

## **'Archival practices and the practice of archives in the visual arts'**

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In 1960, James L Howgego wrote for the second volume of the *Journal of the Society of Archivists* on the subject of 'Archivist and Art Historian'.<sup>1</sup> The materials he identified as potential research sources for the art historian were almost all components within more general collections, such as national and county archives, the British Library, the Guildhall library, country house collections and art dealers' business archives. He concludes his survey with an acknowledgement of the collaborative nature of the research process, involving the "scholarly administration" of the archivist as an important collaborator for the art historian:

Most archivists... by exercising a lively and sympathetic interest in the problems of the art historian, may smooth his path considerably.... [the art historian] is fully alive to his dependence on and indebtedness to the archivist.<sup>2</sup>

Since then, postmodernist thinking has questioned the authority and the practices of archivists – the positivist notion of "scholarly administration" has been replaced by the recurrent spectre of the gatekeeper. Another significant change is the development of a distinct kind of specialist archive focussing on the visual arts. Of course, the world of archives as a whole has experienced a series of conceptual and practical shifts. While the analogue archive materials in our care sit securely on the shelves, allowed into semi-retirement by their substitution with energetic and agile digital surrogates, the whirl of conversation about what archives are, what they do, and what we want of them, gets ever louder. The archival spirit of our time is post-postmodernist, in the most straightforward sense, in that it comes after post-modernism: it is part of, and indeed embodies, a turn that reflects not simply the urge to deconstruct, but a more fertile and iterative urge to build in a way that not only is not monolithic but also is inclusive; and in a way that can accommodate the self-consciousness of this age, a self-consciousness expressed through vast quantities of digital documentation that we generate, share and re-purpose or consume.

The visual arts in particular have become a site of rich convergence for many such questions and developments. The visual arts community is particularly and increasingly engaged, not only in its awareness of the significance of the archives their activities generate, and the wish to ensure their survival and accessibility, but also in creative approaches to 'archiving' and the use of the archive as a site of creative practice. Meanwhile, the academic community of art and design historians and related disciplines, as well as practice-based research activities in higher education, have all considered the significance of the archive, not only as a body of raw research material but also as an arena for the consideration of philosophical questions about its nature and meaning. Many attempts have been made to define exactly what it is that makes the archive so interesting: that we might apply to it the old aphorism that we are as many people as we have friends. Sven Spieker, in his book *The Big Archive: Art from Bureaucracy*, an investigation the archive as "a crucible of twentieth century modernism", talks of "the central tension which characterises the modern archive: its precarious oscillation between narrative and contingency".<sup>3</sup> This nicely encapsulates the archive's potential not only for the stories it tells by itself – increasingly a complex and multi-layered potentiality, involving the reading of gaps and silences - but also for the enabling of other, multiple stories through its interaction with the viewer or reader and their consequent re-interpretation, re-iteration or re-presentation.

The kind of activities carried out on archives, whether in stewardship or research – some of which we see presented in the papers in this volume – correspond to many practices in the visual arts: collecting; selecting; curating; arranging; creating; connecting. This goes some way to explain how the visual arts archive, perhaps more than any archival sector, has experienced particularly creative explorations of the "allure of the archive", to borrow the titular translation of Arlette Farge's 'Le Gout de l'Archive'<sup>4</sup> (for who is not weary of talk of 'Archive fever'?). Hal Foster, in his much-quoted 2004 article 'An Archival Impulse', speculated about characteristics identifiable in some contemporary art that might constitute an archival tendency.<sup>5</sup> The phrase "archival practice" has

acquired other meanings than the professional work of the archivist: it can mean an artistic practice that in some way takes archival forms or uses archival materials or modes of presentation. Yet ten years after Foster, it can be declared that “the archival turn in contemporary art is all but exhausted”<sup>6</sup>, even while discussion of its nature and significance continues: as if it were a fashion, now outdated. And all the while the work of archives – on, in and through archives – and of arts archives particularly, goes on.

Meanwhile, the role of archivist, like that of curator, has experienced a dissolving of its borders, its field of practice explored by a range of other perspectives with an interest in the stewardship of visual arts archives, in both digital and analogue forms. As boundaries blur between disciplines and professions, as curating and archiving become part of the daily activities of documented and presented selfhood, archives are no longer the domain primarily of the archivist and the (art) historian. The status and remit of the archival practitioner is more ambiguous than ever.

