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**Transience, conflict and ontology:
Inevitability of entropy in the archive**

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Table of contents

Introduction.....	1
Transience.....	2
Conflict.....	3
Ontology.....	4
conclusion and research question.....	5
References.....	6

The inevitability of entropy reshapes the archive into a space of vestige rather than permanence, as artists and thinkers challenge and transform its role, offering a critical lens on how we interact with the past. Discuss how their approaches influence the narrative and intent of the archive.

Introduction

Throughout last year, I mused over a certain relic residing in Swansea Museum. A carved stone head effigy weathered beyond recall; residing in a tall mahogany cabinet in the

archaeology gallery. This artifact became a catalyst for *Temporal Reverie: The Unveiling of Alina de Mowbray* (2024), a hyperreal, site-specific exhibition guided by the role of the artifact as Simulacrum (Baudrillard, 1981). In its original context, the mullion exemplified integral support in the pursuit of light and verticality in historical ornate windows, it stood as a representation of Alina's era, place, and culture. However, by citing the artifact as simulacrum, Alina's essence is transformed; the artifact now exists independently, of its original intent or purpose, with its meaning and value curated through display, interpretation, and monetisation. Using methods inspired by Heidegger's notion of ontology (Heidegger, 1927), I sought to map the artifact's human existence, exploring how artifacts relate to people and carry meaning beyond their physicality. The unveiling of *Alina de Mowbray* is an ode not to the artifact as a mere object, but as a meaningful entity mediating relationships between people. Drawing inspiration from Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), this installation acts as a transformative commentary on context (Duchamp, 1975). I recontextualised Alina as spectacle—her historicity named, her meaning and existence evolving through time, enriching her historical and sentimental value. This led to the conception and curation of *Temporal Reverie*, the driving force behind my discussion of the archive.

Following this in-depth study, I mused over how artifact and archive function together as vessels of memory, culture, and identity. Yet within these interwoven themes, a common denominator appeared: entropic forces flowing through the gaping mouth of the archive. The ebb and flow of time both reinforce narratives and erase voices and contexts of culture held within.

In this essay I discuss the ambiguous nature of the archive using academic conclusions and theories as a commentary on entropy, contested histories and the ephemeral nature of time.

Transience

In association with the archive, the first concept is that of Transience. This intimate partnership questions the archive's ability, or inability, to preserve the past. Like many artists, I am plagued with archive fever (Derrida), the compulsion to descend into archives only to confront the impermanence of materials and the fragility of memory. Despite its elaborate curation and preservation of archival materials, the archive is not invulnerable to time nor decay. The archive faces degradation of its physicality and relevance to its stored knowledge. This vulnerability is intrinsic to the archive's very existence.

Susan Hiller's *From the Freud Museum* (1999) is an example of how artists use the space to curate their own narratives in history. Her installation carefully aligns artifacts, texts, and objects within archival boxes, provoking introspection around Freud's studies and his personal collection. Hiller draws parallels between Freud's psychoanalytic method and archaeology, creating an imagined dialogue between both artist and thinker. She writes, "If Freud's collection is a kind of index to the version of Western civilisation's heritage he was claiming, then my collection taken as a whole, is an archive of misunderstandings, crises, and ambivalences that complicate any such notion of heritage" (Hiller cited in McShine 1999, p.93). Hiller critically exposes the archive's role as both preserver and betrayer of the past. *From the Freud Museum* reveals how the archive's failure to encapsulate history is as significant as its attempts to preserve it.

This tension between preservation and reinterpretation is further discussed in *Temporal Reverie* (2024), where a relic from Swansea Museum's archive served as both literal and symbolic artifact, narrating and reshaping a story once lost within the archive's entropic confines. Here, the archive functions not simply as a vessel of preservation but as an active participant in the ongoing narrative construction. Drawing on Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* (Heidegger, 1927), the archive mirrors human existence with its inherent temporality. *Dasein* exists as a progression through past, present, and future; by preserving and collecting

artifacts, the archive similarly confronts temporality—balancing the tension between safeguarding the past and reshaping it through interpretation.

