

# Invisible Culture

An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture

## Introduction

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*Invisible Culture*

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Issue 12: The Archive of the Future / The Future of the Archive

© May 2008

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[T]he question of the archive is not, I repeat, a question of the past...but rather a question of the future, the very question of the future, question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what this will have meant, we will only know tomorrow.

—Jacques Derrida<sup>1</sup>

In his study on the power and politics of the archive, *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida outlines the aporetic desire that defines the archive, describing it as an illness that strives to reconcile the will to safeguard significant documents in human history with the wish to share those documents with others. For many academics, researchers, and students, archives used to be and still are contentious ground, guarded tightly by the archivist/gatekeeper whose relationship with the material is very different than that of the researcher. The archivist aims to preserve and protect; the researcher hopes to explore and experience. Certainly, much archival research is marked by its prerequisite red tape: filling out forms, providing letters of introduction, divesting of all but the necessary belongings, and arming oneself with only a notepad and a #2 pencil. At many archives, this is still the procedure and one that is necessary to ensure the safety and longevity of the material housed. However, in recent years, technology has radically altered how we understand the archive and what it means to conduct archival research, as many physical archives are digitizing their holdings, paradoxically both broadening our ability to access archival sources and shifting the way in which archives mediate our relationship to the past.

The transformative nature of today's technologically-driven archives served as inspiration for both “The Archive of the Future/The Future of the Archive” conference—an internationally, interdisciplinary graduate conference held in the Spring of 2007 at the University of Rochester and co-hosted by the Graduate Program in Visual and Cultural Studies and the Department of English—and this special issue of *Invisible Culture*. The conference explored the shifting spaces, practices, and cultural meanings of the archive and reconsidered the “archival turn” of the 1990s in light of the very real changes wrought by cultural production, consumption, and preservation since the digitization of information. Many presenters discussed their varied experiences in conducting archival work, including the frustrations that often result from the contradictory purposes of the archive and the pleasures of discovery that come from culling archives both physical and virtual. In conceiving this issue, we sought to build on the conference’s fascinating papers and discussions by broadening the original theme to consider the future(s) of archives, past and present, as a constitutive quality whereby archivists and researchers who use archives must engage with work that is always “in-progress,” work that is being transformed by constantly altering archival methods and policies and, in many cases, the influence of new technologies that strive to both preserve materials and increase (virtual) access to documents that might otherwise be too delicate, or too inaccessible, for examination.

Digital technologies aside, the archive has always been a virtual space. The archive as a place, a collection, a history, a concept, and a practice has always been unstable and more intimately about

intangible ideas, discursive practices, and performative gestures than the accumulation of cultural objects. Michel Foucault's insights about the discursive production of knowledge suggest that the archive is not simply a container of objects, but an enunciation, a communication of power.<sup>2</sup> The archive is often assumed to provide a fixed knowledge, manifested, for example by the systems of organization and chronology used to classify and sort collections. In *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Diana Taylor emphasizes, on the other hand, the performative quality of the archive. The preservation of objects in time and space does not automatically correspond to the preservation of a single meaning.<sup>3</sup> Adding to this already temporally and spatially unstable concept, new technologies, and the perceptual and social shifts with which they are bound up, have further destabilized the archive as both concept and practice. In the digital age, archives need not necessarily be housed physically, nor must they abide by a rigid chronological schema. Multiple classification systems can be used simultaneously, materials can be quickly compared or searched, and, in some case, the researcher can make her mark on the material itself with no physical threat to its preservation, changing the contours of the archival body by adding her own knowledge or intervening into the collection through reclassification or reinterpretation. In *The Language of New Media*, Lev Manovich describes the database—one type of digital archive—as too much information with “too few narratives that can tie it all together.”<sup>4</sup> While Manovich alludes to the ambivalence often inspired by the archive of the future as they are necessarily influenced by the effects of technology, his comment also unintentionally references a very different, and yet ultimately analogous, archival antecedent, the 16<sup>th</sup> century *Wunderkammer*, in which many varied objects—mementos of the past, tokens for the future—were collected, preserved and displayed, their meaning always shifting depending on who was looking and why.

How, then, do past archival futures speak to present archival futures, and vice versa? Do future manifestations of the archive inevitably negate those traits we have come to associate with archives in the past or present? Does the digitization of the archive give us an opportunity to rethink the archival project in terms of how the archive, its access and selection, affects knowledge, authority, and subjectivities? More urgently, what can we learn from and what are the cultural stakes of our present investment in imagining future archives? The essays in this issue of *Invisible Culture* consider the question of archival futures from diverse perspectives: as scholars, as artists, as archival investigators, as interventionist researchers, and as curious explorers.