While many kinds of archives have worked with artists, archives located in art schools are often sites of particularly creative collaborations as part of teaching programmes, whether in terms of creative practice, or of critical and contextual studies. Karl Magee and Susannah Waters have described previously in this journal how collaborations with artists and art students drawing on the Glasgow School of Art archive not only raise the public profile of archives but also “enable us [as archivists] to view our collections and practices in a new light... we should... reflect on how our standard working methods can accommodate diverse demands on our collections”.<sup>7</sup>

Elsewhere in the archives sector, the ARLIS (Art Libraries Society)’s Committee for Art + Design Archives has played a key role, not only by providing specialist training and networking for those working in visual arts materials, but increasingly over the past near-decade in engaging with wider debates about the visual arts archive.<sup>8</sup> This process began with two events at Tate in 2007 and 2009, and produced not only several articles in *Tate Papers* but also a book,

which fulfils the aim of bringing together the perspectives of artists, academics and archivists on the archive.<sup>9</sup> ARLIS continues this thread of activities: recent events have included 'The Archivist as Curator' (2014) and 'Giving up the Archive' (2013). Meanwhile the National Archives' 'Archiving the Arts' initiative is indicative of an increasing awareness of the significance and potential of this kind of material, both in arts institutions that lack skills and support to manage archive material, and arts material in larger archives where it does not get particular attention.<sup>10</sup>

The visual arts sector, then, (visual artists of all kinds, curators and academics, among others) has seen particularly rich interdisciplinary exchanges and discourses about archives. Increasingly, archivists have entered these critical and philosophical debates and enriched the dialogue using archival theory and practice, which has often been underrepresented. In the opposite direction, *Archives & Records* has accommodated articles devoted to visual arts archives, not just from archivists practising in this field but also from other voices.<sup>11</sup> Building on such exchanges, this special issue is unapologetically interdisciplinary in its approach and representation. As well as papers by archivists, there are contributions from academics and curators. Not all these contributions will talk about archives in a way that is familiar to the archivist. But it is more important than ever (as the contributions from both within and outside the archives sector show) that we consider also the views on the archive from other stakeholders: creators, users, and those who, without necessarily a formal background in archives, are nevertheless assuming and adapting the role of 'archivist' in new ways in response to the needs of the community they represent. It is important that these new and engaged audiences, whose paths through the archive are far less predictable, and perhaps all the more interesting and rewarding for it, meet with archivists who are alive to issues pertinent to their field and their approach. Magee and Waters point out that current methods and practices of cataloguing do not necessarily facilitate the kind of subjective and non-linear approaches that creative practitioners may take to the archive, such as an interest in physical and visual properties which are not easily accommodated in conventional cataloguing templates and standards.<sup>12</sup>

Experience has shown that arts-based research projects often produce inventive and powerful tools to give access to specific pools of archive materials: the challenge would be to scale these up to meet larger volumes of diverse data, coming up against the inevitable tension between standardisation and customisation.

In the first two papers, archivists discuss aspects of their work as it intersects with other disciplines: the practice of creating archives of the art institution, and the role of archives in the art institution's practices.

Susannah Waters, Archivist at the Glasgow School of Art, describes a collaborative interdisciplinary project working with a 'living' arts organisation, to ensure the preservation and accessibility of its archive. She addresses key issues about balancing professional competencies and sustainable infrastructures with the interests and wishes of the creating institution and its individual participants, who are motivated by a strong desire for ongoing involvement in the archive and for maximum accessibility. Waters' article also speaks to subtler themes about harnessing the qualities of subjectivity and professional detachment, as well as celebrating the powerful materiality of the visual arts archive as a communal resource.

Alan Crookham gives an account of the relationship between the document and the artwork in the exhibition-making practices of the National Gallery, using the example of the exhibition *Turner and Claude* to describe the distinction made between these forms in the particular context of an art institution focussing on the historical canon of art history. In this context archives are assigned a documentary, evidential, illustrative function, one whose boundaries are strictly delineated: their relationship with the art object is not an equal one. It returns us to the traditional conventions of the art museum – a hierarchy of objects, which has been overturned to some degree in museums of more recent art, where archival material tends to form a component of many major exhibitions. Indeed, at the Whitechapel Gallery archives have a dedicated space and curator, exploring the archive as a distinct mode of curatorial practice, not simply as a

documentary form. Crookham's piece then is a counterpoint to the ways in which the archive has been discussed in relation to more contemporary art practice, which has seen the archival object increasingly considered either as an artwork itself, as the only representation of an artwork that may have no other permanent material form, or as part of a curatorial approach.

