

# **ARCHIVING ACTIVISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE**

## COLOPHON

INC Theory on Demand #52  
**Archiving Activism in the Digital Age**

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## 01. ARCHIVING ACTIVISM IN THE DIGITAL AGE: INTRODUCTION

ANN RIGNEY AND DANIELE SALERNO

### Memory and activism

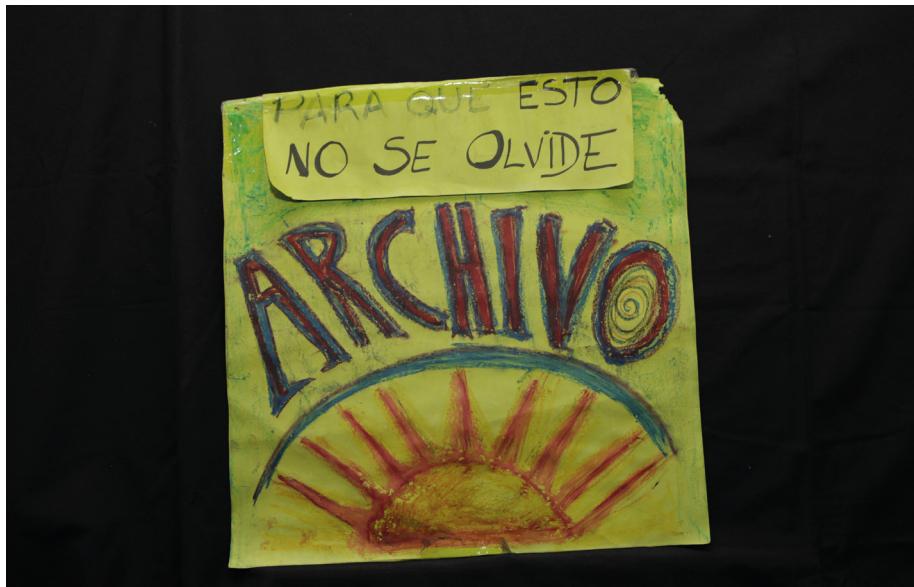


Fig. 1.1.: 'So that this is not forgotten – Archive' courtesy of archivo15M – Sociedad Civil en Movimiento

At first sight, the phrase 'So that this is not forgotten' (in Spanish: 'Para que esto no se olvide') seems more appropriate to the hard marble of a war memorial than to a thin sticky note. But it is precisely that phrase in all its resonance which is used in the above image with reference to 15M, the Spanish anti-austerity movement that played out in the cities of Spain in the spring of 2011. More precisely, it is used with reference to the archive of 15M, which is presented as a bulwark against forgetting something that deserves to be remembered.

This amateurish composition of words and images now serves as the cover of the digital booklet that compiles the minutes of meetings held between 2011 and 2017 to create an archive documenting what happened in those eventful days of protests.<sup>1</sup> The archive was first named 'Acampada Sol', after the occupation of the central square of Puerta del Sol in Madrid.

<sup>1</sup> Archivo 15M, *Recopilación de las Actas de la Comisión de archivo físico de Acampada Sol, luego renombrada como Archivo15M*, Madrid: Archivo 15M, 2022.

Later on, the archive was renamed 15M, shorthand for 15 May, the day activists occupied the square setting up the encampment (also hashtagged and nicknamed as #AcampaSol).

The minutes of the first meeting describe how fourteen activists gathered on 31 May 2011, in a street located a bit apart from the very heart of the protests, to discuss how to transmit the legacy and narratives of the demonstrations to future generations. They argued for putting the question of memory on the movement's agenda by bringing 'the idea of heritage to everyone in the acampada [campsite]'.<sup>2</sup> They discussed how to collect material during the protest and protect it in case of police intervention. They started imagining how to digitize the physical material produced by the movement, debating about the very idea of 'digital archive' and whether to collaborate with existing institutions for preserving the archive for later generations. In short, activists were already imagining how the ongoing protests would be remembered in the future and in the long-term, and taking steps to shape that memory by creating an archive.

Although the 15M occupation lasted just a few weeks, the minutes of the archiving group cover six years. Their archival lab outlasted the visible protest by far, indicating that social movements live beyond and beneath their spectacular and visible waves of contention.<sup>3</sup> The existence of the 15M archive is a reminder that protest movements do not just have a history (taking place at one particular moment) but also have afterlives in the form of stories, images, and other material traces. Until very recently, however, activist mnemonic and archival labour has flown under the radar of scholars both of social movements and collective memory.

Ironically, the phrase that argues for the lasting preservation of the history of the 15M movement is written on a support made for short-lived reminders (and indeed the words 'para que' are already fading). But the words do persist: digitized and preserved in the 15M Archive, these vulnerable materials are now available in digital form as the cover picture for the minutes of the physical archive commission assemblies.

Together with the minutes of their many meetings, the sticky note with its memorializing message reflects the labour and ambitions of the 15M archiving group. It also encapsulates many of the issues that readers will find in this collection of essays: the interplay between remembering and forgetting, the analogue and the digital, the past and the unfolding present and future, as these play out in the archiving of social movements. Whereas the latter are usually seen as forward-looking, the efforts put into the 15M's archive, now housed in the Tres Peces cultural centre in Madrid,<sup>4</sup> serves as a reminder that memory and activism are more intimately entangled than hitherto surmised; and that archiving has been a way for activists to constitute themselves as mnemonic communities as well as political actors.

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2 Archivo 15M, *Recopilación*, 4.

3 Kevin Gillan, 'Temporality in Social Movement Theory: Vectors and Events in the Neoliberal Timescape', *Social Movement Studies* 19 (2020): 516–536.

4 Discussed in Juan F. Egea, 'Square Photography: Picture Taking and Archival Activism in 15M', *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies* 23.2 (2022): 181–196.

The question how people articulate past, present and future in making sense of the world has been studied from different perspectives.<sup>5</sup> But how different temporalities play into struggles for social change has, until quite recently, been a neglected issue in both memory and social movement studies. Things are changing in both fields. Within memory studies, our field of research, there have been calls for more attention to the role of memory in civic life, specifically in political contention as being at the heart of democratic societies.<sup>6</sup> In that context, the concept of a memory-activism nexus has been proposed<sup>7</sup> as a heuristic framework, entailing the study of the interplay between *memory activism* (concerted attempts to change dominant narratives), the *memory of activism* (how later activism is remembered and transmitted across a variety of cultural forms) and *memory in activism* (how memory, specifically of earlier movements, informs later ones). Within social movement studies,<sup>8</sup> the ‘movement-memory nexus’ has been proposed along similar lines.<sup>9</sup> Studying the ways in which social movements are archived, by themselves and by others, promises to add a new dimension to these discussions. Not just by highlighting archiving as a specific future-oriented mnemonic practice but one that may, in certain hands, be considered a specifically activist one. That activist mnemonic practice doesn’t answer to current definition of ‘memory activism’, which emphasizes challenges to dominant narratives; here the mnemonic activism is directed instead towards providing the condition for activism to be remembered in the future.

