# 06. ARCHIVING ART-ACTIVISM IN POSTDIGITAL TIMES: THE MIGUEL BENLLOCH ARCHIVE

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## Introduction

Miguel Benlloch (1954–2018) was an activist, artist, and cultural producer born and based in southern Spain. This chapter describes the conception and development of an archive established after his death to preserve, disseminate and keep alive his legacy. In doing so, it delves into the intricacies of archiving the traces of activism enacted through contemporary art practices and against a backdrop of profound social, political, cultural and technological transformations. Firstly, I focus on the process of turning the work of an activist-artist into archival materials to be stored and accessed online, paying particular attention to the tactical selection of digital infrastructures for that purpose. Secondly, considering that Benlloch's practice manifested most notably in the form of performance art – which is quintessentially ephemeral, situated, and deeply anchored to context – I discuss the challenges of trying to preserve that type of cultural heritage.

The chapter starts with the story of Benlloch, pausing to reflect upon the nature of his work as both an activist and an artist, while examining the intersection between these two fields of action. I then survey the creation of the Miguel Benlloch Archive (hereafter referred to by its acronym in Spanish: AMB) and the main milestones in its development. I continue unpacking the complexities of converting Benlloch's legacy – and more generally performance art – into archival matter, illustrated by an account of his very last performance. The final section identifies key practices and actors at play in the materialization of the AMB. Likewise, it deals with a number of critical issues around the political economy of the World Wide Web (WWW) and how it influenced key architectural choices and the deployment of infrastructures underpinning the AMB.

The chapter draws on relevant literature and documents, on my own experience contributing to the creation of the current online incarnation of the AMB, as well as on numerous conversations and correspondence with the two coordinators of the AMB and close friends of Benlloch: Joaquín Vázquez and Mar Villaespesa.

## Benlloch as an activist-artist (and vice versa)

While Benlloch used the words ‘performer’, ‘poet’ or ‘political and cultural activist’ to describe himself,[[1]](#footnote-1) such terms fail to encapsulate the full extent of his virtually infinite identities. Writing in the prologue to a book published on the occasion of a collective exhibition built around the AMB at the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern (IVAM), Nuria Enguita attempts to give a more comprehensive list of labels.

Miguel Benlloch, maybe everything ‘bad’: communist, pacifist, ecologist, poet, carnival artist, disguise artist, queer before queer, crip before crip, (singing to the sick body – individual and social), master of ceremonies of his village, spokesperson for the popular and the modern, cabaret artist constantly embroiled in collective struggles, anti-conscription, embodiment of so much utopia, transforming spirit, shindig organiser, the dream of revolution or rather of rebellion, incarnate and in card – it’s been said before – incarnate as the performative body and in cards as a card carrying anti-capitalist, homosexual, post-feminist, anti-Francoist and anti-NATOist who’d tear up all the cards if it was necessary, when all they produced was hermetic, fixed identities that limit and put up borders, that classify, codify and sadden every idea and limit every life. Miguel, this and that at the same time, and neither this nor that completely.[[2]](#footnote-2)

All dimensions of Benlloch’s polyhedric existence were deeply intertwined, making it impossible to disentangle his activism from either his creative practice or his work as a cultural producer, which were equally linked to each other. However, Benlloch started his activism while still a university student in Granada and only later in his life developed an identity as an artist.

Over the 1970s and 1980s he was part of numerous organizations devoted to different causes,[[3]](#footnote-3) most notably fighting the Spanish dictatorship, promoting peace, and advocating for LGBTQ+ rights. He played a leading role in the configuration of the anti-NATO movement around the referendum that took place in Spain in 1986 (Fig. 1) and co-founded the Andalusian Homosexual Liberation Front (Fig. 2). His activism was already deeply infused with creativity and humor by then, as illustrated by the ingenious slogans he crafted for some of the causes he supported, such as ‘Lo nuestro sí que es mundial’ or ‘Reagan lo que Reagan, OTAN no’.[[4]](#footnote-4) During the 1980s his creativity also manifested through the *Cutre Chou* (‘Seedy’ or ‘Cheap Show’), a set of cabaret-style sarcastic sketches performed with friends at the Communist Movement’s *caseta* in the Corpus Christi festivities of Granada; as well as through similar performances at Planta Baja, a nightclub he co-founded with his friend and partner Juan Antonio Peinado.[[5]](#footnote-5)

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| Fig. 6.1. Miguel Benlloch at an Anti-NATO demonstration, Granada, 1986. Photo: Gracia Gámez, courtesy of the Archivo Miguel Benlloch. | Fig. 6.2. Miguel Benlloch at a demonstration by the Andalusian Homosexual Liberation Front, Granada, 1982. Photo: Juan Ferreras, courtesy of the Archivo Miguel Benlloch. |

In 1988, Benlloch co-founded with Joaquín Vázquez BNV Productions, first established in Granada and subsequently, just a few years later, relocated to Seville. Thanks to various collaborations with Mar Villaespesa, their work became firmly established in the contemporary art and culture arena of the early 1990s.[[6]](#footnote-6) While BNV came to art from political activism, Villaespesa followed the opposite pathway.[[7]](#footnote-7) In 1992 they worked together on *Plus Ultra*, an ambitious contemporary art program commissioned for the Andalusian Pavilion at the universal exposition of Seville (Expo´92). Conceived as a series of site-specific projects by guest artists, both international and Spanish, it was distributed across the eight provinces of Andalusia and intentionally taken out of the venue of the exposition; as a way of questioning what was being celebrated, namely the 500th anniversary of the ‘discovery’ of America.

