

Roots&Routes, no. 33: Archive is Power

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Special issue on ARCHIVE IS POWER

(edited by Cristina Baldacci and Anna Chiara Cimoli)

deadline for abstracts: 15 March 2020

for submissions: redazione@roots-routes.org

In 'Purity', the novel written by Jonathan Franzen, Andreas Wolf's access to the Stasi archives in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall generates in a few minutes a rebirth: the man who appears in front of a camera goes from the opacity of the documents to the transparency of leaks. But even in leak journalism – it is soon discovered – there is no transparency; there are wounds to heal, manipulation and violence.

Ten years after the opening of the borders and archives of Eastern Europe, the magazine "Artlink" chose as title the eloquent 'Mining the Archive' (1999) for one of its monographic issues echoing 'Mining the Museum', the famous exhibition curated by Fred Wilson at the Maryland Historical Society in 1992. Under the blows of Institutional Critique, the scientific-epistemological status of the archive began to be undermined by the opposition between a knowledge given for acquired once and for all and stories to be written again; by the subjectivity of the archivist as a spokesman for new truths and meanings; by the hidden agenda of institutions and strong powers; by the pitfalls of authorship and unidirectional gaze. The wave of renewal, which in the last two decades has also fully invested the archive, was being prepared and corroborated by postcolonial, gender and cultural studies, by knowledge freely circulating in the digital and hackers' universe, and so on.

Starting from the awareness that the archive is never neutral, the objectivity, validity and meaningfulness of cataloguing systems started to be questioned in order to free knowledge from the immobility and fragility of hierarchies, redeem documents from their rigid organization in folders, boxes, navigation trees. Questioning and subverting the archive have become obsessive gestures (at least as much as organizing taxonomies) and are part of a broader postmodernist process of redefinition of practices and attitudes, which is still in progress. A strong pars destruens is always needed before starting to rebuild from new perspectives and intentions. While, alongside artistic practice, the history of art rediscovers archives with sources that were until recently considered either marginal or secondary, the theoretical reflection on archiving has been extending to the

unfinished, immaterial, impermanent and digital world (think, for example, of dance and performance: is video an adequate recording device to hand down the structure of a choreography or of a performance? Who are the new Rudolf Laban today?). Besides intentional archives there are also unintentional ones that increasingly define themselves as constellations of spontaneous information, which is uploaded online by individuals and shared collectively, and whose organization is mostly in the hands of a widespread body that, without a face, monitors and collects information.

The topic of the archive, with its internal logic of selection, organization, accessibility, affects many different fields: curatorship and museology, cultural policies, media and digital technologies, open source and creative commons, collecting and artistic practices (mostly time-based), and more in general everything that is related to access and participation in the building of knowledge.

"Roots&Routes" issue no. 33 questions this theoretical horizon, as well as the different forms of archiving in contemporary art. The Italian title 'Archivio è potere' plays with the ambivalence of the word 'potere' (power) as both a noun and a verb. Power as a form of control but also as the possibility to act and make a change. The literal English translation, Archive is power, does not permit to keep this ambivalence, but still highlights the core issue at stake. We are interested in contributions that delve into the silence of archives; collections that were either unaccessible or damaged for a long time and their impact once they have been rediscovered and reactivated; the metaphors of accumulation and of waste; artists as collectors and storytellers; safeguard and enhancement systems; new methodologies that overcome the rigidity and control of knowledge organizing systems.

We know something about this. As art historians we had to force limits that were imposed on us without explicit reasons, we collected oral sources, waited months before we could see a single letter, wore white gloves to browse the documents or wool socks to spend whole days between metal shelves in damp cellars. Each of the archives we consulted appeared to us as an organism with a soul. In addition to report the results of the research carried out, we would have liked to describe the profile of each one of them. From a humanistic perspective, isn't reactivating the archive transforming it from a repository of silent documents to a set of testimonies and voices resurfacing from the past in the present? This issue responds to our obsessions. Yours will be welcome.

"roots&routes" is a magazine with an editorial vision announced by its editorial board, which guarantees the quality and coherence of its contents. We consider it crucial to maintain an ongoing receptivity towards any submission of quality, provided it corresponds with the final vision shared among the editors. We therefore not only solicit work from artists and scholars, but also encourage submissions from contributors working in contexts that we do not know directly.

"roots&routes" announces a Call For Proposals, asking artists and scholars to submit proposals, beginning with the magazine's theme for the upcoming quarter.

Submissions should be sent in the form of an abstract, with a maximum of 350 words, to the following email address: redazione@roots-routes.org, with the subject heading "Article Submission."

Abstracts written in English, Italian, French, Portuguese or Spanish are acceptable.

In case of interest on the part of the editorial board, an email requesting the full paper will be sent to the author of the abstract. The paper is to be written in the language of the author's choosing. The editorial board, upon receiving the full paper, reserves the right to request partial edits, or to reject the piece, in the case that it does not align with the earlier proposal.

For those interested in submitting materials, the themes for the upcoming issue of the magazine will be announced on this section of the website.

Reference:

CFP: Roots&Routes, no. 33: Archive is Power. In: ArtHist.net, Feb 3, 2020 (accessed Apr 7, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/22549>>.