Archives – as concept, as cultural phenomenon, and as resource – have long figured in humanities scholarship, providing a basis for discussions of their role in activism to which we will return. In social movement studies, in contrast, archives have hardly figured at all as media of transgenerational memory transmission. Instead, the idea of a ‘repertoire’ – consisting of models for interaction transmitted by embodied performances – has been used to explain, not just shared practices in the present, but also how knowledge of those practices is carried across time in social movements.<sup>10</sup> Crucially, this ‘strong’ understanding of repertoire<sup>11</sup> helps explain continuities and changes in the form taken by contentious actions across generations

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- 5 See the classic Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Times*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. More recently, a reflection on the articulation between past and future temporalities in texts is offered in Daniele Salerno and Jorge Lozano, ‘Future. A Time of History’, *Versus* 131 (2020): 189–206; an analysis of how this articulation plays a fundamental role in activism is offered in []{\_Hlk134185790 .anchor}Ann Rigney, ‘Memoryscapes in Activism: The Commonwealth, 1885–1894’, unpublished mss.
- 6 Yifat Gutman, *Memory Activism: Reimagining the Past for the Future in Israel-Palestine*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2017; Jenny Wüstenberg, *Civil Society and Memory in Post-War Germany*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- 7 Ann Rigney, ‘Remembering Hope: Transnational Activism Beyond the Traumatic’, *Memory Studies* 11.3 (2018): 368–380.
- 8 Priska Daphi and Lorenzo Zamponi, ‘Exploring the Movement-Memory Nexus: Insights and Ways Forward’, *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 24.4 (2019): 399–417.
- 9 More recent publications adding to our knowledge of this nexus include Stefan Berger, Sean Scalmer and Christian Wicke (eds), *Remembering Social Movements: Activism and Memory*, London-New York: Routledge, 2021; Yifat Gutman and Jenny Wüstenberg (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Memory Activism*, London-New York: Routledge, 2023.
- 10 Charles Tilly, *Contentious Performances*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- 11 Charles Tilly, ‘Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain, 1758–1834’ in Mark Traugott (ed), *Repertoires and Cycles of Collective Action*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995, 27.

without those involved having access to formal archives or archiving practices.<sup>12</sup> Given this emphasis on embodied transmission, social movement studies have at best looked to (institutional) archives as historical sources for reconstructing and comparing repertoires of protest over time and across different locations. This preponderance of the concept of repertoire in social movement studies explains the traditional lack of interest in activist recordmaking during protests and the setting up of archives, by participants and observers, to ensure that the legacy of protests and social movements is carried over to future generations. The emerging interest in the role of memory in activism provides a new context in which to bring alternatives to embodied transmission into the understanding of continuities across movements, especially in the digital era.

## Changing notions of the ‘archive’

Archiving has been the subject of intense reflection in multiple disciplines within the humanities, not all of whom speak the same language. Michelle Caswell, in an essay called “The Archive” Is Not an Archives<sup>13</sup> has noted the gap between experts in information sciences, like herself, who think of archives in the plural as dynamic sites of knowledge production, and cultural theorists who have tended to use the term in the singular and with a capital ‘A’ in line with influential work by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.<sup>14</sup> While our collection is interested above all of the nuts and bolts of archiving in the plural, it takes from more philosophical approaches some fundamental insights into the nature of archives in order to frame our understanding of archiving as a mnemonic practice.

Taking state archives as paradigmatic of all archival projects, Foucault sees archives as instruments of control, as constituting the ‘condition of possibility’ of discursive production (‘the archive is first the law of what can be said’<sup>15</sup>). In line with this reasoning but with different emphases, Derrida then posited ‘the Archive’ as a virtual site for imagining alternatives to state-sponsored projects of recording; on the one hand, by dismissing institutional archives as an ultimately futile and power-driven attempt to fix knowledge in favour of other forms of knowledge transferred in an ever-renewed form through the repertoire of embodied practices; on the other hand, by positing the existence of the ‘an-archive’ as a repository for marginalized knowledge: every act of selection produces an un-archived remainder beyond the reach of official records.<sup>16</sup>

12 According to Tilly a ‘strong’ understanding of repertoire implies: ‘(a) social relations, meanings, and actions cluster together in known, recurrent patterns and (b) many possible contentious actions never occur because the potential participants lack the requisite knowledge, memory, and social connections’. Tilly, ‘Contentious Repertoires’, 27.

13 Michelle Caswell, “The Archive” Is Not an Archives: On Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies’, *Reconstruction: Studies in Contemporary Culture* 16.1 (2016): n.p. See also Anne J. Gilliland, Sue McKemmish and Andrew J. Lau (eds), *Research in the Archival Multiverse*, Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2017.

14 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: a Freudian Impression*, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996. Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, London-New York: Routledge, 2002 [1969].

15 Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, 145.

16 See Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Durham,

The role of archives has been persistently flagged in memory studies as a key factor in cultural memory-making, but it has rarely been studied in its own right. The exception to this general rule is Aleida Assmann's conceptualization of the relationship between 'archive' and 'memory'.<sup>17</sup> Although her terminology has slightly shifted over time, her approach remains based on a fundamental distinction between passive and active forms of memory, with 'working memory' associated with narratives that are in circulation and 'storage memory' associated with the archival storage of information. The archive, here too associated with bureaucracy and state power, is based on selected information that has been deemed important enough to preserve and, although it has not yet been interpreted and brought into structures of meaning, it has the potential to be activated – and hence to become active, working and narrativized – at a later point in time. 'The archive, therefore, can be described as a space that is located on the border between forgetting and remembering, its materials are preserved in a state of latency, in a space of intermediary storage (*Zwischenspeicher*)'.<sup>18</sup> Against this background, Assmann argues further that the more that institutionalized archives are tailor made to match hegemonic narratives ('canonical memory') the more they took on the character of 'political archives'. In more democratic societies, in contrast, the archive is ideally constituted in a more open way as truly 'historical archives' that can become in the long-term a resource for alternative narratives: 'Where political archives function as an important tool for power, historical archives store information which is no longer of immediate use' and constitute 'a kind of "lost-and-found office" for what is no longer needed or immediately understood'.<sup>19</sup>

Assmann's key contribution here is her understanding of archives as a form of latent memory, situated between forgetting and remembering, between raw data and its interpretation and narrativization. Her distinction between latent and working memory implies that the dynamics of memory-making are oriented towards the future as well as past even if that future is, as yet, undetermined or merely aspirational. In this, she echoes Derrida: '[T]he question of the archive is not, I repeat, a question of the past...but rather a question of the future, the very question of the future, question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what this will have meant, we will only know tomorrow'.<sup>20</sup> What both theorists share is a belief that the boundaries of an archive are porous and that archives are not fortresses but rather changing in their meaning and composition as part of a larger ecology. This fundamental principle has been echoed by recent advocates of the 'living' archive.<sup>21</sup>

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NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

17 Aleida Assmann. *Erinnerungsräume: Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses*. München: C.H. Beck Verlag, 1999: 342–347.

18 Aleida Assmann, 'Canon and Archive' in Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (eds), *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2008, 103.

19 Assmann, 'Canon and Archive', 102 and 106.

20 Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 36

21 Stuart Hall, 'Constituting an Archive'. *Third Text*, 54 (2001): 89–92; Phil Cohen, *Archive That, Comrade: Left Legacies and the Counter Culture of Remembrance*, Oakland: PM Press, 2018; Red Chidgey, 'How to Curate a "Living Archive": The Restlessness of Activist Time and Labour' in Samuel Merrill, Priska Daphi and Emily Keightley (eds), *Social Movements, Cultural Memory and Digital Media*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 225–248.

For all the value of this basic insight, theoretical approaches to ‘the archive’ remain very much tied to one model: institutionalised collections produced by professionals, funded by the state, and hence linked to issues of power and governance. In the last decades, however, changes in the very nature of archiving as a cultural phenomenon have occurred in tandem with new conceptualisations of archiving on the part of scholars and practitioners that integrate the idea that archives are dynamic sites and go well beyond this equation between archives and state-based repositories of written documents. To echo Caswell, “‘The Archive’ is not an archives’ and state-organised repositories are no longer (if they ever were) the only act in town. Several inter-related developments can be flagged here.