Jacques Derrida, in *Archive Fever* (1995), reflects, “The archive has always been a pledge, and like every pledge, a token of the future” (p. 18), suggesting the archive’s compulsion to preserve is motivated by an aspiration to resist transience, securing permanence against the nature of existence.

This human desire to preserve both ephemeral and inanimate forms embodies the archive’s essence. Building on Freud’s death drive (Freud, 1920), Derrida posits the archive’s preservation impulse is dualistically tied to an entropic force seeking both destruction and order. *Temporal Reverie* embraces this duality, using the art of collection to comment not only on history’s preservation but also on how archives deconstruct and reconstruct narratives whilst acknowledging their fragility.

Conflict

In association with the archive, the second concept is Conflict. The interrelation between conflict and the archive, has dated from multiple historical dissensions. The archive supplies integral knowledge essential to informing generations and narrating historical divots and peaks. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), Foucault’s critique around traditional historiography ‘the study of the ways history has been written and interpreted’ – considers the biases of histories narrators, arguing that the archive is neither objective nor neutral, instead, that narratives are shaped by the historian’s perspectives, cultural contexts and the power dynamics of the era. The archive as storer of knowledge and vessel of record, in history has been subject to conflict both as object, vessel and narrator. The ordering system itself behaves as an enforcer of power structures. Mbembe’s concept of decolonising the archive insists that archives, rooted in primordial systems, have been used in history as tools of exclusion. His

works in 'The power of the Archive and its limits' (2002) discussed his own critical framework for reimagining and recontextualising the archive to challenge the oppressive power structures rooted within the archive. These archives are often referenced to by Mbembe as the colonial archive he recognises these as sites of epistemic violence, where certain narratives are privileged over others, ensuring the erasure of non-western narratives/histories - shaping histories to serve colonial ideologies. Reclaiming the archive by revealing suppressed histories and voices, prioritising inclusivity and representation, can heal the conflicts inherent in the archive. "The archive is primarily a matter of consignment, a process of gathering together signs in a single place and according to them some kind of order." (The Power of the Archive and Its Limits, 2002) The destruction of knowledge systems and power structures leading to the erasure of texts, narrations and academics reflects the physical act of conquest and an assault on the structure of knowledge of the period. Archives themselves are used to narrate these conflicts, both preserving and perpetuating histories, leading to conflicts over how trauma is represented, for instance – some would argue that preservation of photographs and records from concentration camps prompts concerns about the archive's role in memorialisation and voyeurism.

Archives, have a responsibility to cradle evidence of past atrocities, injustices, and violence, it is integral that society is held accountable and takes aims to confront its own painful history – to educate and teach future generations. Although, there is also a responsibility from an academic to correctly handle sensitive material, some aspects of the experiences remain unspeakable leaving the archive incomplete, reflecting the societal silences around trauma, this mirrors an individual struggle to articulate difficult experiences, (Unclaimed Experience, 1996, p. 6). for example, colonial archives may omit suffering of subjugated populations, reinforcing historical silences. Caruth's work addresses these inconsistencies in historical narration, encouraging archivists, historians, and researchers to confront the silences in the archive, understanding that what is omitted is equally important as what is preserved.

“Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation.” (Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire, 1989) The Mongols' destruction of Baghdad (1258) resulted in the irrevocable loss of the house of Wisdom; this archive housed an extensive collection of manuscripts and texts from various civilization – it is estimated that these archives were likely to have included materials dating as far back as 2000 BCE. The event emphasizes the importance to view archives not just as repositories, but as dynamic, fragile systems intertwined with societal power structures. It is important to discuss how archives contribute to the construction of national identity (Imagined Communities, 1983, p. 12) During conflict the erasure of historical continuity disrupts a community's ability to maintain its historical continuity and identity.

