

Performing Intersectional Counter-Archives (Amsterdam, 30 Jun 22)

DAS Research, Academy for Theatre and Dance, Amsterdam University of the Arts in
Amsterdam Noord, Jun 30, 2022

Deadline: May 2, 2022

Esmee Schoutens

Symposium Archival Interactions: Performing Intersectional Counter-Archives

The research program of Archival Interactions took place at museum/archive partner's sites in mostly virtual meetings that brought together scholars, artists and archivists (Feb 2020-Oct 2021). Our overarching focus was on discussing how the practices of participants related to engaging with archives and counter-archives—curating, collecting, consulting, creating—in a manner that incorporated an intersectional critique of their formation and study. We learned from each other's experiences of facing loss and encountering gaps in collected or archived knowledge perpetuated by structural oppressions due to race, gender, class, age, sexuality, religion, residency status, as well as multitude emerging factors that influence personhood/subject positions. We discussed how to counter, sensitize, and shape the logic of archiving and its positivism (that which can only be scientifically verified) that discounts other knowledges of feeling and the ephemeral that are often key for historically marginalized groups who suffer from symbolic annihilation in the form of untrustworthy 'evidence' and representation. The resources of counter-archival materials, knowledge, and affects are sometimes the only—or most trusted—sources for gaining access to these pasts and the felt historicity of the present. We explored how institutional archives might be hacked or molded differently to make a platform that gives space to formerly muted and excluded voices, and how to hold state and colonial archives accountable. We also discussed forms of exhibition-making, art and performance that are willfully crafted so as not to suit archival demands, opening up a field for the anarchival, embodied knowledges, emotions and liveness of experience, ephemeral evidence and speculative histories.

We were hosted by the Research Centre for Material Culture at the Tropenmuseum to think through Criticality and Solidarity in interpreting collections, at the Van Abbemuseum to discuss Urgent Visualizations of archived materials; at DAS Research at the Academy of Theatre and Dance to experience the Anarchive's Excess in performance; at Het Nieuwe Instituut for [De-]Constructing Heritage by focusing on the labor of (precarious) heritage workers; at IHLIA LGBT+ Heritage to reflect on interventions and practices that honor Legacy and Speculative Archives.

Symposium's Focus

This closing symposium is a proposal to reopen the group once more, to look specifically at dimensions of performance and performativity in archival interactions: namely, interactions between and among archivists & records; scholars & documents; artists & archival scraps; artists

& archivists; archives & counter-archives. In these interactions, what affects are elicited? what knowledge is produced? For many, performance remains fundamentally anarchic – defined by ephemerality in ways that place it in an inevitably antagonistic relationship to the archive. Peggy Phelan’s famous insistence on the constitutive nature of performance’s disappearance remains a dominant perspective: “Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented. Performance... becomes itself through disappearance” (Phelan 1993: 146). And yet, Rebecca Schneider’s (2011) important work asks us to re-consider if this perspective closes us off to the ways in which notions of the archive might be transformed by a new attention to how performance remains – albeit not in ways that conform to conventional logics of the archivable, or what Leticia Alvarado, in thinking the late José Esteban Muñoz’s crucial contribution to performance studies, notes is performance’s capacity to engage “a reparative project that retains a kernel of the negative” (Alvarado 2015: 107), making available the act of repair even within the violences that haunt the archive. Historical re-enactments are just one way in which the performing body inhabits the archive engaging us in the question of how the production of historical knowledge is performed.

We also invite further critical consideration of the notion of being “counter to” an institutional archive. Can one be ‘counter’ in the post/de/colonial? Which archives do we make impossible once we use the word “counter”? That is, when we work with certain archives, do we foreclose the possibility of “countering”? Can colonial archives be mobilized in a counter archival frame?

Keeping present the crucial role of “canonical black feminist work” in shaping intersectional legal work and theory, we want to invite participants to take up Jennifer Nash’s crucial question: “Who owns intersectionality, and who steals it?” (Nash, 26). In our reflections at the symposium, we wish to engage intersectionality because in Nash’s words, it “offers the sense of collective world-making, and because it is the extension of a certain form of agency” (2019: 27).

We invite any interested party to propose a short form of response: to present or perform. We have room for 12-15 persons to take part in 20min timeslots during the three sessions that compose the day program. We welcome traditional academic interventions as well as performative, creative and more non-traditional interventions into the archive. Please read the short descriptions of the three planned sessions, which build on each other, and explain in your proposal how you’d like to respond to the topic and related questions.

Keynote performance by meLê yamomo, with Layan Nijem

After talk with Barbara Titus, Closing drinks

I. Intersections of Archival Inclusion

This session will address questions of belonging. We want to pay attention to the appropriate homing of materials, in terms of rightful custodial care and how intersectional materials speaking to multiple issues at once belong to more than one archive. Also, archives can elicit feelings of belonging as much as of non-belonging. Should we find the truth of ourselves in on-site and official archives? Do we want to be included? Perhaps intersectional approaches to archiving would caution against documentation and inclusion as the only answer. Preferring not to be claimed could be a means to avoid scrutiny and the surveillance that documentation can facilitate. Inclusion can very well look like or precipitate violence. If included, how should archival descriptions

and metadata continue to be adapted and updated based on changing terminology and understanding? How might archival instruments like finding aids and search terms be rethought to better locate intersecting, dynamic social categories of experience? Who embodies heritage? How might the infrastructures and things in the archive be imbued with a liveliness? What kind of archives house the undead? If heritage production is knowledge production, then, what is imperative to consider when setting a social justice agenda for archiving? How might activists and artists collaborate with, or intervene in, archives to reach this horizon for social justice?