These revolve around democratisation and technological innovation. Since at least the 1960s the idea of ‘a right to (the) archive’ and in general to ‘a right to memory’ has become more widespread and paved the way for new historiographical and archival practices aiming for greater inclusivity. A milestone in this development was the emergence of oral history as a method to capture histories that were nowhere preserved in the form of written record and often linked to the experiences of people without cultural capital who figured only in criminal and medical records.<sup>22</sup> The ‘right to (the) archive’ has also been taken literally. Archives have been extending the scope of their collecting practices to become more representative as well as opening up their collections to the public in the form of exhibitions on the principle that accessibility and ‘public participation’ should be more central to their workings. Archiving and curation, conservation and access, have thus become more closely entangled as institutions have become more public facing.

Moreover, archiving occurs increasingly outside the framework of heritage institutions. The number of new citizen-based community archives is rapidly increasing and such concepts as ‘living archives’, ‘community archives’ and ‘autonomous archives’<sup>23</sup> becoming common currency in critical archival studies.<sup>24</sup> Carried in part by skilled ‘pro-ams’,<sup>25</sup> community archives have become one of the pillars in constituting group identity both to its own members and to the outside world. Its very existence bears witness to the fact the group has had a history and aspires to a future, and provides ‘evidence for the creation and continuation of claims to identities and places’<sup>26</sup> which is particularly important for emergent groups seeking to establish or ‘institute’ themselves.<sup>27</sup>

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- 22 Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, London-New York: Routledge, 2003; Debra Ramsay, ‘Tensions in the Interface. The Archive and the Digital’ in Andrew Hoskins (ed), *Digital Memory Studies. Media Pasts in Transition*, London-New York: Routledge, 294.
- 23 Hall, ‘Constituting an Archive’; Andrew Flinn and Ben Alexander, “‘Humanizing an Inevitability Political Craft’: Introduction to the Special Issue on Archiving Activism and Activist Archiving’, *Archival Science* 15 (2015): 329–335[!{#\_Hlk134185990 .anchor}]; Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens and Elizabeth Shepherd, ‘Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream’, *Archival Science* 9 (2009): 71–86; Shaunna Moore and Susan Pell, ‘Autonomous Archives’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 16.4 (2010): 255–268.
- 24 Michelle Caswell, Ricardo Punzalan and T-Kay Sangwand, ‘Critical Archive Studies: An Introduction’, *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1.2 (2017): 1–8.
- 25 Abigail De Kosnik, *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016, 26.
- 26 Moore and Pell, ‘Autonomous Archives’: 255, 257.
- 27 Daniele Salerno, ‘An Instituting Archive for Memory Activism: The Archivo de la Memoria Trans de

In line with this role of archives in constituting publics, theorists have also increasingly recognised that archival collections are not only a source of information but can also be a focus for affective investment and hence a repository of shareable feelings and emotions.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the very labour involved in collecting, ordering, making accessible, and caring for the records in the archive acts has been seen as an agent of community-building especially when the resources being archived are material ones, hence requiring the physical presence of their guardians at a designated place.

The value attached to public participation reflects the democratization that has been affecting many fields of cultural production and, in the case of archiving, has fostered new ideas about ownership, stakeholdership, and accountability, and idea that involved citizens should have the possibility of making their own records about their own experiences. The downside of this extension of the ‘right to (the) archive’ means that the relevant know-how (in terms of archival architecture, metadata, sustainability of access) is not always present in such initiatives or the relevant infrastructural support. But the ensuing dilemmas have also been generating new collaborations between professionals and amateurs in, for example, the formation of community archives<sup>29</sup> with the help of engaged archivists whose role is conceived more in terms of mediation, public service and outreach than in terms of the hieratic control of an archive set up and then ‘protected’ by experts from the public at large. Where traditionally archiving served administration, law, and the writing of history, it is now also linked to social justice and community-building<sup>30</sup> as well as to public outreach, often in conjunction with the arts. Seen within this framework, archives have become open-ended and dynamic sites where the question ‘what is to be preserved’ is continuously being linked to its societal value in the here and now; and where ‘meaning’ is produced rather than fixed.<sup>31</sup>

More could be said about current theories of archiving both within the field of information science and humanities at large, but enough has been hopefully said (1) to definitively dismiss the idea their being a monolithic ‘archive’ that represents an exclusive and state-sponsored form of knowledge; (2) to support the idea that we can better think of *archiving* (note the verbal form) in the plural as a multi-sited and multi-actorial phenomenon; and (c), that *archiving* operates through texts, images, objects that are collected and arranged as part of a future-oriented and, in the case of emergent groups, aspirational mode of remembrance that is not yet (and may never become) narrative in form. It’s memory as emergent, as potentiality and as aspiration,<sup>32</sup> rather than as *fait accompli*.

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Argentina’, *Memory Studies* online first (2023): 1–17; Michelle Caswell, Alda Allina Migoni, Noah Geraci and Marika Cifor, “To Be Able to Imagine Otherwise”: Community Archives and the Importance of Representation’, *Archives and Records* 38.1 (2017): 5–26.

28 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003.

29 Michelle Caswell, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*, London-New York: Routledge, 2021.

30 Heather MacNeil and Terry Eastwood, ‘Introduction: Shifting Currents’ in Heather MacNeil and Terry Eastwood (eds), *Currents of Archival Thinking*, Santa Barbara, CA and Denver, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 2017, xii.

31 Cohen, *Archive That, Comrade*, 56.

32 Arjun Appadurai, ‘Archive and Aspiration’ in Joke Brouwer and Arjen Mulder (eds), *Information Is Alive*,

## Activism and the digital

The flourishing of oral history since the 1960s was possible also because technological innovation made the recording of aural – and later visual – information more affordable and manageable. Digital technology has played a similar role in the democratization of archiving practices outlined above. Since the 1990s, the right to (the) archive found a powerful tool in the digital and the internet, with their promise of unlimited and affordable possibilities for storing, reproducing and making available not only written texts, but also visual, audio, and audio-visual information. Digitisation in its various facets has meant that information can be easily replicated but, more importantly, that control over the means of archival production is no longer the privilege of institutions but open to all those who care about certain topics or causes enough to collect information and preserve it for the future. This has led to the emergence of archives that are supported and organised by amateurs or off-duty professionals in their role as committed citizens.

But more fundamentally for our topic here, digitization has changed the very nature of activism itself by providing new social media platforms for expressing dissent and mobilizing opposition be that as part of a movement or as an individual ‘artivist’ in exile with no direct access to public space (see Ann-Katrine Schmidt Nielsen’s chapter below). The term ‘media activism’ captures this new arena, which offers new opportunities for groups who because of disability or geographical distance have otherwise no easy access to the usual repertoire of contention to the extent that this relies on physical presence (see Pollaert and Van Trigt’s chapter below).

Moreover, digitization has also changed the nature of embodied activism. As Castells has argued, these have become ‘hybrid’: demonstrations are prepared online, rely on online interactions even as they are being carried out on-site and, crucially for our topic here, rely on digital technologies to record their own actions.<sup>33</sup> The ease with which contemporary campaigns can be recorded – with the possibility of capturing sound, movement, and visuals greatly enhanced – means that recent protest organically create enormous quantities of images (and hence generates one of the most important preconditions for archiving: the availability of information).

The Global Justice movement, starting in the late 1990s with the protests in Seattle<sup>34</sup> and continuing in Genoa in 2001,<sup>35</sup> was arguably the first ‘born digital’ movement<sup>36</sup> to integrate digital recording into the ‘repertoire of contention’. Accordingly, when the Italian police raided the Social Forum headquarter and media centre during the protests against the G8 summit

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Rotterdam: V\_2, 2003, 14–25.

