regarding fluidity should not be interpreted as being opposed to or contrary to fixity. The idea is not to introduce another dichotomy between fluidity and fixity. Rather, we postulate that archives are transversal, not tied to predefined structures.

¹⁹ Ra'ad, W. & Gilbert, A. (2002). Walid Ra'ad by Alan Gilbert. *Bomb Magazine*, 81.

tion binary by introducing a space of relativity beyond geo-historical or geopolitical (Eastern-Western) space²⁰. However, avoiding the dualities is not sufficient to generate a new way of thinking. There is no third way, but ongoing production with new characteristics than a «neither-this-nor-that» or a «midway» product. It is possible to keep or produce dichotomies when they are presupposed to be overcome. The analysis of resistance space cannot be achieved by disrupting what is already established (namely, facts and fictions). As Manuel DeLanda highlights, «avoiding dualities is [not] the key to a new way of thinking (particularly if one simply adds new ones: (...), rhizome-tree, power-resistance)»²¹. If it is assumed that the elements –fictive, real, non-fictive, speculative et al.– will simply be rearticulated within *new contexts or containers* we will fall into the dichotomous grammar of the archive (between oppressor and oppressed, between resistance and power). As a result, considering *The Atlas Group* as a kind of third space of a geopolitical disaster fails to adequately analyse the relationality between material, image, imagination, and war zones.

Therefore, fiction is not a simple tool for overcoming the dichotomies and creating an alternative space. Photographs have historically and discursively been regarded as documents and as images of certain truths that should be preserved. The artworks mentioned above are successful in oscillating between two different positions that are inclusive of the documented body and the represented content, while simultaneously rendering a fictionality to these aspects. If this is done, there may be a danger of losing sight of the medium and craft of photography. As a document, a photograph has a body–content inside and contributors outside. In this way, photographs can show not only the individual in front of the camera but also the counterparts behind it. Additionally, they are shaped by socio-political-historical-nonhuman factors. The instability of archival processes, especially during conflict, or any other instance of urgency, is what gives rise to this type of work.

On the brink of disaster, fictionality is produced in relation to materiality, as shown in *Secrets in the open sea* (fig. 1). In this subcategory of *The Atlas Group*, Raad depicts large blueprints with developed photographs at the bottom right of the prints. Upon examination in a laboratory, according to the artist, the prints, which were found under the rubble of the war, revealed the latent images of drowned people in the Mediterranean Sea during the war. A movement occurs within the body of the print, from a blue opaqueness to the faces of unknown individuals to the recognisable characters situated at a specific time in history. It sheds light on a unique feature of history, that is, the accepted notion of history does not allow any ordinary individual to be identified. In other words, drowned civilians form an almost ephemeral materiality of history when they are buried in the anonymity of their plurality. *Secrets in the open sea* shows how plurality can be employed to produce a result that

²⁰ See e.g.: Lambert-Beatty, C. (2009) Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility. *October*, 129 (August), 51-84. <https://doi.org/10.1162/octo.2009.129.1.51>; Dupont, V. (2012). L'histoire libanaise de Walid Raad. *Sociétés & Représentations*, 33(1), 49. <https://doi.org/10.3917/sr.033.0049>; Lambouris, N. (2014). Fabricating: Facts and fiction in the work of the Atlas Group. *Photographies*, 7(2), 163-180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2014.943022>; and Wroczynski, E. (2011). Walid Raad and the Atlas Group: Mapping Catastrophe and the Architecture of Destruction. *Third Text*, 25(6), 763-773. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2011.624350>.

²¹ Dolphijn, R., Tuin, I. van der, & DeLanda, M. (2012). «Any materialist philosophy must take as its point of departure the existence of a material world that is independent of our minds»: Interview with Manuel DeLanda. In *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (pp. 38-47). London: Open Humanities Press. <https://doi.org/10.3998/ohp.11515701.0001.001>.

renders civilians invisible in history. As a result of the latency of these images, we can see the fragility behind the supposed certainty of photography as a representational process.

Like Raad's following project, *Scratching on things I could disavow*, *The Atlas Group* views the geographical displacement as a constituent and constrictive parameter of an internal structural thread in the archive. Neither the efficacy nor the determinism of geography participates in the production of meaning in *The Atlas Group*. In other words, it emphasises that the relation between geographical displacement and the motion of archives is not determined by what is referred to as a geometrical location or an archival shelter, but rather a result of reterritorialisation after the outbreak of civil war. Nevertheless, this does not imply that the geography is less relevant; on the contrary, works such as *Hostage: The Bachar Tapes* (which, as the artist argues, has been partially unavailable outside Lebanon) or *Let's be honest, the weather helped* (in which gathered bullets illustrate the unnoticed presence of «peace-loving» countries like Switzerland in the civil war) underscore the relationship between geography and meaning production as something deep and complex.