It is in that context where, exceeding the usual remit of a cultural producer, Benlloch literally entered the sphere of performance art in the first person. After hearing from him of the traditional folklore song *María de la O*, James Lee Byars – the artist invited to work in Granada for *Plus Ultra –* decided to create a golden three-meter diameter plaster sphere*.* Built by local artisans, the sphere was hollow, 10 cm thick, and delicately covered in gold leaf. Following Byars’ instructions, on the 11th of October 1992, Benlloch was introduced into the sphere with the help of a crane to recite the phrase ‘María de la O’, time after time, over the course of a few minutes (Figg. 3-4). A few photographs and a brief videoclip documented the event. The sphere itself was destroyed, as requested by Byars after local institutions failed to show any interest in it, but Benlloch kept a fragment that is now part of the AMB. Apart from such visual and material remains, Benlloch wrote a personal account of that experience for the book *Acaeció en Granada*.[[8]](#footnote-8)

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Figg. 6.3-4. Benlloch enters Byar’s golden sphere, 1992. Photos: Mar Villaespesa, courtesy of the Archivo Miguel Benlloch.

As a creator himself, Benlloch pursued different forms of expression. However, he is arguably best known for his work as a performance artist and, indeed, was particularly fond of the term ‘performancero’: a Spanglish neologism he coined himself to define his identity – at least one of them – as an artist. In 1994, he staged what is considered to be his first work as a performance artist:[[9]](#footnote-9) *Tengo tiempo*[[10]](#footnote-10)(Figg. 5-6). It was originally conceived as a birthday present for his friend Miquel Bargalló and enacted at a bar in Moyá (Barcelona), but shortly after he was invited by artist Robin Kahn to repeat that performance at The Kitchen, a prominent venue devoted to experimental art practice in New York.

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| Fig. 6.5. Miguel Benlloch, *Tengo tiempo* at The Kitchen, Nueva York, 1994. Photo: Jeff Kahn. Courtesy of the Archivo Miguel Benlloch. | Fig. 6.6. Miguel Benlloch, *Tengo tiempo* at sala BNV Producciones, Sevilla, 1994. Courtesy of the Archivo Miguel Benlloch. |

Over more than two decades, until his death in 2018, Benlloch combined his ‘day job’ as co-owner and cultural producer at BNV Producciones with his own practice as an artist. Both facets of his career constantly overlapped and mutually informed each other, always grounded on an anti-patriarchal and anti-capitalist stance; which according to Vázquez is what best explains why he ‘never stopped questioning how to develop a kind of practice that could be seen as collective, non-fragmented action, capable of producing a profound transformation in the existent symbolic, political and economic order’.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Benlloch’s work was heavily influenced by queer theory, which he helped to introduce and further develop in Spain through the coordination of numerous seminars and events under the Post-identitary Feminisms strand of the UNIA arteypensamiento program.[[12]](#footnote-12) In that capacity, between 2003 and 2014 he was in close collaboration with Paul B. Preciado; who once stated feeling like the ‘he-, she- they-child of Miguel Benlloch and Pedro Lemebel’.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Rooted in the gay rights campaigning he initiated in the 1970s and bolstered by his encounter with queer theory in the 2000s, which somehow helped him to consolidate what he had already been doing as a sort of proto-queer artist,[[14]](#footnote-14) Benlloch’s performative practice became a powerful activist-aesthetic endeavor articulated around what Villaespesa and Vázquez define as ‘the vague, varied, playful, unbecoming, migrant, illegal, non-identified, diluted and conjugated body’.[[15]](#footnote-15) By working at the intersection of art and activism, Benlloch instrumentalizes art with the aspiration to prompt social and political change (i.e. the politicization of aesthetics), a position that Boris Groys regards as still relatively new in historical terms.[[16]](#footnote-16) At the same time, his trajectory can also be understood as a process of intensified aestheticization of activism.

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| Fig. 6.7. Miguel Benlloch, *Bandera tranxesual*, 1998. Digital image: Salvador González Barba. Courtesy of the Archivo Miguel Benlloch. | Fig. 6.8. Miguel Benlloch, *La braga activista*, 2004. Photo: Gonzalo Sáenz de Santa María Poullet. Courtesy of the Archivo Miguel Benlloch. |

## Birth of a postdigital archive

Before his death, Benlloch designated his nephew Manuel Benlloch and Joaquín Vazquez as joint custodians of his legacy: the remains of a multifaceted existence, amalgamating objects and documents that he had either created or gathered throughout decades of collective and individual practice as an activist, artist and cultural producer. His legacy consists of physical artifacts of different kinds and provenance, but also the digital content stored in ‘that bottomless well of [his] hard drives that contain as many memories as terabytes’.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Benlloch was clearly concerned with the preservation and dissemination of his work after his death. Indeed, his will and testament specified that any potential revenue generated through the display or sale of any of the elements of his legacy, which includes works by other artists, must be reinvested in the preservation and diffusion of that legacy. However, the very idea of establishing an archive as a way of carrying out his wishes only emerged after he had passed away.

Benlloch initiated his practice at a time of limited access to media production technologies and before computerization became pervasive in everyday life. However, at the end of his existence the so-called postdigital condition had already permeated almost all dimensions of society. Postdigital is a rather elusive concept whose origin is often linked in the literature to a brief article published by Nicholas Negroponte in 1998 under the title of ‘Beyond Digital’.[[18]](#footnote-18) Without using the term, Negroponte signaled the advent of a world in which the digital would be ubiquitous and, therefore, taken for granted in every aspect of contemporary living.