- 33 Manuel Castells, *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012. See also Emiliano Treré, *Hybrid Media Activism: Ecologies, Imaginaries, Algorithms*, London-New York: Routledge, 2019.
- 34 See Donatella della Porta (ed), *The Global Justice Movement. Cross-National and Transnational Perspectives*, London-New York: Routledge, 2007.
- 35 See Gabriele Proglio, *I fatti di Genova. Una storia orale del G8*, Roma: Donzelli, 2021.
- 36 Yvonne Liebermann, ‘Born Digital: The Black Lives Matter Movement and Memory After the Digital Turn’, *Memory Studies* 14.4 (2021): 713–732.

in Genoa in July 2001, their first target was the servers and materials that media activist organizations – among them Indymedia, a global network of independent media outlets –

had accumulated as evidence of police repression (which had caused, among other consequences, the death of 23-year-old demonstrator Carlo Giuliani). The hard disks were seized, and the computers illegally destroyed. This shows how at the beginning of the new century, both activists and police were well aware of the power of digital tools in accumulating evidence against the police and state repression, with the potential to be later used, in the media, to counter distortions of the facts and, in court, to obtain justice. Moreover, recordings such as the video documenting the killing of the demonstrator Neda Salehi Agha-Soltan in Tehran in 2009, when brought into circulation in acts of ‘media activism’, feed back into a protest movement while also creating, thanks to the internet, transnational networks of solidarity.<sup>37</sup>

Mike Lukovich’s cartoon on the Wave of Green movement in Iran in 2009 illustrates well how the presence of recording devices increasingly shaped interactions between protesters and police throughout the 2000s. Reworking the famous photo of the Tankman in Tiananmen Square in 1989, Lukovich highlights the role that smartphones and social media platforms were believed to be playing in the Iranian protests.

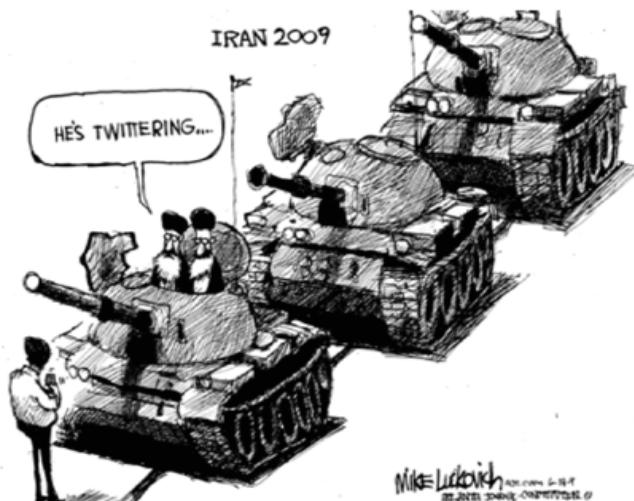


Fig. 1.2. *The Tank Man of Iran, 2009* (courtesy of Mike Luckovich).

Beyond their evidentiary function, recordings made by activists also have a role in helping the latter to tell their own story and in their own terms as it is unfolding but also in the future. For that to happen, however, ephemeral materials need to be preserved and made accessible

<sup>37</sup> Aleida Assmann and Corinna Assmann, ‘Neda: The Career of a Global Icon’ in Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad (eds), *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, 225–242.

in the long-term; in other words, archived. It is no coincidence then that movements have started to set up their own archives and, indeed, to integrate archiving along with recording in the repertoire of contention. Memory work is not something that occurs after the fact, but is already integrated into movements as they anticipate how their actions may inspire new forms of protest and give the movement and its message an afterlife.

## Between archiving activists and activist archivists

As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, self-archiving has become a way for activists to constitute themselves as mnemonic communities as well as political actors – witness the work of archiving committees within 15M, but also in Occupy in the USA, Nuit Debout in France, the Egyptian Revolution and – as Özge Çelikaslan shows in her chapter below – in the Gezi Park Protests.<sup>38</sup> These initiatives have in turn led to the emergence of a metadiscourse about archiving and the importance of ‘movement-memory’<sup>39</sup> exemplified by the US-based Interference Archive<sup>40</sup> that aims to provide a virtual hub for different social movements by collecting post factum materials as well as exhibiting material online, offering a counterpart to the physical space of the MayDay rooms discussed by Rosemary Grennan below. Other websites offer practical advice to activists on how to set up their own archive.<sup>41</sup> To be sure, archiving is not usually the first priority of those caught up in a protest cycle both because it takes time and energy away from the struggle at hand, and imagines a moment when that struggle will belong to the past. When movements run out of steam or are forced off the streets, however, cultivating its memory through archiving may be the only form of survival possible.

Activist archiving has a ‘constitutive’ function, to use Stuart Hall’s term.<sup>42</sup> It provides evidence of the movement’s existence and its action: to the movement itself and to the outside world. In the process, it defines its legacy in its own terms rather than those of the mainstream media which tends to emphasize the issue of law and order rather than the movement’s experiences and aspirations.<sup>43</sup> Self-archiving, finally, allows for the movement to ‘stay on message’ for its own supporters as they seek to imagine the movement as a whole from the ground up;

38 See also Chidgey, ‘How to Curate a “Living Archive”’. Donatella Della Ratta, Kay Dickinson and Sune Haugbole (eds), *The Arab Archive: Mediated Memories and Digital Flows*, Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2020.

39 Priska Daphi, *Becoming a Movement: Identity, Narrative and Memory in the European Global Justice Movement*, London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017; Lorenzo Zamponi, *Social Movements, Memory and Media: Narrative in Action in the Italian and Spanish Student Movements*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

40 Interference Archive, <https://interferencearchive.org/>

41 See for example: Witness, ‘Archives for Change: Activist Archives, Archival Activism’, <https://blog.witness.org/2010/09/archives-for-change-activist-archives-archival-activism/>; British Library, ‘Archiving Activism Website’, <https://blogs.bl.uk/socialscience/2018/05/archiving-activism-website-launch.html>; British Library, ‘Archiving Activism’, <https://www.bl.uk/projects/archiving-activism>; Archiving Activism, <https://archivingactivism.com/>

42 Hall, ‘Constituting an Archive’. Recently Daniele Salerno has proposed the concept of ‘instituting force’ of activist archiving see Salerno, ‘An Instituting Archive’.

43 Egea, ‘Square Photography’.

but also, most importantly, for later generations.<sup>44</sup> Struggles to control the narrative occur as events are unfolding but are also prolonged in struggles about how best to remember it. Having one's own archive offers a bulwark against absorption into hegemonic narratives and a bolthole for keeping alive the memory of the hopes that inspired the movement. Claiming the title 'archive' can give greater authority and credibility to a group's materials and, by extension, their knowledge.<sup>45</sup>

Rebecka Taves Sheffield recently suggested that archives serve as abeyance structures for social movements,<sup>46</sup> while Phil Cohen<sup>47</sup> has compared them poetically to Noah's Ark in that they keep a movement's energy in place until such time as a later generation will reactivate it: 'Under these circumstances the drive to archive, to construct a little ark of political covenant in the hope that at some future date, it may be opened under/more hospitable circumstances, is correspondingly intense'.<sup>48</sup> This drive towards archiving activism with an eye to its future influence brings memory work and activism into a very close alliance: archiving in such circumstances becomes an integral part of political action. It creates the conditions for the protest to have an afterlife in memory, hence giving it the potential to become a source of inspiration in the future. The images collected in the 15M archive were mainly taken from the perspective of the precariat involved rather than from the helicopter perspective of the authorities,<sup>49</sup> thus constituting a sensorium for re-experiencing the event as well as lasting evidence of its worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment or what Tilly has called a movement's WUNC.<sup>50</sup>

One way or another, archiving has become such a significant part of recent social movements that skills in recordmaking and recordkeeping is now seen as a part of the repertoire of contention itself.<sup>51</sup> The term 'archival activism' reflects the idea that managing the records of a movement extends that movement, and constitutes a form of activism by other means.<sup>52</sup> Accepting that archiving is part of the protest repertoire cuts through the opposition between 'repertoire' (as embodied knowledge) and 'archive' (as inscribed knowledge) advanced, for example, by Diana Taylor in her influential book *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), where the intergenerational transmission of the embodied knowledge of the oppressed is posited as an alternative to the oppressive state and colonial archive based on written documents.