The Atlas archive is a matrix of the forces involved in the Lebanese civil war, in which one set of forces influenced another. Imagining the Lebanese war as a confrontation between merely two opposing forces would be a caricature of the conflict. Instead of seeing geographical zones as static, *The Atlas Group* conceives of space as a complex, redefining and altering the «territory» of archives within the context of disaster through which it emerges. Yet, it appears that the materiality of the archive in *The Atlas Group* persists at a cause-and-effect level as if the materials are «used to think about or to think with, and again act as an indicator of something else»²² (emphasis original). Though materiality plays a key role in *The Atlas Group*, it already exists as a predetermined element. There is, therefore, no consideration of it as an agential counterpart that is produced within the archival practice.

3. Reorientation of material in motion: a flux

This section will explore the ongoing production of materiality within archival discourse. By reorienting materials as fluid, indeterminate participants, the dynamics of the archive are further restructured by looking at anthropocentric models of materials and tools (*les appareils*). In doing so, it irrevocably destabilises the primacy of human agency within the (visual) archive. In the definition of the archive, the idea of material as a container shifted to the material as an agent. The concept of «active materiality» as described by Elizabeth Edwards places photographic material not only in the process of producing meaning but also recognises a hermeneutic disposition for the material in shaping reality. Alternatively, it can be regarded as the accession of the material into the *arkheion*, where the material participates in the creation and interpretation of the archive. Hence, photographs as material perform an active role in archives if they are «material performances that enact a complex range of historiographical desires»²³.

²² Lange-Berndt, P. (Ed.). (2015). *Materiality*. London; Cambridge; Massachusetts: Whitechapel Gallery; The MIT Press, 13.

²³ Edwards, E. (2009). Photography and the Material Performance of the Past. *History and Theory*, 48(4), 130-

An example of «active materiality» illustrates the importance of flowing material into an archive. An archivist from the British Columbia archives, Ann ten Cate, introduced the concept of nowhere-to-go materials as *fugitive objects*: «Fugitive objects», for Ann, «are the things that cannot be preserved because of their inevitable material deterioration, their obsolescence as technological systems, or their precarity as orphaned or unclassified residents of the archive»²⁴. The act of preservation and motion here is also part of the material proportion. This can be seen in the work of artists-anthropologists Trudi Lynn Smith and Kate Hennessy who created the «fugitive film archives». Therefore, they propose a theory of «anarchival materiality» or the «generative force of entropy in archives» as a «boundary transgression» capable of escaping the fixation and preservation processes²⁵. Through an examination of the constant changes in the materiality of the archive, a parallel has been drawn between the resistance to change in power dynamics and entropy in collections. A magenta hue on the surface of a film, a film contaminated with bacteria, the chemical conditions of a colour film, and acid-burned paper are factors that contribute to the vulnerability of an archive. By combining these attributes, the artists can formulate a destructive force that restrains the archive.

For their 2018 exhibition *Fugitives in the Archive*, they presented *To the Burning World*, a ten-minute experimental video featuring a re-edited version of Kelly Duncan's 1978 film *To Build a Better World* (fig. 2). In contrast to the original film, which aims to promote progress through capitalist exploitation of British Columbia's forests, the film *To the Burning World* creates multiple layers till it almost obscures itself within this formal treatment. As a physical representation of the archive's instability (arising out of the irreversible decay of the materials), the magenta hue creates new power dynamics regarding the decline of *the* promised history mediated by the colonial-capitalist discourse of progress. This process illustrates the force of destruction as more than an anthropocentric force and positions entropy as a continuous intervening force for the «monolithic promise of modernity»²⁶. They, therefore, outline a materialist design of the archive where the material is an active living component involved in what archive is and how it functions.

From the vivacity of archival material, Hennessy and Smith have developed a form that relies on the interplay of history and material. The animation of materiality establishes two important laws of relations of material: a) it ensures that materiality is not limited to the physicality and objecthood of the archive; b) it does not relegate itself to merely external connections between material and discourse. This allows us to contemplate the agency of material in the archive beyond what is considered «supportive», «mediative» or even something that is created through interaction among different entities.

