Reactivating Archives in Contemporary Art (Lisbon, 2–3 Oct 25)

Universidade Nova de Lisboa (Lisbon), Oct 2–03, 2025
Deadline: Mar 31, 2025
reactivatingarchives.wixsite.com/conference

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Call for Papers: "Reactivating Archives in Contemporary Art",
International Conference at the Universidade Nova de Lisboa, October 2-3, 2025.

Since the late 1990s, the archive has paradoxically become both a buzzword and an integral part of the vocabularies of academia and contemporary art (Callahan, 2022). Scholars, art critics, artists and museums have increasingly addressed the production, articulation, curation and destruction of archival material to discuss matters of presence and visibility, which can also be situated in a wider problematization of the relationship between art and documentation (Groys, 2008). Debates on the archive as a structure, a technology and an institution have also taken centre stage: through its processes of montage, deconstruction and reassemblage, archival-based art has challenged “official” histories and exposed the power relations that permeate our visual repertoires.

The archive has therefore always been a space of dispute and has played a key role in memory activism struggles. Archival documentation can be seen as a symptom of the contemporary obsession with memory, and archival-based art holds a multifaceted relationship to notions of evidence, referencing and (re)appropriation. This is because, on the one hand, the archive can facilitate the exploration of past practices and affective knowledge, opening up new paths for collaborative work and shared lexicons. On the other, the archive is also a site for the fetishization of past experiences, the imposition of meaning, and processes of censorship or self- censorship. In this sense, archive-based contemporary art has often negotiated between the poetic and the political, offering opportunities for constant (un)learning, reconstruction and reinterpretation.

For this conference, our focus is two-fold: on the images, objects, themes and narratives we (do not) see or “find” in archives, and on the ways in which peoples, histories and knowledges are connected and disconnected through archival structures and apparatuses. We invite contributing scholars to reflect on how contemporary artists have been mobilising archival materials and frameworks in their practices to facilitate and amplify processes of transmission, re- organisation and interrogation.

What do artistic archival projects tell us about the impulse (Foster, 2004) and impossibility to archive everything? In their processes of excavation, how can artists bring to the surface stories that have been buried, erased, hidden or displaced? And how can these (re)activated archives help

us challenge notions of narrative stability, temporal linearity and neutrality?

Notions of access and who has the right to (the) archive (Azoulay, 2019) are also central to this conference. We are interested in exploring the intersections between autobiographical, fictional and documentary archival narratives and welcome papers that question and renegotiate dichotomies such as personal and institutional, affective and objective, preservation and neglect. How can we ensure that caring for artistic documents and images is done critically and in common? How might artistic archival projects challenge the notion of collective memory, and what are the artistic strategies employed for building multidirectional or conflicting narratives (Huyssen, 2003, 2022; Rothberg, 2009)? How do artists manage to remain aware of how archives were constituted, but also think creatively beyond it?

We want to celebrate the diversity and heterogeneity of archival-inspired art and are therefore keen on learning from and about practices and projects from different geographical contexts. We are also particularly interested in the interdisciplinary and multimedia ways in which archives are mobilised and (re)activated to the public.

Possible topics for presentation might include (but are not limited to):

- Artistic archival research: how, when, where, for whom?
- The artist as archivist: questions of authorship and self-reflexivity
- Documenting and (re)presenting ephemeral works
- Audience engagement with archival-based, multimedia works
- Archives and activism: how images can be a political tool
- The past in the present: rethinking images of resistance today
- Archiving now and for the future: institutional, practical and conceptual challenges
- Making space for unreliable memories and informal knowledges within the archive

We welcome both academic papers and creative contributions (i.e., visual essays, interactive workshops).

Please submit abstracts (max. 300 words for 20-minute presentations) and a short biographical note (max. 250 words) to: reactivatingarchives@gmail.com by March 31, 2025.

While this is an in-person conference, we might accept a small number of online presentations for accessibility reasons; if this applies, please let us know when you submit your abstract.
We aim to respond to authors in April.

No conference fees will be charged.
Following the conference, we will invite selected papers for inclusion in an edited volume.

Reference:

CFP: Reactivating Archives in Contemporary Art (Lisbon, 2-3 Oct 25). In: ArtHist.net, Feb 28, 2025 (accessed Nov 23, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/44069>.