In “Archival Genres: Gathering Texts and Reading Spaces” Kate Eichhorn considers the archive as a question of genre. Starting from the architecture of the personal computer—with its metaphors of folders and documents and its position as a portal to both one's personal archive and the archives of the Internet—Eichhorn wonders to what extent all writing is now conducted both in an archival space and as an archival practice. Renaissance commonplace books are the past archival future through which Eichhorn reads contemporary blogs. Both commonplace books and blogs rely on the recording of the writer's reading practices into a form that both constructs a text-based identity and creates a social space where, at the very least, texts are put in conversation with one another. Eichhorn convincingly argues that blog writing is premised on rather old archival codes and structures, while at the same time generating, in their ubiquitousness and intensity, an archival genre of writing that exceeds previous forms.

Pashmina Murthy's article, “Buried in the *Arkheia*: Writing the Female Infant into Being,” delves into a historical manifestation of archival futurity, confronting the ways in which historical accounts may be used to establish or explain present-day cultural precedents. Specifically, she considers the practice of female infanticide among the Jahrejah Rajputs in 19<sup>th</sup> century India, and how colonial British officials attempted to understand this native culture through their archives (verbal and textual). Moreover, Murthy argues that British research and commentary on this violent practice among the Rajputs framed female infanticide as a “custom” or “habit” rather than a crime, which “afforded the British an opportunity to test the viability of the moral pedagogy on a barbaric people and encroach on the private lives of the natives.” Not only does Murthy's intervention into these colonial interpretations of the archives of the Other

uncover how viewing female infanticide as a custom opens the door for the absencing of all female voices, but she also sheds light on some of the ways in which history is often utilized as a justification for the continued presence of future violence.

In “The Virtual Archive and the Missing Trace: Charlotte Salomon on CD ROM,” Elisabeth R. Friedman interrogates the effect of digital archiving, considering how the process impacts a researcher’s ability to engage with delicate multimedia works like Salomon’s musical and theatrical, *Life? or Theater?* Friedman discovers how the CD ROM version of Salomon’s project reveals what could not be seen through many recent exhibitions of the artist’s work, which often had to compromise access in order to preserve the more fragile pieces. However, Friedman acknowledges that this digital version of *Life? Or Theater?* also involves a certain negotiation. Even the expansive CD ROM cannot provide the researcher with a completely unrestrained understanding of history. Instead, such digital archives create potential spaces for viewers to experience what Friedman describes as “the lack of resolution between different levels of reality and dimensions of experience.”

In another kind of archival exploration, Dore Bowen, in her article, “This Bridge Called Imagination: On Reading the Arab Image Foundation and Its Collection,” examines the historical figures who haunt the margins of the Foundation’s collection of photographs. Whereas in the more traditional construction of the physical archive, the researcher always holds the potential to alter or even destroy the physical archive simply through the handling of delicate material, Bowen considers how even in the virtual archive, ostensibly much more immune to the wear-and-tear that threatens the physical archive, the researcher can, at least temporarily, alter and become a part of the archive itself. She relates the fluid processes that govern the archive—representation, technology, translation, situation, interpretation—to the researcher’s imagination. Considering the keyword searches that characterize accessing a digital archive, Bowen presents the researcher’s imaginative process as a kind of bridge, permitting both a distortion of the archival image via its projection in the present and a recognition that the image is of another world and time. Discovery and imaginative invention are always coupled with the recognition that “I cannot make of it what I want.”

Finally, in her online exhibition “Historias Oficiales—Official Stories,” based on an installation by the same name, artist Carla Herrera-Prats traces the Mexican government’s presentation of and investment in pre-Hispanic history through twenty years worth of the third grade history and social studies textbooks. Her archival exploration and ultimate presentation of these books reflect on the political relevance of education and consider ways in which history can be modified and archives reshaped and re-presented. Her exhibit, both as a physical installation and as a digital presentation, explores the difficult relationship between art and archive, display and function. Herrera-Prats’s exhibition interrelates politics and theory and, like the essays written by all the authors in this issue, offers a space to question and explore the archive(s) of the past, how archives might look in the future, and the future of the archive.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (University of Chicago Press, 1996, 36).

<sup>2</sup> See Michel Foucault, “Part III: The Statement and the Archive,” in *The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language* (New York: Tavistock Publications Limited, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003),

<sup>4</sup> (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 217.