Since then, the postdigital has gained ground across disciplines, proving meaningful in the study of wide range of topics including art-activism[[19]](#footnote-19) and memory institutions.[[20]](#footnote-20) As suggested by Petar Jandrić, the postdigital is a ‘wide-open position or perhaps even worldview which encompasses various reconfigurations between technologies and humans’.[[21]](#footnote-21) In that sense, it prompts the adoption of socio-material perspectives and pushes the theoretical envelope well beyond the mere analog-digital chiasm, to address much broader posthumanist issues.

While the AMB was born in postdigital times, it also deals with artifacts and content that predate the so-called digital revolution. Reflecting upon the social and material building blocks and processes that articulate this archive can help us to gain insight into the complexities of preserving and disseminating both art and activism at this moment in history.

Unlike traditional archives, the AMB does not exist as a collection of physical items stored within a single place. Indeed, artifacts and documents are scattered across various locations, only coalescing occasionally to be exhibited at galleries or museums.[[22]](#footnote-22) Embodied into various online interfaces, the permanent home of the AMB is the internet. Its own web domain[[23]](#footnote-23) works as the main point of access to Benlloch’s legacy, while it also relies on third-party online infrastructures. Far from being immaterial, the AMB is a socio-technical assemblage of servers, wires, hard drives, computers and other elements of hardware and software that, along with a constellation of people embedded in their own material conditions, bring the archive into being.

Most of Benlloch’s work could be seen together at the solo exhibition *Miguel Benlloch. Cuerpo Conjugado*, curated by Vázquez and Villaespesa at the Sala Atín Aya (Seville City Council), just a few months before he died.[[24]](#footnote-24) And it was in the context of conversations between Vázquez, Villaespesa and Soledad Gutiérrez about taking the exhibition to CentroCentro, Madrid,[[25]](#footnote-25) that the idea of creating the AMB emerged. Villaespesa and Vázquez worked closely with Charo Romero Donaire and Inmaculada Salinas to build the first online incarnation of the AMB,[[26]](#footnote-26) which was launched on the opening at CentroCentro in 2019. It provided a wealth of content and contextual information on each of the main artworks created by Benlloch:

existing records – whether videos, photographs, texts, etc.; a description or synopsis of the work; a timeline of the places where it has been displayed; other related works by Miguel; and connections to the archives of other artists, collectives and institutions with ties to his work.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Several computers were available at CentroCentro for visitors to browse the AMB’s website. The same happened at the next and final iteration of that exhibition, hosted at the University of Granada in 2020 (Fig.9),[[28]](#footnote-28) and in *Essays on Seediness*, at the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern (IVAM) in 2021-22.[[29]](#footnote-29) It is worth noting that the exhibition in Valencia followed an approach considerably different from the previous ones: ‘It’s no longer a question of simply showing the Archive on computers as a research resource; now the archive itself is the original seed of the process of this exhibition’.[[30]](#footnote-30) *Essays on Seediness* presented five artworks in dialogue with Benlloch’s aesthetic and political universe. For this, the curators invited various artists to peruse the archive and respond with their own projects.

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| Fig. 6.9. Terminals available to consult the website of the Archivo Miguel Benlloch, available at the *Miguel Benlloch. Cuerpo conjugado* exhibition, Hospital Real, Universidad de Granada, 2020. Photo: María Alcázar. Courtesy of La Madraza, Universidad de Granada. |

The reconfiguration of the AMB’s web domain, which is still a work in progress, started in parallel with the preparations for the exhibition at IVAM and involved establishing a few separate websites: the main domain name was reserved to host the new online incarnation of the AMB and a subdomain was established to keep the original version,[[31]](#footnote-31) while another subdomain was allocated to a website specifically devoted to the *Essays on Seediness* exhibition.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Before giving more details on the architecture of the new online incarnation of the AMB and the range of infrastructures underpinning it, in the next section I will pause to describe its contents and to unpack some of the main challenges of archiving performance art and, more specifically, preserving activism manifested in the form of performance art.

## On Benlloch’s works of art-activism as archival matter

The AMB consists of a variegated assortment of items, both physical and digital, either produced or collected by Benlloch. Most notably, it includes:

* Documents relating to his political and LGTB activism since the 1970s: manuscripts, flyers, diverse types of graphic materials, press…
* Documents relating to his activity in Plata Banja during the 1980s: fanzines, brochures, flyers, press…
* Object art pieces: small sculptures (spheres…); everyday life objects and symbolic stones that configured his aesthetic space and thinking; clothes he used in his performances turned into artworks, such as *La braga activista* (‘The Activist Pants’)*;* fragment of *the Golden Sphere*, converted into an element of the work *O donde habite el olvido* (‘Or Where Oblivion Dwells’);
* Works in the form of digital photographs;
* Video-documents of his performances, [as] digital files;
* Digital audio [files] of music preparatory to his performances;
* Garments he wore in his performances. There are many, including the emblematic suit of mirrors he used in several of his performances: *Ósmosis, Ibn Farum, Mapuch ¡EH!, Acuchillad+s*…[[33]](#footnote-33)

Within that mix, drawing a line between art and documentation is often rather difficult, if not impossible. Furthermore, Benlloch’s activism and art practice overlap to the extent of being jointly embodied in most of the artifacts and documents that form his legacy. Even some of the ephemera and records predating his art practice were subsequently (re)integrated by Benlloch into his artworks:

It took a third exhibition for me to find in its pages the origins of the little blurry photo, the one with you holding up the placard saying ‘OTAN NO!’ [‘NO NATO!’]; the one we’d shown for your pacifist activism, not as a document but as an artwork, because it had been established as such in another of your characteristic operations when you included it in *Signos* (Signs).[[34]](#footnote-34)

The AMB is one of those archives helping to preserve the memories and activism of LGBTQ+ people,[[35]](#footnote-35) but it also provides invaluable insights into the articulation of other causes into which he was deeply invested too. For instance, the pacifist movement against NATO and the cultural activism of the Plataforma de Reflexión sobre Políticas Culturales (PRPC),[[36]](#footnote-36) which emerged in response to the now defunct Bienal de Arte Contemporáneo de Sevilla (BIACS). Thus, despite resulting from the existence of a specific individual, the archive transcends his own person to offer insights into the collective struggles of various communities, in Spain and beyond, in recent history. At the same time, considering the aesthetic nature of Benlloch’s work, the AMB occupies the liminal space where art and cause-based archival practices intersect.