Karen Barad's new materialism emphasises the inseparability of matter and discourse. According to her, both human and non-human entities emerge from intra-actions, flowing without having fixed positions and constraining without being determined:

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²⁴ Smith, T. L. & Hennessy, K. (2020). Anarchival Materiality in Film Archives: Toward an Anthropology of the Multimodal: Anarchival Materiality in Film Archives. *Visual Anthropology Review*, 36(1), 113-136. <https://doi.org/10.1111/var.12196>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

[M]atter is agentive and intra-active. Matter is a dynamic intra-active becoming that never sits still— an ongoing reconfiguring that exceeds any linear conception of dynamics in which effect follows cause end-on-end, and in which the global is a straightforward emanation of the local. Matter’s dynamism is generative not merely in the sense of bringing new things into the world but in the sense of bringing forth new worlds, of engaging in an ongoing reconfiguring of the world²⁷.

Barad brings to the table the material’s fluid and generative nature that does not follow the meaning or concepts. A central feature of materiality lies in its ability to reframe the relationship between material and discourse according to a posthuman and intra-active understanding of the discursive practice. In contrast with «interaction» which relies on pre-determined «entities» or «relata» to function, intra-action is the entanglement of inseparable counterparts in constant motion: «To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence»²⁸. Materiality, therefore, cannot be a passive, given, motionless carrier or container. Using Foucault’s terminology, they can be seen as dimensions of power that do not merely reside in the physical space but are an integral part of its production²⁹. However, Barad’s discussion of fluidity and indeterminacy should not be misconstrued as negating the historicity. On the contrary, she recognises matter as the carrier of «the sedimented histories of the practice in which it is rooted and nourished deep within it—it is engrained in its becoming (...) as rings of tree mark the sedimented history of their intra-action with the world»³⁰.

The archive is rooted in the material history—the material remains and erasures. Foucault’s archive often cited «the law of what can be *said*» (emphasis added), seemingly impoverishes «active materiality» in the archive:

[T]he archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity, nor do they disappear at the mercy of chance external accidents; but they are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities; that which determines that they do not withdraw at the same pace in time, but shine, as it were, like stars, some that seem close to us shining brightly from afar off, while others that are in fact close to us are already growing pale³¹.

Although discourse for Foucault is operative, strategic, and has a material dimension, his conception of the archive, as a system of enunciability, neglects the matter as an agential counterpart in the production of the archive, thereby giving leading influence on the discourse rather than the matter³². It would be helpful here to draw

²⁷ Barad, K. M. (2007) op. cit., 170.

²⁸ Ibid., ix.

²⁹ Foucault, M. (2016). *The Force of Flight*. In J. W. Crampton & S. Elden (Eds.), *Space, knowledge, and power: Foucault and geography*. London; New York: Routledge.

³⁰ Barad, K. (2001) op. cit., 90-91.

³¹ Foucault, M. (2002). *Archaeology of knowledge*. London; New York: Routledge, p.145-6.

³² Ibid. and Foucault, M. & Defert, D. (2000). *Le discours ne doit pas être pris comme... In Dits et écrits : 1954-1988. 3: 1976-1979* (Nachdr., pp. 123-124). Paris: Gallimard.

on the Baradian concept of distinguishing between materials existing in a state of perpetual relatedness from which they are incapable of being separated, rather than previously independent materials coming together in a collage of relationship where they may retain their own identities and may even return to their independence. Considering this, Foucault's plan of grouping materials within an archive may fall short, since they precisely embody the kind of danger Barad warns against. Reading the independent existence of materials which are woven into a web of multiple relations from a Baradian perspective may provide greater insight into their value. However, despite the critique of Foucault's concept of the archive in the light of Baradian intra-activity, the archive that Foucault proposes remains important precisely because he does not read them as the results of individual histories, rather as a composition of multiplicities.

The Baradian reconfiguration of power dynamics that is enhanced by the entanglement of material and discourse allows one to move beyond certain pre-existing conceptions of the archive, including: a) archive as the accumulation of historical time, or b) archive as a locus of power, or c) the archive's reactivation, redemption, and inversion in contemporary art. Enwezor's *Archive Fever* «in which artists have appropriated, interpreted, reconfigured, and interrogated archival structures and archival materials»³³ is not external to the archive. Because of the fluid nature of the archive, it is always read in a multi-faceted relationship beyond the artistic intent to interrogate, encompassing past, present, and future. Fluidity refers to the spatio-temporal qualities of material-time-space. Therefore, archival materials do not simply migrate from the locations of disasters and settle in different museums across the globe as a temporary refuge. As performative acts of the archive, histories of materials and spaces are not erased but simultaneously practised as fluid elements.