II. Asterisked Archives

Scholars such as Katherine McKittrick have shown that the archive of black life is an asterisk in the grand narrative of history. "Asterisked archives" are filled with bodies, with narratives of brutalities, of racial-sexual violence, of death. What do we do with archival documentation that displays an unfree and violated body? Could the open, connecting asterisk of trans embodiment and study ever be reconciled with the closing, setting-aside asterisk of enslavement and colonial histories? What kinds of emotional accessibility (as a technique or capacity) are necessary to hear archives full of violence and littered with bodies? They tend to be the "official" histories, yet contain only evidentiary scraps attesting to the humanity of those condemned. We understand the decolonial as the imbricated and all-encompassing technologies of violence that emerged from the colonial enterprise. How then do we think and write and share as decolonial scholars and foster a commitment to acknowledging violence and undoing its persistent frame, rather than simply analytically reprising violence? How are our intersectional experiences of history and archives creating differential modes of the emotional labor that arises in facing colonial injustices? What does the practicing of close listening and reading bring to such archives? How might we map intersecting oppressions, those on the surface and those submerged? What is missing, misrecognized, mislabeled, or misrepresented in the archives, and how should an archival institution engage with these matters? What does it mean to invent and sustain one's own legacies? What would a future-oriented, life-sustaining archive look like? The pockets of archives that give us vitality may not be found in institutions. Where exactly is heritage and its production situated, other than the archive? How can archival collections promote the disruption of the recurring nature of institutional and activist amnesia when it comes to addressing and redressing exclusionist harm?

III. Creative Disordering of Archives

We might search in the arts for other means to understand the desire/practice to collect and sediment histories. Leaning away from empirical practices of history, a speculative relationship to history might embrace creativity rather than rejecting it as lacking rigor. We might take a speculative stance to history, by reading for what might be there rather than for what is demonstrably there. Drawing on Saidiya Hartman's thought, we ask quoting her, "How might I decompose the official narrative or recombine its elements or produce a different configuration or economy of statements?" What forms of working the join of the archive and counter-archive might produce such decompositions? How might redaction, transposition, augmentation of the material document bring about justice, maybe even something we might call affective justice, or a sense of restoring the past in the present? What aesthetic modes and actions outplay the paradigm of archival obliteration? One might think here of practices of annotation and (re)composition: in making performance notes to capture the ephemeral gestures and moods of enactment. Or of (audio)visual and textual works that employ redaction, transposition, augmentation. Or any art form (dance and gossip included) that enacts cultural repertoires and narrates cultural memories. Some artistic research-

ers have focused on the technique of the anarchival in which research-creation is a process-making machine. The anarchival, or anarchival might be defined as what cannot be captured, or is produced in a performative setting. It is what is outside “the archive” – a not-archive, or repertory of traces that can reactivate the research, triggering a new event. What other ways must we learn to “work with the mess of the archive, to creatively disorder the institutional fictions and the violent abstractions authorized as fact and truth,” in Hartman’s words.

Details of Event & Selection Procedure

This will be an in-person event and not hybrid or recorded. This call for participation will be followed up by an open invitation to register for the day and evening program (for free) with room for up to 60 persons. The studio space used for all three sessions will have wifi, projection equipment, and modular seating. For specific technical questions, email Laura Cull. We will provide vegetarian and vegan catering including drinks throughout the symposium for all participants, and modest speaker’s fees for presenters. The location is equipped with an elevator and ramp into the building. We ask that participants refrain from wearing scents. Presenters will be asked to verbally describe their person and images. Further questions about the accessibility of the event can be directed to Eliza Steinbock.

Deadline for proposals: Monday 2 May 2022

Decision on program to be communicated: Monday 16 May 2022

Opening of registration: Monday 16 May 2022

Event date: Thursday 30 June 2022

The symposium organizers will select proposals to create the day program, and are open to discussing your ideas in advance of the submission deadline. Proposals should consist of (1) a short title, (2) description of the response’s form (academic presentation or performance lecture), (3) around 300 words explaining the question that will be addressed, the materials that will be analyzed, or the proposition that will be made, (4) to which of the three sessions you’d like to present in, and (5) a brief CV in the form of a biographical note of around 200 words. (Proposals for more than 1 person to present should explain what each person will contribute.)

Send proposals to Eliza Steinbock: e.steinbock@maastrichtuniversity.nl

This event is made possible with support from the NWO-Dutch Research Council (Creative Industries) and “The Critical Visitor” Consortium partners: The Research Centre for Material Culture within the Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen and the Amsterdam University of the Arts

Reference:

CFP: Performing Intersectional Counter-Archives (Amsterdam, 30 Jun 22). In: ArtHist.net, Apr 1, 2022 (accessed Jul 6, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/36296>>.