The process of transforming individual works into archival records depended on their materiality. Print documents entered the AMB’s website as scanned copies, while objectual artifacts became archival materials after being photographed; whether in preparation for publications or as items on display at exhibitions. Media content generated by Benlloch and his collaborators came into the online archive mainly from his hard drives; as a mix of both born-digital files and analog media that he had digitized.

As already noted, Benlloch adopted performance art as the cornerstone of his creative practice. Scholars specializing in that form of expression have paid considerable attention to the role of documentation, carefully pondering whether it should be understood either as just an imperfect representation of aesthetic events or as an intrinsic part of the creative work. In order to illustrate how the AMB approaches that issue, I will pause on Benlloch’s final performance, *El fantasma invidente* (‘The blind ghost’),[[37]](#footnote-37) which he enacted on the 16th of February 2018 at the opening of his exhibition *Miguel Benlloch. Cuerpo conjugado* in Seville (Figg. 10-13). Since I was not present, I can only report vicariously, relying on documentation and accounts, such as the words written by Santiago Eraso on his blog:

In a sort of premeditated circulation, in a way his last circulation, from the end to the beginning of his life, Benlloch, wearing a sort of shroud but also guerrilla outfit, traversed the rooms of the two floors, in dramatic pose, in silence, as if words and gestures could no longer enunciate or do anything against the inevitable, as if he walked from the very belly of his mother to the land where his ashes were spread over the thickets of Loja [...][[38]](#footnote-38)

Artist Isaías Griñolo, a close collaborator of Benlloch, produced the ‘official’ video recording of that performance. Besides documenting his actions, it also provides a wealth of details which some might regard as mere contextual information while others consider them a substantial part of the artwork itself. I recognize some familiar faces in the audience: from local artists and his colleagues of BNV Producciones to influential figures in the Spanish contemporary art scene, such as the director of the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía at that time. Likewise, the video recording contains traces of ‘documenting acts’ enacted by other people who were also witnessing the performance: several flashes bleaching the image as Benlloch walks down the stairs and his body seen incidentally on the screens of phones capturing the moment.

During the first half of the performance Benlloch is fully covered in garments, literally from top to toe; including gloves, a hat, and a scarf hiding his face. He slowly goes up the stairs and, after reaching the first floor, keeps treading – all the way backwards – while leaving behind many of his works. He then gets to the stairs that lead to the second floor and keeps going onwards, always in reverse and upwards. It takes about seventeen minutes to get to the point where he finally stops and unveils his face.

Next, he takes off his overgarment, revealing the extremely thin silhouette of his sick body and grabs from a wall the vest that he devised for *DERERUMNATURA Quien canta su mal espanta* (‘DERERUMNATURA. Laughter is the Best Medicine’). A bunch of striking peacock feathers is attached to the vest, which makes him look like he is sporting a colorful cape once wearing it. In his next actions, Benlloch takes off his shoes and puts on another pair; he also reveals the rings adorning both of his hands after removing a pair of silky gloves. Right after that, he picks up from the floor a ceramic whistle in the shape of a jar and starts to blow, producing a sound that mimics the tweeting of a bird. It is time to resume the journey, but now he is walking forward.

The journey ends at the same place where it started, on the ground floor of the gallery, with Benlloch standing in front of a projection of his first performance: *Tengo tiempo*. As the images of his past and present selves – and artworks – superimpose on the new video recording, a sort of palimpsest emerges.

During that journey, Benlloch was surrounded by dozens of people: some of them merely observing with the naked eye, while others looking through devices of different kinds as they captured the moment. Apart from a myriad of ordinary smartphones, ‘proper’ photography cameras and video recording gear were present in the gallery too. The video by Griñolo constitutes the main documentation of the performance. Still, it is not the performance itself but some sort of synthesis that captures certain moments, gestures and faces; leaving others unrecorded and, therefore, unable to enter the AMB – at least in that way.

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Figg. 6.10-13. Miguel Benlloch, *El fantasma invidente*, 2018. Photos: Javier Andrada. Courtesy of the Archivo Miguel Benlloch.