We then turn to what archives might look from outside the profession: to academics and curators, writing about aspects of what archives mean to artists, and the critical contexts these are set in by researchers in visual culture. David Jones considers archival aspects of the digital work of French artist Christian Boltanski. While Boltanski's analogue 'archival' work has been more widely written about, Jones explores his attitude to the digital by looking at the quantified self movement and the promise of the digital archive, through datalogging, to give "total recall" of personal data. Jones' paper speaks also to wider issues of the place of archive in contemporary society – where is the archive? What do we want it to document of our selves? It is an example of how artists respond to, and thus draw our own attention to, changes taking place in society, and specifically of how Boltanski's work, by speaking of archives, speaks to our age.

Caroline Gausden, meanwhile, looks at the Women's Art Archive, which is at once both an archive and an artwork. A body of recordings created by the Polish-born artist Marysia Lewandowska, it is an explicitly subjective creation, born from a very particular intention, documenting the voices of women who might otherwise be excluded from the archive ("an act of creating a counter-text"). Lewandowska's work is an example of artistic appropriation, adaptation or subversion of the characteristics and practices of the archive. How different is this view of the intention of an archive, and of the 'archivist' as its steward, from the theoretical framework that underpins the archive profession? How does it fit with debates about more inclusive, community archives?

The notion of a more inclusive archive is also behind Ilaria Bignotti, Elisabetta Modena, Marco Scotti and Francesca Zanella's article about MoRE, a digital

museum of unrealised art projects, set up by curators and art historians with the intention of capturing documentation about art projects which, for a variety of reasons were never completed. Complicit with Hal Foster's notion of the archive as offering the possibility of "recouping failed visions",<sup>13</sup> and the notion that the gaps and silences of the archive offer significant research potential, the authors set out the aims and objectives of the project from an art historical and curatorial point of view, while also considering the status of the museum in relation to other kinds of archival sources. Documenting the 'refusés' – the works which, for whatever reason, did not make it into the establishment – it speaks to the notion of the canon, not only of art history but of the archive, and how the former can be a consequence of the latter.

At heart, these articles address fundamental questions for those working with and in all kinds of archives. What is the archive, and what do we want it to be? Who should decide? Are such questions even necessary in the digital era? Beyond Howgego's 'lively and sympathetic interest', the particular perspective and expertise of archivists remains an important element of a more complex network of collaborators, what Terry Eastwood, drawing on Verne Harris, Terry Cook and Joan Schwartz, has described as "participat[ing] in shared historical discourse",<sup>14</sup> and in the future of the collective archive.

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<sup>1</sup> Howgego was Keeper of Prints and Pictures at the Guildhall, and so may well have considered himself an art historian.

<sup>2</sup> Howgego, 'Archivist and Historian', 372.

<sup>3</sup> Spieker *The Big Archive*, 7.

<sup>4</sup> Farge *The Allure of the Archive*

<sup>5</sup> Foster, 'An Archival Impulse'.

<sup>6</sup> Adami and Ferrini, 'Editorial: The Anarchival Impulse'.

<sup>7</sup> Magee and Susannah Waters 'Archives, Artists and Designers', 283.

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.arlis.net/about/committees-groups/art-design-archives>, accessed 15 January 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Recordings of 'The Archival Impulse' (2007) and 'Archiving the Artist' (2009) can be found at: <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/audio/archival->

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[impulse-study-day-audio-recordings](http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/audio/archiving-artist-audio-recordings) and <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/audio/archiving-artist-audio-recordings> Accessed 15 January 2015. *Tate Papers* Issue 9 included four articles based on papers given at the 2007 event, including one by the author. Available online at <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/issue-09> Accessed 15 January 2015. Vaknin, Stuckey and Lane, *All This Stuff: Archiving the Artist*.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives-sector/archiving-the-arts.htm>, accessed 15 January 2015

<sup>11</sup> Velios, 'Creative archiving'; Stevens 'No Diving'.

<sup>12</sup> Magee & Waters, 277-278

<sup>13</sup> Foster 'An Archival Impulse', 22.

<sup>14</sup> Eastwood and MacNeil, *Currents of Archival Thinking*, 19.

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