Archival practices of contemporary art make it possible to simultaneously reframe and expand upon the diverse material, multiplicity of histories, and reconstruction of geographies. Creating counter-narratives in contemporary art is realised through a new dynamic of power. A motion of time-space-matter diffuses the distinction between histories, geography, and matter. A study of archival practices in this article is not confined to the detection of a power position that emerges from the diffusion, but also to the analysis of a network of relationships that give this distribution its power.

4. Re-framing the archive: towards a topology of the archive

It was not unusual for travellers in Paris during the 16th century to encounter police when and if they did not have lanterns in their hands while walking on the streets. Over the next century, «administrative public lighting» became widespread, where the police were entrusted with the responsibility of lighting the streets by installing lanterns, representing His Royal Majesty: «a symbolic presence of *roi soleil* [Sun King] incorporated in the artificial sun»³⁴. Despite the seeming benevolence of the legislation, this was an authoritarian act which deprives the people of their right to invisibility. As a result, during the July Revolution, the people hurled stones at the

³³ Enwezor, O. (2008) op. cit., 11.

³⁴ Schivelbusch, W. (1987). The Policing of Street Lighting. *Yale French Studies*, 73, 61-74. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930197>

lanterns in the streets, causing them to be broken. This may appear to reduce police visibility, and by extension, the existence of the state on the streets, which are now occupied by revolutionaries. On closer examination, it may be interpreted as the emergence of a parallel power, even though it arises as a reaction to the machineries of the state. As history has shown us, the fall of *roi soleil* did not end the authoritarian forces; instead, it diffused the rays of the Sun without the sun.

Analogous with the above-mentioned event, archival structures as well, give birth to and are given birth to by archival forces that exist alongside the authoritarian image of the archive and are affected by fluidity rather than unification. It is important to keep in mind that authoritarian forces do not necessarily operate differently from other non-authoritarian forces. This archive exists within the framework of a continual coalition among various types of forces³⁵. Accordingly, the existence of the archive depends on the fluidity of the archive. The non-monolithic, multi-dimensional, and pluralistic nature of these forces tends to illuminate a larger vision of archives, in which material and meaning are interconnected in constant, interdependent flow. In general, archival art practices, and those mentioned earlier, may contribute to the emergence of «other» parallel forces operating subliminally within the larger structure of archives. In recognising only these «other» forces, which construe the feeling of fluidity in the archive, there may also be a danger of negating the hegemonic, institutional, and authoritarian mechanisms at work. This is in direct conflict with the purpose of this article. By assuming that archives exist if they are practiced, the purpose of this article is to build a bridge between a) the multiple, fluid, interrelationships that continue to help the archive become born and reborn in new contexts; and b) hegemonic tools which function within a matrix of practices that help create such structures.

The forces at work in this situation have no source or origin, whether it be the lantern or the Sun King of Paris or Raad's *The Atlas Group*, rather, they are produced in a series of relationships that disperse, deform, and deflect the existing normative structure and help manifest (and become part of) the new «nomadic» power dynamics. There are no hard lines that separate and define them clearly; rather, they are diffused with one another constantly depending on new intra-actions. As a result, archive topology enables the study of the fluidity of archival practices through an understanding of power *dynamics* rather than multiple *positions* of power.

Topology allows one to avoid anthropocentrism in contemporary art to reactivate the material. According to Foster, non-hierarchical archival practices recognize «alternative knowledge and counter-memory» in historical documents through their «will to connect what cannot be connected»³⁶. There is more to archival arts than the mere setting into which «lost, stranded, outmoded, or displaced» materials are subjected to the artist's will: a will which had its roots in Euclidean geometry and Newtonian physics, in which «material objects are identifiably discrete; they move only upon an encounter with an external force or agent, and they do so according to

³⁵ One of the major dangers associated with the concept of «other forces» is that they could be developed against or along with existing forces, such as authoritarian forces. In a manner which is explicitly stated, it is not intended to produce a force of otherness against or along the archival structures. There is an effort to articulate certain polaristic materialist forces that are multidirectional in the power network. The introduction highlighted how materialist geopolitical forces can challenge our understanding of the nexus between material and discourse in what has come to be referred to as the archive and what has become its function.