As Matthew Reason notes, recordings are by definition partial and incomplete, they can never tell the whole story, but at the same time he claims that it is through the gaps and absences (i.e. what cannot or is not recorded) that the transient nature of performance art becomes evident:

that which is missing (the unrepresented, unrepresentable and liminal) re-inscribes the continuing absence of the ephemeral performance. The discourse of documentation continually re-inscribes perceptions of ephemerality; the act of documentation marks and brings into being the fact of disappearance.[[39]](#footnote-39)

The complex relationship between performance art and its documentation has been the subject of heated debate. Art historian Amelia Jones has passionately defended the legitimacy of studying performance art through photographic, textual, oral, video or film traces; arguing that such representations do not have a less privileged relationship to the ‘historical “truth” of the performance’ than witnessing an artist perform ‘in the flesh’.[[40]](#footnote-40) Going somehow further, Auslander concludes that the value of performance documentation does not come so much from treating it as ‘an indexical access point to a past event but from perceiving the document itself as a performance that directly reflects an artist's aesthetic project or sensibility and for which we are the present audience’.[[41]](#footnote-41) Conversely, challenging the primacy of documentation, Simon Jones proposes that:

the distinctiveness and efficacy of performance as an art-form are not inaugurated in the instant of its documentation and their subsequent interpretations by historians. This misrecognises performance’s essential relation as being with the archive, resulting in its present being immediately taken up in its future perfect—what it will have been to future historians.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Like all live artworks, Benlloch’s performances were ephemeral, and one might argue that his performance art somehow ended with the last step of *El fantasma invidente.* However, while the media recordings of his performances cannot be treated as the performances themselves, they still convey much of the aesthetic power of those events; sometimes even amplifying it. Indeed, in the absence of the performances themselves, the value of the video documents generated out of them is being recognized by traditional arts institutions, as illustrated by recent acquisitions by the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA).

Likewise, the importance of such archival records for activism should not be underestimated. They are not just valuable from a historical perspective, but also as fully functional symbolic devices that remain useful in contemporary social struggles. By disseminating Benlloch’s legacy as an artist-activist, or activist-artist, the AMB aspires to do what, as Michelle Caswell puts it, archives do at their best: to empower people to ‘see themselves in a new light across space and time [and] then catalyze this new self-reflection into action, motivating users into activism beyond their personal contexts’.[[43]](#footnote-43)

Benlloch lived through an epoch of rapid social, political and technological transformation; going from the ‘media scarcity’ of pre-digital times – when access to media devices was very much limited – to the ‘media abundance’ characteristic of the post-digital living that he could see unfold during the last decades of his life. In this regard, the limited records of his first incursion into the realm of performance art, as a collaborator of Byars, is in stark contrast to the multitude of recording devices capturing his final performance.

Harnessing the proliferation of media recordings typical of postdigital times, the AMB is also concerned with the collection and preservation of, for lack of a better word, ‘unofficial’ traces of Benlloc’s work. Thus, it remains open to media recordings generated as personal memorabilia by those who attended some of his performances, in order to incorporate as many perspectives as possible. This adds to the notoriously complex task of managing intellectual property in relation to performance art[[44]](#footnote-44) and is in line with the efforts to ensure that the copyright status of items within the AMB enables preservation and dissemination as much as possible.

## Archival acts, actors, architecture and infrastructures

The AMB is sustained by a myriad of processes and people that enable the collection, preservation, and dissemination of Benlloch’s legacy. Examples of key practices include the selection and sorting out of relevant items and documents, the digitization and description of content, managing funds, liaising with galleries and museums, as well the configuration of a range of digital technologies chosen with the aim of providing access to content in the long term.

Some of those processes even predate the foundation of the AMB and started when Benlloch was still alive. In this regard, a key moment in the systematizing of his oeuvre was a visit he paid to Villaespesa in Tarifa (Cádiz, Spain) in the summer of 2013, where they spent several weeks working together on the book *Acaeció en Granada*.[[45]](#footnote-45)

It was then that he/we gave a structure, denominations, etc. to his body of work: ‘performances’, ‘signos’, ‘tipotopotropos’, ‘alboroques’ [...] To me it was key for the elaboration of a curatorial proposal for the exhibition in Seville [*Miguel Benlloch. Cuerpo conjugado*], as it allowed me to acquire a more systematic knowledge of his work beyond my direct experience, having been very close to him and his practice from 1992 to 2018.[[46]](#footnote-46)

The nomenclature and categories they established at that time subsequently underpinned the configuration of future exhibitions and have also shaped the online incarnations of the AMB, providing a conceptual scaffold for the organization of archival materials. Thus, the naming and sorting of things that happened as part of the preparatory work for that book should be regarded as the first archival acts that started to articulate the basis of this archive, years before it was established or even envisioned.

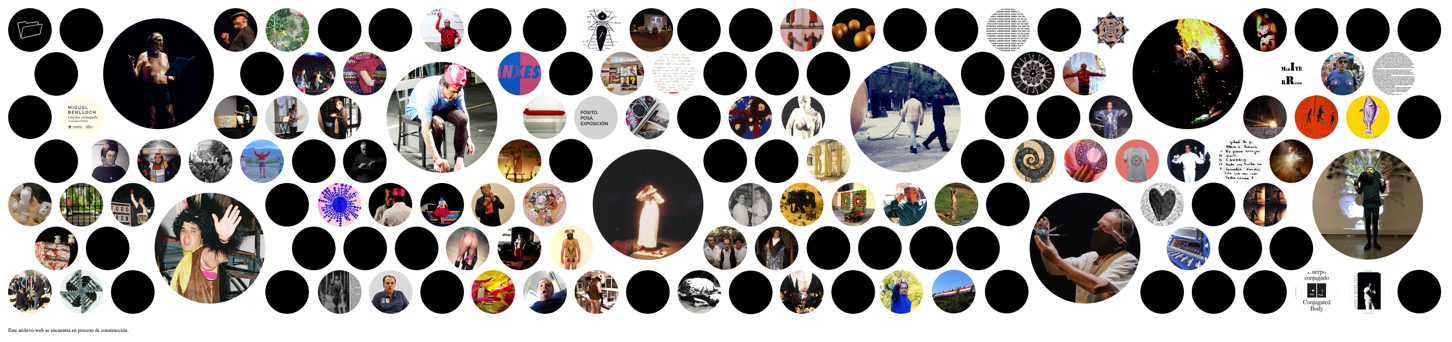
Vázquez and Villaspesa have obviously played a central role in the process of turning Benlloch’s legacy into archivable materials and archival matter; in collaboration with other actors who have also contributed to that process in different ways. For example, as already mentioned, Griñolo worked closely with Benlloch in the documentation of some of his performances, while Inmaculada Salinas and Charo Romero Donaire built the first website of the Archive. In my own case, I contributed to the process of reimagining the current online incarnation of the AMB.