44 See for example Lorenzo Zamponi, '#ioricordo, Beyond the Genoa G8: Social Practices of Memory Work and the Digital Remembrance of Contentious Pasts in Italy' in Samuel Merrill, Priska Daphi and Emily Keightley (eds), *Social Movements, Cultural Memory and Digital Media*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p 141–171.

45 Susan Pell, 'Radicalizing the Politics of the Archive: An Ethnographic Reading of an Activist Archive', *Archivaria* 80 (2015): 45.

46 Rebecka Taves Sheffield, *Documenting Rebellions: A Study of Four Lesbian and Gay Archives in Queer Times*, Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2020. Although Sheffield's analysis is focused on LGBT archives, it is possible to imagine her suggestion applicable to many types of activist archives.

47 Cohen, *Archive That, Comrade*, 12.

48 Cohen, *Archive That, Comrade*, 28–29.

49 Egea, 'Square Photography'.

50 Tilly, *Contentious Performances*.

51 Pell, 'Radicalizing the Politics of the Archive': 34.

52 Egea, 'Square Photography'.

Reflecting the more general trend towards participatory archiving, activists have emphasized the importance of communality in the constitution of their archive as an extension of the horizontality of their politics. In the words of a member of the group responsible for archiving the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement: ‘What better way to make the archive accountable to the people than to make the people accountable for the archive?’.<sup>53</sup> Alongside the idea that an archive should be a shared ‘commons’, is the commitment that it should be made by and for the activists themselves. Accordingly, ‘autonomous archiving’<sup>54</sup> has become an important principle, autonomous meaning in this instance freedom from all interference from outside the movement itself (something of especial importance in cases, such as the Turkish one, in which police surveillance is an ongoing concern). Part of that autonomy, again reflecting a commitment to the commons, is to use open source platforms. ‘Each of these activist archives does more than collect; they also enact the politics of their communities’.<sup>55</sup>

Nevertheless, autonomy is not necessarily an easy or sustainable option (see in this volume the chapter by Özge Çelikaslan). The tension between autonomy and expertise, mentioned earlier in relation to community archives, plays out in an acute way in the case of social movements. As Message shows with respect to OWS, suspicion of parasitic cultural institutions eager to collect memorabilia with a view to exhibiting them, fear of the consequences of cooperation with existing institutions for the status of the materials collected fed into the desire for autonomy.<sup>56</sup> As Kera Lovell shows below in relation to the People’s Park movement, the possibility of making digital copies of vulnerable materials has greatly assisted efforts to preserve the memory of a movement despite the indifference of institutions. And yet, without professional and institutional support – be that an existing heritage institution or an one set up by activists themselves – it may be hard to preserve and manage vulnerable materials over a longer period. Since a large part of activism is embodied and performative, capturing it in the form of digital records is a challenge in itself and requires considerable expertise, as is brought out below in Daniel Villar-Onrubia’s contribution to our collection.

The challenge is not just one of getting access to that expertise, but also of accessing resources. Material archives require physical storage space and suitable conditions for the preservation of vulnerable documents and banners. Digital archives also require significant investment in virtual storage space: the 858.ma archive of the Egyptian revolution includes thousands of hours of footage, for example, which, if it is to be preserved and legible in the long-term, will need financial as well as technical support. Moreover, the lack of continuity between one protest wave and another can lead to discontinuous stakeholdership: the mnemonic community supporting the archive may dissolve after the mobilization has passed whereas the archive itself aims to provide a long-term perspective on a particular movement.

53 Jeremy Bold in Kyle Message, *Collecting Activism, Archiving Occupy Wall Street*. London: Routledge, 2019, 175.

54 Artıkışır Collective (Özge [I]{#\_Hlk124357376 .anchor}Çelikaslan, Alper Şen, Pelin Tan) (ed), *Autonomous Archiving*, Barcelona: DPR, 2016; see also Pell, ‘Radicalizing the Politics of the Archive’.

55 Alycia Sellie, Jesse Goldstein, Molly Fair and Jennifer Hoyer, ‘Interference Archive: A Free Space for Social Movement Culture’, *Archival Science* 15 (2015): 457.

56 Kyle Message, *Collecting Activism*.

The tension between institutions and ‘rogues’, and how to resolve it, is one of the red threads in our collection. Solutions include cooperation with institutions that have a track record in providing a home for archives of activism, be they made from within a movement as it is unfolding or post-hoc collected by allies. In contrast to the caricatural linking of ‘the archive’ to oppressive state power, an exploration of the variety of archives in practice points to the existence of friendly institutions with a mission to provide the sustainable infrastructure for preserving the memory of social movements. Cases in point are the Tamiment library at New York University, where the archives of OWS were deposited after much debate; the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam and the Bishopsgate Library in London, which have a long track record in the preservation of materials related to oppositional movements; and the Centro de Documentación e Investigación de la Cultura de Izquierdas (CeDInCI) in Buenos Aires, which is devoted to the preservation of materials produced by Latin American Left movements. One should also note the existence of cultural centres such as the May Day Rooms (see in this volume Rosemary Grennan’s essay) which, in being devoted to the archiving of multiple movements, offer a measure of institutional stability within a changing activist landscape. According to Phil Cohen, such ‘living archives’ of past protest are important sites for bringing people together and for the slow gestation of new movements through the labour of collecting materials and making them available at locations where people can meet.<sup>57</sup>

The existence of the institutions mentioned above raises yet another question; namely, how far do and should professional archivists go in assuming the role of activist so as to ensure that the records of oppositional movements are preserved and interpreted? The answer in part will lie with the mission of the institution within which the archivist is operating and the degree to which it is committed to promoting the memory of particular traditions (as expressed, for example, in the title of the Center for the Documentation and Research of Left-wing Culture based in Buenos Aires). As indicated earlier, new forms of collaboration between archivists and citizens have been emerging in tandem with critical soul-searching as to whether professionalism in archiving is compatible with commitment to causes. In their survey of these complex debates, Flinn and Alexander distinguish between *archiving activism*, the collection and documentation of political and social movement material; *activist archiving*, the making of archives as an integral part of political activism; and *archival activism*, where the archive itself is the focus of campaigning.<sup>58</sup> The latter is illustrated by activism for access rights to state archives in the transition from dictatorship to democracy in Latin American countries.<sup>59</sup> It is illustrated here, from a different perspective, in the chapter by Eline Pollaert and Paul van Trigt which shows, with reference to the Netherlands, how archiving disability history and disability activism is itself a crucial step towards greater visibility and empowerment on the part of a group for whom access to public space is not self-evident.

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57 Phil Cohen, *Archive That, Comrade*.

