THE TROUBLE WITH *ARCHIVES*

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Years ago, amid the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, I found myself sifting through photographs dating back to the moment my parents first moved into our family home. Amongst the haphazard pile of images splayed across my lap, which primarily documented D.I.Y. projects and newlywed silliness, I came across a picture of my father with his back against the wall, eyes closed, face covered in bruises. It was 1981 and he had been attacked in the street. This was the picture my mother had taken as evidence for the police. Nothing came of the whole ordeal in the end; a minor beating during the throes of Northern Ireland's 'Troubles' was somewhat inconsequential after all. Nonetheless, it was jarring to suddenly stumble across criminal evidence, tinged with traces of the conflict that had defined that particular period in time, nestled amongst domestic harmony.

It is this exact phenomenon that theorist Alan Sekula highlights when he states that the structures of archives "establish a relation of abstract visual equivalence" (1), a product of context erosion that both photography, as a medium, and archiving, as a practice, are complicit in. The decontextualised nature of the archive is not merely a consequence of collecting; it is a prescribed practice to achieve absolute objectivity. This pursuit of abject neutrality continues to cloud archival repositories, as well as photography. For many, the sense that one is really seeing a slice of the real, a fragment of uncontested truth, is the power that both photography, and archives, wield.

This is the seduction of the indexical image; the promise of access to a reality that is not there. Archives similarly avail of this privileged relation to truth, despite their mere presence signifying the existence of a hierarchy of knowledges. They denote a hegemony which seeks to preserve only that which is deemed worthy of remembrance and, often, productive to the continuation of the established order that produced such structures in the first place. Naturally, this leaves gaps in the records, entire facets of human experience drenched in shadow and unknowability. This pervasive practice of erasure is what Jacques Derrida describes as "the violence of the archive" (2).

A solution to this troubling manner in which archives behave can be found in the interventions and interpretations that artists provide. By taking the rigid form of the archive and injecting it with highly subjective perspectives, the structure is broken, the objects unfettered from their suffocatingly strict classifications. Importantly, artistic responses imbue new meanings and methods of reading material, creating space for multi-vocal potentialities.

Frida Orupabo is one such artist whose 'anarchival' practice does just this. She utilises the innate violence imbued in the archive by splicing, perforating, erasing, effectively fastening our gaze to the violent structures that pervade these historical repositories. By emphasising their insidious function, Orupabo's work is able to turn the medium in on itself, peeling back its skin to reveal the sinister underbelly. Rather than perpetuating the archive's role, Orupabo's use of photographic collage creates the psychic space for new narratives, crafted from the ashes of forgotten knowledges that were once relegated to the recesses of a filing cabinet or, in this case, eBay auctions, small town newspapers and the liquid form of the digital image in a world that is decidedly post-internet and post-photography.

It is also these crevices from which Orupabo harvests her migrating images which anchors her disruptive 'anarchival' practice as explicit critique of colonial image production and the violence enacted on the black body both historically and contemporaneously (3). The jagged limbs caught in Orupabo's images simultaneously reveal and refuse the workings of the colonial gaze, instead embracing Black Cultural Memoryscapes to create a living, breathing, feeling black archive that transcends typical archival and photographic practices by denying the violent processes that plague them.

It feels about time to reconsider what our collective goal should be for archival practice. To whom do we owe the most responsibility, our past, present or future? In a world ravaged by climate crises, increasing international destabilisation and political upheaval, it might be in our best interest to archive for the now.

REFERENCES

1. Alan Sekula, 'Reading an Archive: Photography between labour and capital', in The Photography Reader, ed. by Liz Wells(London: Routledge, 2003), p. 443-452.

2. Jacques Derrida, 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression', Diacritics, 25.2, (1995), 9-63 (p. 12).

3. Carine Zaayman, 'Anarchival Practices: The Clanwilliam Arts Project as Re-imagining Custodian-ship of the Past', (ICI Berlin Press, 2023), p. 4.