When thinking about the various actors involved in establishing and nurturing the AMB, it is important to highlight that Benlloch’s work was embedded into a vast network of social relations and collaborators. Indeed, his practice heavily relied on ‘a truly collective life, the liveliness of people, the sociopolitical and artistic groups with whom he interacted’.[[47]](#footnote-47) Acknowledging the importance of collaboration in his work, one of the sections established to organize the new online incarnation of the AMB is named after the term *otr+syyo* (‘othersandI’),[[48]](#footnote-48) which Benlloch coined himself and highlights the relational nature of his practice: ‘*OthersandI* is an affirmation that speaks of both the individual and the multiple, and how the individual is multiple and the multiple is made of individuals in relationships, othersandI also forms a unity from which life can be understood as conflict, support and affect’.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Many of those ‘others’, including both weak and strong links, have breathed some life into the AMB, whether it is by ‘unearthing’ material that had remained lost so far, contributing records captured by themselves, helping to describe content and improve metadata, or drawing the attention of others to Benlloch’s work.

As already noted, AMB’s primary manifestation takes the form of a web domain. Therefore, it is mainly embodied in digital media available online, consisting of both born-digital content and digitized materials as described in the previous section. While its domain name has remained stable since it was established in 2019, the interfaces and underlying infrastructures that enable access to content have undergone several reconfigurations.

The first online incarnation of the AMB (Fig.14) consisted of 90 ‘project’ web pages, a page listing all those projects in alphabetical order, another page with biographical information, and the homepage, which gave access to each of the projects by means of featured images of each of them.

Fig. 6.14. Homepage of the first online incarnation of the AMB. Courtesy of the Archivo Miguel Benlloch.

Each of the project web pages followed a similar structure that required scrolling horizontally (Fig.15): title, embedded video or still image, description, key milestones of the project in chronological order (for example, the date on which Benlloch staged a performance for the first time and subsequent iterations or public screenings of the respective video-document), documents (for example, performance scores, leaflets, scholarly works) and/or still images, internal links to the pages of related projects, and external links to relevant content in other websites (for example, those of institutions where he presented his work).

Fig. 6.15. *El fantasma invidente* on the first online incarnation of the AMB. Courtesy of the Archivo Miguel Benlloch.

The content of the current incarnation of the AMB (Fig. 16) is based on the original website, but all the entries have been revised; in many cases expanding information and also adding new archival materials. Moreover, there are significant differences with regard to the overall structure. While the original site relied on the term ‘project’ to describe all entries, the new version organizes content around a number of categories and subcategories.

All his artworks are gathered under *Obras* (‘Works’), available in both chronological and alphabetical order. The category *Otr+syyo* (‘OthersandI’) encompasses collaborations with other creators, collective initiatives, his political activism (which is also archived under the section ‘Works’), *in memoriam* events, and other miscellaneous content, including, for instance, a collection of photographs of Benlloch with family and friends.[[50]](#footnote-50) The category *Biblioteca* (’Library’) contains the books he published, as well as other publications (e.g., booklets, leaflets) and texts written by him and others. Finally, content about his solo and collective exhibitions is available under a separate category and respective subcategories. In addition to categories, keywords (tags) offer another layer of metadata that allow the visitor to browse and filter content in other ways: by medium, people, entities, places, topics, etc.