In these instances, in history, the archives have been destroyed to ensure political neutralisation, the archives are often collateral damage in conflicts or a tactical prioritisation to retard a community – hindering their development and progress. During this conflict, while the destruction of the house of wisdom marked a devastating intellectual and cultural setback, it serves as a lesson in the critical need to sustain and safe-guarding human knowledge. This event highlights the vital influence of the archive in shaping civilisations. Claims say that the Mongols tossed countless manuscripts into the Tigris River, causing its waters to run black with ink. The imagery symbolises the annihilation of centuries of knowledge in literature, philosophy, science, and medicine. This cautionary tale is a symbol of the fragility of knowledge – the vulnerability of the archives and the importance of preservation against conflict and neglect. “The idea of a nation is inherently connected to the institutions that record and preserve its history.” (Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism, 1983) The digital era introduces new dimensions of conflict into the archive, in this context, conflict emerges in abstracted and intricate ways walled behind

layers of code. These challenges transform the role of the archive from its traditional use as repository of knowledge and enhance its function as site of power and contention. The digital archive faces challenges regarding preservation, unlike the physical archives that will endure centuries if properly maintained, digital data is fragile. Failures within the digital archive can cause irreversible damage. Manipulation within the archive of digital record; the ease of creating, altering, and distributing digital content can distort the records of history and narratives. the vulnerability of the archives is magnified, competing actors aim to control the archival record and distinguish their own narratives.

Transience

The third concept is ontology; the archive is inherently tied to questions of being and existence. What should be remembered?

During this section, I want to focus on Schacter's framework on the flaws of human memory and apply this to the archive – as we have discussed, archives are not neutral; they are constructed on the bias of the narrator, they embody the ontology of their creators and the context in which they were created. When referencing the seven sins of Memory, the framework reveals the archives limitations and vulnerabilities in a unique way. The archive is not immune to entropy, it experiences decay alike memory – paper deteriorates, digital formats are dissolved – and their Teather to the present is wavering. The 'Angel of History' (Benjamin, 1940) is a concept derived from Benjamin's work in Theses on the philosophy of history (1940). This framework intends to present the archive as a space intertwined with loss, decay, and persistent struggle to make sense of the past. As he himself 'gazes back at the past, witnessing the "wreckage and ruins" of human progress.' he writes: "This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls

it in front of his feet.” (Theses on the Philosophy of History, IX) The angel recognises the neglect, oversight or failure to preserve or document certain events and determines the misattributions of records resulting in the distorted views of history, when referencing these key concepts as ‘sins’ the archives become repositories of truth and as living system – dynamic, incomplete, entropic and intertwined with memory. This perspective encourages a critical lens into the archive. In reference to Barthes’ ‘That-has been’ we can describe the archive/ the photograph’s inherent use to attest to the existence of a moment documented/captured now passed.

This ontological connection between makes the archive unique amongst the arts, as it serves as a trace of reality – a direct imprint of what was. Whereas, when implemented in the archive this trace transforms into evidence of a historical, cultural, or personal moment in time. Bazin, discusses this same inherent need to preserve – resisting the natural order of temporality and decay. Within the archive, in a means of ‘embalming time’ is the desire to halt the entropic nature of time and document a stable record of the human experience. The artificial encasing of a corpse is not entirely devoid of decay, this is also significant within the archive – the archive often adopts new meanings over time, the context and narrative may shift. This ontological ambiguity creates a dynamic and contested space for the archive.

Conclusion

The influence of Heidegger, Baudrillard, Derrida and Foucault during this critical discussion led to my hypothesis that entropy reshapes the archive into a space of vestige rather than permanence, as artists and thinkers challenge and transform its role, offering a critical lens on how we interact with the past. The nuanced relationship between the archive and these three key ideas ;Transience, Conflict and Ontology, create a running commentary on the archives ability to preserve, deducing from Derrida and Hiller’s work, its role in historical narration,

drawing from Foucault and Mbembe, and the archives ability to question existence and being acting as repository of reality and space for reinterpretation, with the aid of Walter and Barthes' commentary.

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