58 Andrew Flinn and Ben Alexander, “Humanizing an Inevitability Political Craft”.

59 Ludmila da Silva Catela and Elizabeth Jelin (eds), *Los archivos de la represión: documentos, memoria y verdad*, Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI, 2002; Kirsten Weld, *Paper Cadavers. The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014.

The debates on the relation between professional archiving activism are ongoing, as Flore Janssen reminds us in her essay. This collection does not come down on one side or another. But it hopes to have mapped this rocky terrain, showing both the complex interactions between activism and archiving, and the importance of memory to the long-term impact of social movements.

## Outlines of the book

As demonstrated by the minutes of the 15M activists mentioned earlier, archiving the cultural memory of protests entails making a series of decisions regarding what materials should be preserved and how the information should be organized, and made accessible. These decisions constitute what we can call the *politics of archiving*. In this decision-making process, designing the *archive media ecology* and determining the role of the digital in transforming the cultural production of social movements into available archival records is crucial for the very existence of an archive.

In the opening essay, Özge Çelikaslan describes the difficult task of translating the politics of archiving into its material architecture. Çelikaslan analyzes the case of Bak.ma, an archive that originated during the 2013 Gezi Park protests in Turkey. During the protests, activists occupied and turned Istanbul's park into a protest camp to resist the urban development plan of the area and police violence. Protests spread throughout the country, with parks becoming places where people gathered to discuss and oppose police violence. Çelikaslan personally took part in the protests and documented events as a member of the activist media collective Videoccupy. From this frontline position, Çelikaslan describes how media activists recorded protests and collected and secured material recorded by demonstrators across the country. After the protests ended, a group turned their media activism into archival activism, working together to build an archive where they could store and share the material collected during the protests. Çelikaslan describes the archival work that took place after the dissipation of the protest. She argues that affective bonds and attachment to the material and events were the primary resources for sustaining the Bak.ma archive and shaping the Gezi's afterlife. The archive gradually also included material from other movements, from before and after 2013, becoming a point of reference for activism in Turkey and beyond.

If Çelikaslan describes how activists organize the archiving of material produced on the ground, Rosemary Grennan, in her chapter on the MayDay Rooms in the UK, describes how activists conceive archives not just as by-products of a struggle for a cause, but also as the very cause to which their activism is directed. The MayDay Rooms is a collective which emerged in 2014 in response to the austerity and 'zero tolerance' policies of the UK government that threatened the capacity of both institutional and autonomous organizations to preserve and provide access to radical history and the cultural legacy of past social movements. The organization collects, describes, arranges, digitizes and makes material accessible online, providing activists with historical materials from different social movements. The MayDay Rooms also organize meetings in which activists can find inspiration in the archival material and learn to design their own tactics and to archive their own material. In these meetings and in other initiatives that Grennan describes in her chapter, activists and archivists can use archival

records as tools for shaping contentious actions in the present, allowing the transmission, adaptation and cross-fertilization of knowledge about protests and contentious actions across different movements and generations. These practices illustrate how activists use archival records in and for contentious actions in the present, transforming storage memory into working memory (to recall Assmann's distinction). The case of the MayDay Rooms enriches our understanding of the relationship between activism and archiving as well as of memory activism, by showing how the feedback mechanism whereby activists mobilize the legacy of past social movements in seeking inspiration and models for their own action in the present.

Kera Lovell further explores this feedback mechanism by examining how different protest waves, decades apart, have sought to revive the legacy of earlier movements. She does so with reference to the People's Park movement, which was active during the late Vietnam War era in the USA (1960s-70s) and brought activists to occupy vacant lots and transform them into parks as a means of demonstrating against police brutality, gentrification, and racism. Protest camps were often short-lived as police frequently evicted demonstrators after a few days, making the task of documenting these experiences important but also difficult to implement. In the 1990s, a new attempt by Berkeley University to build residential buildings in park areas sparked a new wave of protests, which found an important symbolic and affective precedent in the archival material accumulated in the 1970s. In the 2010s, with Occupy, the legacy of People's Park movements revived through the digitization of archival material and its circulation on social media. Archival records are not merely the material 'residue' of past demonstrations and social movements, Lovell shows, but are active ingredients in later protests by inspiring and shaping actions in the now. They become tools for activists willing to take over the baton from earlier movements.

Lovell concludes her analysis by emphasizing how the performative character of the protest repertoire in the case of the People's Park protest made its archiving very difficult. This challenge is not unique to her case. Tilly compared contentious actions to jazz improvisations or to 'the impromptu skits of a troupe of strolling players'<sup>60</sup> who adapt their repertoire to local circumstances.<sup>61</sup> So how can archives capture the performative nature of protests, which resists traditional recording technologies like writing? Performances are, in fact, ephemeral by nature and pose a series of epistemological and technical challenges to the archivist, which the digital may help resolve. Ann-Katrine Schmidt Nielsen and Daniel Villar-Onrubia reflect in their essays on these dilemmas but bring them back to their non-metaphorical domain: the use of the performing arts for the articulation of dissent.

In his analysis, Schmidt Nielsen takes as her point of departure the use of Instagram by three exiled Afghan artists: Kubra Khademi, Shamsia Hassani, and Rada Akbar. The author argues that social media platforms may work as a platform for archiving activism, allowing artists under the threat of dictatorial regimes to document, reproduce, and distribute their work;

60 Tilly, 'Contentious Repertoires in Great Britain', 27.

61 See also Tilly and Tarrow, *Contentious Politics*: 16; Donatella della Porta, 'Repertoires of Contentions' in David A. Snow, Donatella della Porta, Bert Klandermans and Doug McAdam (eds), *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Social and Political Movements*, Hoboken: Blackwell Publishing, 2013, p 1–3.

furthermore, she argues, social media are not just a means of reproduction and distribution, but also shape aesthetic practice by providing an infrastructure for materializing an archive of feeling (to recall Ann Cvetkovich). Since the return of the Taliban regime in August 2021, the Instagram profiles of Khademi, Hassani, and Akbar serve as archives for their artistic work and for defying Taliban repression. Hassani, a street artist, used Instagram to document the erasure of her work in Kabul by the Taliban. Khademi works on urban space by replacing the plaques naming streets after soldiers and past battles with ones recalling women activists and uses Instagram to record her performances for a broader audience. Akbar, who fled Afghanistan after the return of the Taliban, made her Instagram stories available as a thematic collection in her profile, documenting the daily life of an Afghan woman before the return of the Taliban regime. These records are defiant acts of 'resistant' memory against the return of the Taliban regime.

In the following chapter, Villar-Onrubia examines the digital archive of the Spanish activist and artist Miguel Benlloch. Born in 1954, Benlloch was involved in various groups and movements, such as the Communist movement, the Revolutionary Youth of Andalusia, the Homosexual Liberation Front of Andalusia, and the Andalusian pacifist and anti-NATO movement. Because of his activism, Benlloch's archive serves as a prism through which to view post-dictatorship Spain as well as the transition from pre-digital media scarcity to post-digital media abundance. As a scholar and practitioner personally engaged in archiving Benlloch's cultural production, Villar-Onrubia articulates long-debated ontological issues (for example, is it possible to distinguish between original and copy in a performance?) with the material circumstances and technical options that arise in the (digital) archiving process. Benlloch's political engagement was expressed through his artistic work, which included both performance and creative slogans as a way of acting out dissent. Archiving his cultural production poses a challenge, particularly with regards to preserving and providing access to his ephemeral performances. Despite these challenges, Benlloch recognized the importance of organizing and archiving his work for future generations. Today, [Archivomiguelbenlloch.net](http://Archivomiguelbenlloch.net) serves as a central and permanent node for accessing and connecting the artist's legacy across various online and on-site locations. Villar-Onrubia details the practical steps taken to address the challenges of archiving performances, ultimately providing Benlloch's legacy with a digital home.