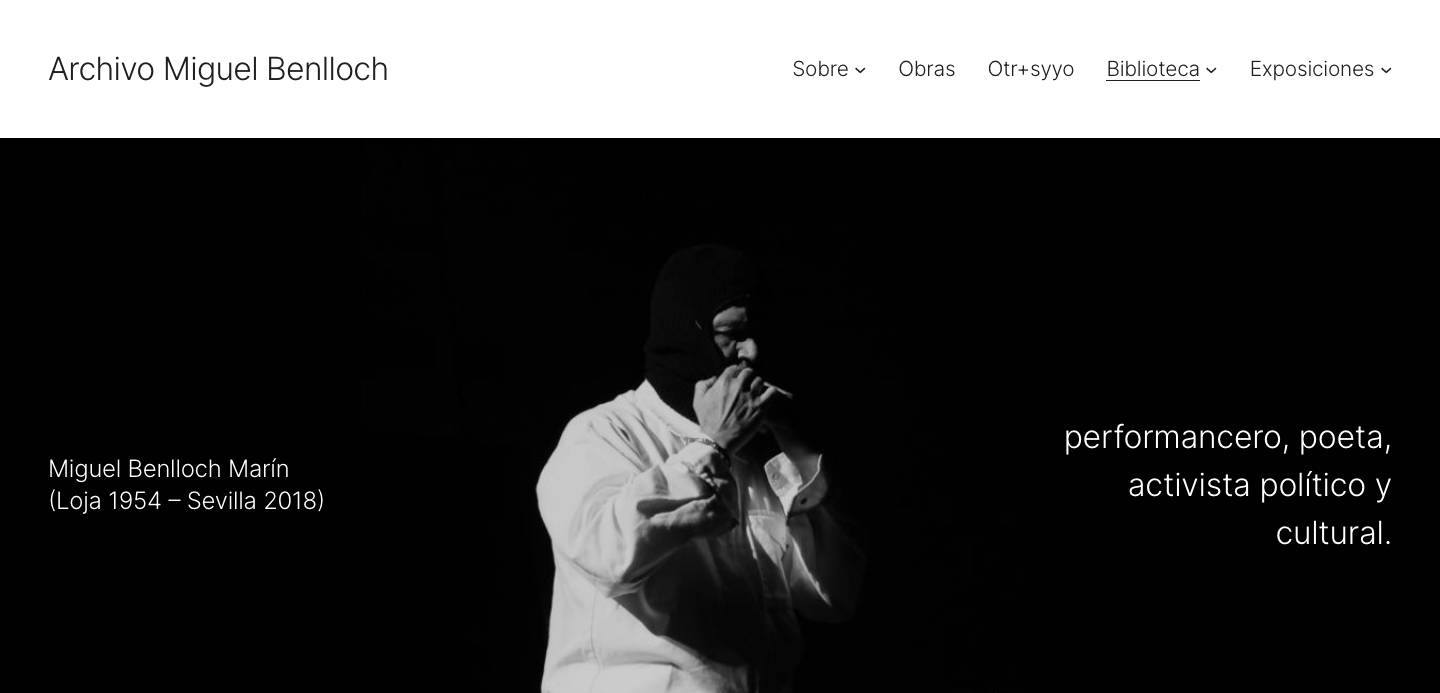


Fig. 6.16. Homepage of the current online incarnation of the AMB (fragment). Courtesy of the Archivo Miguel Benlloch.

Understanding the creation and maintenance of an archive in postdigital times calls for the adoption of an ecological approach that, as Sy Taffel suggests, is mindful of complex ‘entanglements of technology, culture and mediation [...] that go beyond focusing upon the content of mediated communications, additionally examining the infrastructures of software and hardware upon which digital communications are predicated’.[[51]](#footnote-51)

The challenges are not limited to finding efficient ways of preserving materials and providing access to them, but they are also very much concerned with the ethical and political implications of such practices and the underpinning infrastructures. Contemporary activism often combines the appropriation of corporate social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter or YouTube with the concomitant adoption of autonomous infrastructures and alternative digital technologies.[[52]](#footnote-52) As illustrated by the case of Italian hacktivism in the mid 2000s, ‘people open pages on Facebook, a Twitter feed, blogs on both Noblogs and Blogspot, mail both on Autistici and Gmail, upload videos of demonstrations to YouTube and photos to Flickr. With all of the advantages, problems and contradictions that this implies’.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Currently, activism at large arguably relies on digital information and communication infrastructures by leveraging the affordances of such a hybrid media ecology. Whereas corporate platforms in that mix may play an instrumental role in the practicalities of ‘doing activism’, it is worth stressing that ‘archiving activism’ effectively calls for minimizing the dependency on infrastructures whose fate is ultimately dictated by market forces and/or the temperament of their owners.

The first online incarnation of the AMB was developed using the now discontinued web-builder Adobe Muse and relied on Youtube as a repository for video content, with other types of documents (i.e., still images and PDF files) stored within the website itself. The current incarnation is built on an open-source self-hosted Content Management System (CMS), namely WordPress, and it is based on the principles of independently-hosted web publishing.[[54]](#footnote-54) Unlike the first website, the new incarnation is responsive and amenable to consultation from different kinds of devices (i.e., laptop, tablet, smartphone).

A critical change to the set of infrastructures underpinning the AMB is that Youtube has been discarded as a repository to host and share video content, for practical as well as ethical reasons. The political economy of Youtube and its parent company Alphabet Inc. – the holding in which Google is also integrated – called for the use of alternative platforms that are better aligned with Benlloch’s sensibilities. Questionable aspects include Youtube’s ‘digital labor architecture’[[55]](#footnote-55) and very problematic algorithmic biases,[[56]](#footnote-56) as well as other characteristics typical of most commercial platforms that hinder the archival of activism and other socio-cultural practices:

Another important issue is the plethora of born-digital material that exists only on commercial services (such as Gmail, Flickr, YouTube, or Vimeo). Many people believe that these services will preserve their material ‘forever’. Few realize that many of these services quickly take something down with even the slightest challenge, and in no way should be considered long-term repositories. [...] And few realize that a number of the services assert ownership over content posted on them or require the signing of user agreements that prohibit many types of downloads or copying, making it technically illegal for a repository to copy material from a service, even with the original owner’s permission.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Instead, the Internet Archive (IA) works now as the primary repository in which the archival materials within the AMB are stored (Fig. 17), including both born-digital and digitized contents of different kinds (i.e., videos, still images, PDF files). The IA’s mission is to ‘provide Universal Access to All Knowledge’ and, unlike commercial platforms, it does not rely on the commodification of either content or users’ data. Originally conceived as an ‘archive of the Internet’, it has evolved to become also one of the largest archives of cultural artifacts (e.g., books, music, videos) on the Internet and it is open to communities interested in making ‘permanent the digital materials we are all generating’.[[58]](#footnote-58)