³⁶ Foster, H. (2004) op. cit., 10.

a linear logic of cause and effect»³⁷. By reading archive arts as ongoing «beings» and «actions», we can elevate material to a kind of agential, non-determined entity. The way Barad articulates the intra-action invites us to consider the archive as not reducible to possession or ownership³⁸. The dynamics of power are marked by intra-action between material and discourse as well, so there is no defined archive space (as a space of resistance, heterotopia, etc.) before the practice of archives; archive as *agencement* is both producing and being produced, so the relationship between the archive and archive art is not external³⁹.

One can reconsider the story of oil archivists during the Iran-Iraq War, who began to use deracinated people to transport fragments of documents collected and stored as a whole. The dispersion of historical documents entangled in time and space multiplies the archive's generative power. The participation of the displaced, as well as the material condition of the archive, destabilised the principles of the institutionalised and centralised knowledge production circuit. Agency is not only connected to its anthropocentric action, but also to all its counterparts actively participating. As the *arkheion* burns, the archive experiences a flux that remaps the bounds of its existence and its capability. Archive topology aims to undo the deterministic reading of archives as pre-existing objects possessed by institutions, discourses, or people, as well as a field of desire that maintains history from chaos.

5. Conflict of interests

None

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³⁷ Coole, D. & Frost, S. (2010). *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Durham: Duke University Press, p.7.

³⁸ Barad, K. (2003). Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(3), 801-831. <https://doi.org/10.1086/345321>.

³⁹ As Foucault explained that apparatus (*dispositif*) is a «thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral, and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid. Such are the elements of the apparatus. The apparatus itself is the system of relations that can be established between these elements». This article refers to post-Foucauldian/Baradian apparatuses that «are material-discursive practices—causal intra-actions through which matter is iteratively and differentially articulated, reconfiguring the material-discursive field of possibilities and impossibilities in the ongoing dynamics of intra-activity that is agency» (emphasis original). See: Foucault, M., & Gordon, C. (1980). *The Confessions of the Flesh*. In *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977* (1st American ed, pp. 194-228). New York: Pantheon Books, 194; and Barad, K. M. (2007) op. cit., 170.

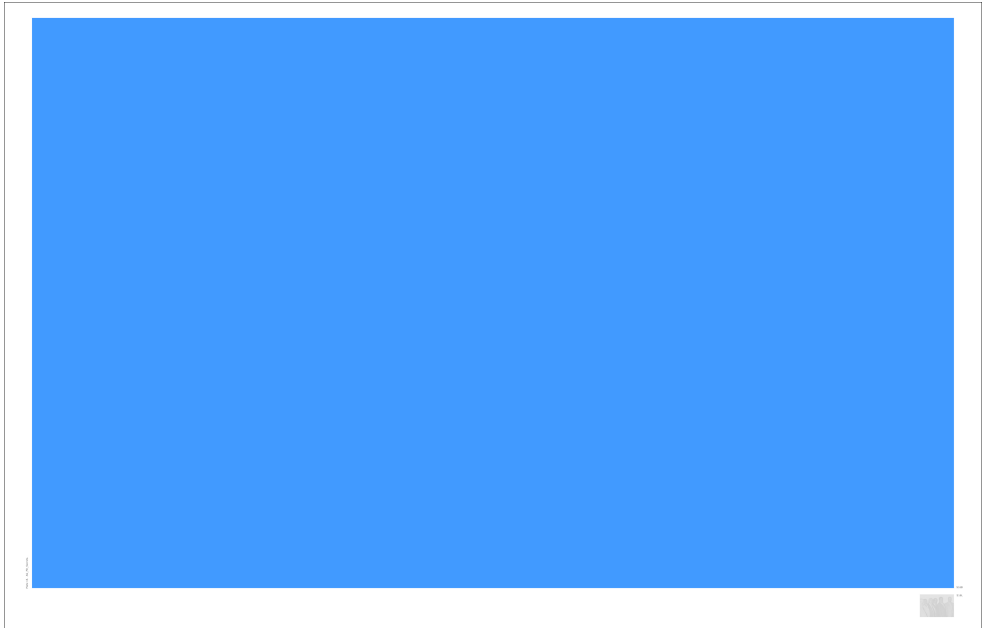


Figure 1: Walid Raad, *Secrets in the open sea* (plate 16), 1994/2004, 1 of a series of 6 digital prints, 43.7 x 68.1 in (111 x 173 cm). © Walid Raad. Courtesy Paula Cooper Gallery, New York



Figure 2: Film still from *To the Burning World*, Kate Hennessy and Trudi Lynn Smith, 2018. © Kate Hennessy and Trudi Lynn Smith

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