The cases discussed by Schmidt Nielsen and Villar-Onrubia show how the digital not only connects different publics online and on-site, but also enables performances to be archived and thus to be made available and visible despite their being ephemeral, for aesthetic reasons (e.g. Benlloch's artistic practices) or because of political constraints (e.g. Afghanistan under the Taliban). The question of visibility returns also in the chapter by Eline Pollaert and Paul van Trigt on disability activism. The authors emphasize that the traditional image of activism as made of in-person mass gatherings makes other forms of activism invisible. This is especially the case with disability activism since disabled activists may not have access to physical protests, and their online activism is often dismissed as 'armchair activism'. As a result, disability activism is not recognized as a form of political engagement that calls for archiving.

After analyzing these pitfalls, Pollaert and van Trigt go on to explore how digital tools can support the archiving of disability activism and make it more visible. They discuss how digital tools

can facilitate activists and self-archiving processes, connect archival materials to a broader audience, and create new archival/archivable material and activist networks. Nevertheless, the authors note some persistent problems: the lack of time and resources for use in archiving; the tendency of disabled activists to prioritize actions in the now over archiving the records of the movement their cultural production, the lack of continuity in the maintenance and ownership of the digital platforms used for preservation and transmission. The authors explore in this light the challenges and opportunities offered by the digital for disability activism with reference to three case studies: the disability justice collective Feminists Against Ableism, the website DisPLACE.nl, and a community project with the Kreukelcollectief (Crinkle Collective) on eugenics.

While the digital can be a tool for promoting inclusivity and reshaping activism, Flore Janssen notes in her chapter that it is also a double-edged sword. Archival practices are rooted in social hierarchies, and many principles of archival praxis were set in administrative manuals, such as the Dutch Manual, written in colonial times, reflecting assumptions that privilege those in power. The author argues that the use of the digital may simply perpetuate inequalities and injustice. Analyzing the concepts of 'active archiving' and 'archival activism', Janssen highlights the importance of critically assessing how collections perpetuate social injustice before implementing digital tools, and of acknowledging personal positionality in the archival profession. She then goes on to discuss one of the most significant innovations, facilitated by the digital, in archives' mission: postcustodialism. Janssen explains that simply digitizing catalogs and records to make them findable online is not enough for democratizing archives and offers examples of good practices in which digitization serves social justice and democracy, such as the South Asian American Digital Archive and the Early Caribbean Digital Archive. These initiatives challenge some of the oppressive and gatekeeping structures of existing systems and institutions and seek to expand archival record to include marginalized voices and experiences.

Mention of the South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA) brings us to the end of the volume, with an afterword signed by the co-founder of SAADA and prominent scholar in critical archival studies: Michelle Caswell. In her reflection, Caswell engages with our topic from an outspoken position as an activist archivist. How can archives be constituted and mobilized as resources to combat inequality in the present? How can they be used in the service of what she calls 'liberatory memory work'? In a thought-provoking move, she creates a continuum between the work of the archivist in caring for precarious records to the politics of care for the precarious in today's world. In this way, she reminds us that creating better infrastructures for recording the past and present will be a key element in the creation of better futures.

As scholars in the field of memory studies, our approach in this collection is grounded in the belief that understanding the relation between archiving and activism in the digital age requires collaboration and dialogue among researchers, activists, and archivists. Our intention is to bring together diverse perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds in order to facilitate a rich and productive exchange of both theoretical and empirical knowledge. Whether readers approach this collection with practical concerns, such as how to build a digital archive for activism, or more theoretical questions about the role of archiving in protest and activism,

our hope is that this book will provide answers and useful suggestions. Exhaustiveness was not our aim. What we hope, more importantly, is to inspire new questions and open up new areas of common interest, exploration and collaboration among scholars and practitioners interested in cultural memory, archiving and social movements.

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## 02. BAK.MA: THE MAKING OF AN ACTIVIST DIGITAL MEDIA ARCHIVE

ÖZGE ÇELIKASLAN

Independent, non-institutional archiving practice has been both informally and officially regarded as a criminal act in many conflict countries, including Turkey. Having a complex relationship with archiving, some governments forbid and ban any non-sanctioned archival attempts. For instance, in countries like Turkey that have a history of military coups/regimes, state-led discrimination and oppression target dissident communities. The aim is often to annihilate the political memory of leftist, autonomous, and liberation movements, and these efforts have, at times, been met with considerable success. However, despite the oppression, people and collectives have come together around documenting political movements, truth-seeking, and justice struggles to generate their own digital archives as part of their activism over the last decade. These archival infrastructures emerged in response to a variety of sociopolitical needs, including the preservation and circulation of archival material, provision of a social space, advocacy of human rights, and supply of evidence for justice struggles. The level of political oppression, social and historical factors, the strength of dissent, and the cultural connotations of recordkeeping in these countries determine the archiving processes of activists. In this chapter, I examine these phenomena within the scope of *bak.ma digital media archive of social movements* that appeared in Turkey during the Gezi Park protests in 2013.

### The emergence of bak.ma

The story of the emergence of bak.ma can be told in three phases, taking into account political and social conditions in Turkey over the past decade, and how they were transformed by the Gezi Park protests and their aftermath. The first phase was the emergence of bak.ma as an idea during the protests in 2013; one of the significant features of bak.ma is its attachment to the movement during its entire life cycle. The second phase corresponded to the development of the digital archive in 2014. The third phase involved the expansion of its content beyond the Gezi Park collection from 2015. In this contribution I will elaborate on the methods and modes of collecting the footage of bak.ma and how traditional and hegemonic forms of data collecting are regenerated in this archive practice; and I look at how new meanings and alliances emerge through the associations of the production processes in the digital archival work through the division of labor, collective data processing, transversal relations among people and groups, and affect. I use my experiences from 2013 until today as a resource for this along with those of the members of the video activist collectives who created and developed bak.ma, namely Videoccupy, vidyokolektif, and Artıkişler (referred to as ‘we’).

I was living in Istanbul when the Gezi Park protest was initiated. In its first days, before the citizens occupied Gezi Park on June 1, I recorded clashes between the protesters and the police with my handycam at different places around Taksim Square. Then, I met two other

friends recording the events with various devices, and on June 2, we decided to come together to form a video activist collective. In response to the occupation of the public space, we named our collective Videoccupy, which also corresponded to the occupation of the video medium. Twelve people formed the collective, but many other people – friends and colleagues with different backgrounds, but also video activists, filmmakers, artists, and designers – joined us to record the mass protests, police response, and daily life of the commune that sprang up in Gezi Park, from the day the citizens occupied it until the evening the police attacked, burned the tents, and brutally removed protestors two weeks later, on June 15.

Videoccupy had set itself the goal of documenting the peaceful intent of the resistance movement which was trying to keep open the public space. As collective members, we created our own media to reveal police violence toward protestors exercising their democratic rights but being portrayed in the mainstream Turkish media as offensive, unfair, and predatory ‘looters’ (*çapulcular*), as designated by Prime Minister Erdogan. We shot and edited short videos and shared them on our YouTube page<sup>1</sup> and circulated the links through social media accounts and email groups.

Videoccupy members thus came together to realize a unique project, one that also differed from various those of other media groups<sup>2</sup> that emerged to broadcast the news from the protesters’ perspective.<sup>3</sup> We recorded the resistance with video activist tools and tactics. We split into groups. Some of us recorded daily life at the park<sup>4</sup> while others recorded demonstrations on Istiklal Street, rallies in Taksim Square, and clashes on streets, boulevards, and squares at different locations of Istanbul.