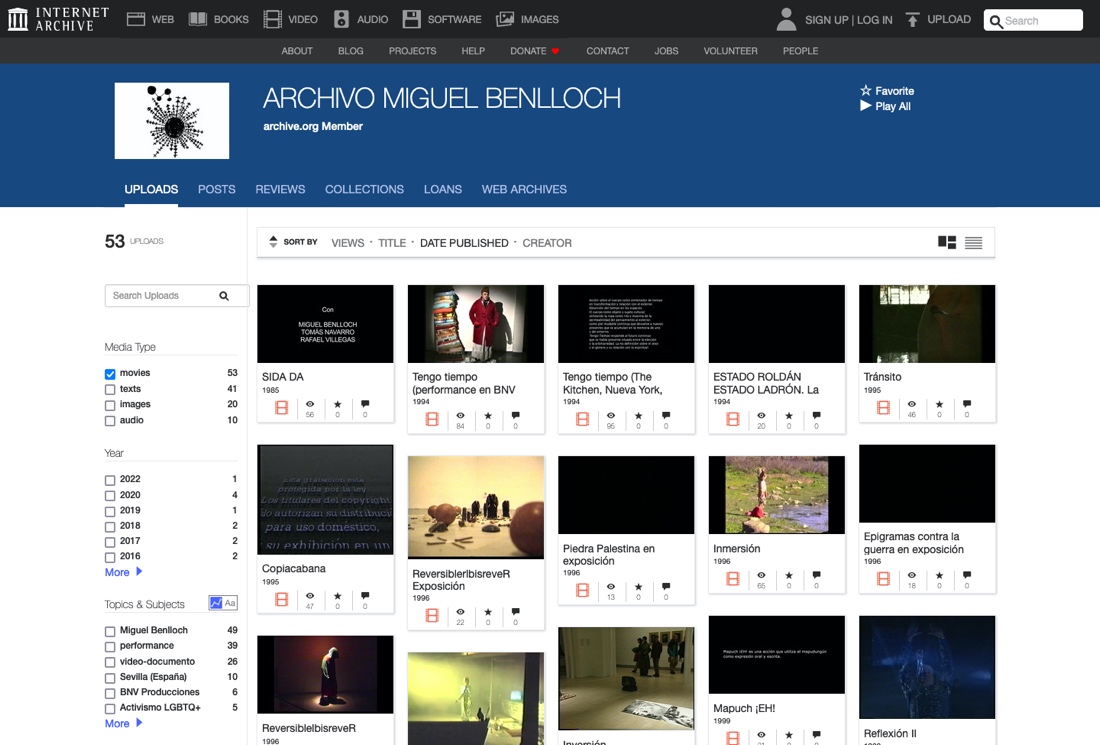


Fig. 6.17. Items uploaded by the AMB to the Internet Archive. Courtesy of the Archivo Miguel Benlloch

Likewise, the IA’s Wayback Machine (IAWM) is used to record external websites linked from the AMB’s domain, to ensure access to them even in case of the original source being no longer live on the WWW. External links are an important part of the AMB and they extend its remit well beyond the preservation of works created by Benlloch himself. Furthermore, those links do not include just well-established sources but also more ephemeral ones, covering formal and informal forms of ‘social memory’.[[59]](#footnote-59)

Supplementing such a central element, the digital media ecosystem of the AMB also includes other third-party platforms that aim to improve access to content and long-term preservation. Zenodo, a European open science publicly-funded[[60]](#footnote-60) repository, is used to host research materials within the AMB that are relevant to scholars in the diverse Social Science and Humanities disciplines. Additionally, two commercial platforms are part of the AMB’ digital ecosystem too: Vimeo and Flickr. Both platforms offer the possibility to restrict access to content where needed and combine freemium use with paid subscriptions.

By prioritizing the use of infrastructures operated by non-commercial entities, both public and private, the AMB aims to protect Benlloch’s legacy from logics dictated by the dominant political economy of the web, which has too often led to the disappearance of online services and platforms.[[61]](#footnote-61) However, it should be noted that organizations that do not rely on commercial revenues are also vulnerable to important threats, such as litigation from various industries.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Putting AMB’s digital eggs into more than one online basket, the hope is to increase the chances of long-term preservation despite limited resources and support from cultural heritage institutions. In the future, the AMB will look forward to harnessing other online systems, with particular interest in non-profit community projects such as Conifer,[[63]](#footnote-63) decentralized online infrastructures such as PeerTube,[[64]](#footnote-64) and public service internet initiatives[[65]](#footnote-65) such as the Spanish Web Archive.[[66]](#footnote-66)

## Conclusion

Throughout his lifetime, Miguel Benlloch not only played a key role in several fronts of political and cultural activism in southern Spain, but also developed a fully-fledged identity as an internationally recognized contemporary artist. Far from operating as two independent dimensions of his existence, they overlapped to become one and the same thing while also intersecting with his career as cultural producer and partner in BNV Productions. As an activist in the 1970s and 1980s, he soon realized the potential of aesthetics in political struggles and, over the years, his creative practice became more and more prominent; though never abandoning the aspiration of instigating social change. On the contrary, he made such a goal a signature of his artwork.

While the AMB was established to preserve, give access to, and keep Benlloch’s legacy alive, it goes well beyond his own person and helps to better understand some of the social movements, struggles, and sensibilities that defined the last and first decades of the 20th and 21st Centuries respectively. Likewise, considering the fact that his practice unfolded across the transition from predigital to postdigital times and the particularity that the AMB has been embodied into various incarnations already, the chapter offers relevant insights into the (re)configuration of hybrid socio-material arrangements aimed at archiving art-activism. More specifically, it sheds light on the process of transforming performance art into archival materials as the line between works and documentation may blur.

The chapter also offers a detailed overview of the practices, actors, architecture, and infrastructures that bring the AMB into being. In this regard, it reflects upon a number of critical choices that anyone concerned with the archival of activism should carefully consider. Beyond the practicalities of storing and giving access to records in the short term, it deals with long term preservation and the ethical implications of deploying information and communication technologies within the wider political economy that underpins the current postdigital media ecology.

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