Many protestors also recorded the events on their mobile phones, tablets, and handycams. We decided to collect these recordings when we realized that the resistance would become a milestone event in the country’s history, but we had other reasons as well. We could not go to every protest, event, and meeting, and we could not record the events in other cities and towns; many people recorded those events and deleted their videos after sharing them on social media. We anticipated that protestors’ recordings will be lost sooner or later. Live broadcasting was another form widely used by the activists, and it was also one of the effective tools of Gezi Park media. Although effective at the time of the incident, it does not have an afterlife due to the disappearance of the link, pages, and the effectiveness of

1 Videoccupy YouTube page, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCDhtsYy5VC09T0ixjHmhBQQ/videos>

2 Among the media collectives were Çapul TV (Loot TV), Naber Medya (What’s up Media), Kamera Sokak (Camera Street), çekimiyapankadınlar (womenrecording), Seyri Sokak (Street Watch), İnadına Haber (News Out-of-Spite), and Ankara Eylem Vakti (Ankara Time to Act).

3 When the protest transformed into a mass event attacked by the police on the afternoon of May 31, the news channel CNN Türk did not change its programming to cover the events and was widely lampooned for continuing to broadcast a documentary about penguins. This failure became symbolic; the name ‘penguin media’ was soon adopted by the protestors and penguins became one of several stock images in highly effective and creative collective humor expressed in activists’ social media posts, graffiti and other art and shared in photographs and videos.

4 *Gezi Park Günlüğü / Gezi Park Diary*, <https://bak.ma/CRT/player>

the moment. Thus, almost all live broadcasting collectives themselves disappeared right after the resistance. Therefore, we aimed to rescue these recordings by assembling them on a platform.

We wrote a call and circulated it via our networks. From the earliest days of the protests to the end of the occupation and its aftermath, Videoccupy repeatedly announced its project to the public. The first call was made on June 4.<sup>5</sup> Following the call, we received recordings from the people who attended protests and shot their testimonies with their devices. At the same time, we collected video recordings in Gezi Park at the shared booth of activist collectives.

Eventually, we aimed to create an open-access video archive of the Gezi Park protests comprising all this collected material. Meanwhile, rushing about from one place to another, we discussed making this collection available to the public as soon as possible. Indeed, many journalists, researchers, and filmmakers were trying to reach us to access the collected material. Access to the collection needed to be immediate, so we endeavored to find the most efficient form. Our initial idea was to copy hard drives and leave copies at the buildings of the Taksim Solidarity Platform and Chamber of Architects.

With a mission similar to that of the Occupy Wall Street Archives Working Group (OWS), we wanted to own our resistance by keeping its records and guaranteeing that our history would be accessible to the public. Kylie Message emphasizes the role of the OWS archive as ‘the main instrument of resistance and the main vehicle through which they advocated for the Occupy movement’.<sup>6</sup> Message remarks that the majority of the Occupy Wall Street collection was transferred to the Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives located at New York University between 2013 and 2017. Similarly, we also believed that Videoccupy’s archive would be a major resource for the public by offering a record of the protests. However, we did not want to hand over the collection to an institutional library or an archive as we preferred to stay independent and autonomous.

We acknowledged the practice of publicizing the collection as remission, which means giving the recordings back to the people and returning the memories of the resistance to the collection’s owners. Accordingly, we researched different possibilities for public accessibility. A physical location seemed easy and practical at first. However, since we were dealing with a digital collection, it required a basic categorization on the hard drives. The video files on hard drives could only be organized by date, time, or place or by the content of the events in many subfolders, which would complicate the process for users and also us. Since there would only be a limited search engine, users would not be able to easily find what they were looking for. Therefore, we decided to look for cloud storage options.

We consulted with IT specialists and software developers and learned that cloud storage would not be possible for several reasons. AWS Storage Service was the most easily accessible

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5 Videoccupy’s call, <https://bak.ma/documents/YX>

6 Kylie Message, *Collecting Activism, Archiving Occupy Wall Street*, London-New York: Routledge, 2019, 6.

and widely used cloud storage. It belongs to Amazon, the American multinational technology company focusing on e-commerce, cloud computing, digital streaming, and artificial intelligence. Amazon is one of the biggest IT companies, alongside Alphabet, Apple, Meta, and Microsoft. These companies effectively govern the internet: Amazon runs e-commerce, Apple has the hardware, Meta controls social networking, and Microsoft dominates business software.<sup>7</sup> Cloud storage accessibility, reliability, and safety seemed unconvincing because of their centralized data collection system, and we further estimated that cloud storage would become financially difficult because of its over costing service. Most importantly, security would be a problem. After long discussions, therefore, we decided not to use cloud options because of their connection with the internet monopoly.

Meanwhile, we discovered Pad.ma,<sup>8</sup> an online archive of text-annotated video material, footage, and unfinished films from India. We were impressed by Pad.ma because its entire collection is searchable, viewable online, and free to download. The archive is based on pan.do/ra,<sup>9</sup> an open-source media archive software. As the creators of Pad.ma explain,<sup>10</sup> the archival design allows for various possible types of viewing and contextualization, from an overview of themes and timelines through much closer readings of transcribed dialogue and geographical locations to layers of writing on the image material. In addition, archive users can upload video files and enter descriptions, keywords, and other annotations to be placed on the timelines. Creating an organized online public archive would be difficult considering the dynamism of the period and our conditions as we were at the first stage of publicizing an activist video collection.

It took a long time to start using pan.do/ra because immediately after the police evacuated Gezi Park, the collective's structure also changed. We left our temporary office near the park, and some members returned to their jobs. However, those who were still willing to record the aftermath of Gezi documented various forms of ongoing protests, such as the park forums, NGO press releases, mass gatherings to stand against the brutality and human rights violations committed by the police, and commemorations for the protestors who lost their lives during the protests.<sup>11</sup>

7 Zander Arnao, 'Why Monopolies Rule the Internet and How We Can Stop Them', *The Gate*, 2 January 2022, <http://uchicagogate.com/articles/2022/1/4/why-monopolies-rule-internet-and-how-we-can-stop-them/>

8 Pad.ma (Public Access Digital Media Archive), <https://pad.ma/home>.

9 Pan.do/ra, <http://pan.do/ra>.

10 Pad.ma, 'About', <https://pad.ma/about>.

11 Thousands of people attended funerals and commemorations for Berkin Elvan, a 14-year-old boy shot in the head by a tear gas cartridge; having struggled for 269 days, Elvan lost his life in the morning hours of March 11, 2014. Ali İsmail Korkmaz, a 19-year-old student, joined the protests in Eskisehir province; he escaped to the city's side streets, where he was beaten to death by plainclothes police officers, and, after struggling for his life in a coma for 38 days, lost his life on July 10, 2013. In addition to Berkin Elvan and Ali İsmail Korkmaz, other victims who became heroes and symbols of the resistance included Ahmet Atakan, Ethem Sarisülük, Abdullah Cömert, Mehmet Ayvalıtaş, Hasan Ferit Gedik and Medeni Yıldırım. For further information, see 'Amnesty International's Gezi Park Report', 2013, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur44/022/2013/en/> and Bianet Independent Communication Network, <https://m.bianet.org/konu/gezi>.

The group split into two subgroups that kept collaborating while working on different tasks for a few more months. Along with maintaining our internal communication, filming on site, collecting protester's footage via online transfer services: these were our main activities in the first phase of bak.ma. Before recounting the second phase, the intertwinement of collective action in Gezi Park and the emergence of bak.ma should be clarified.

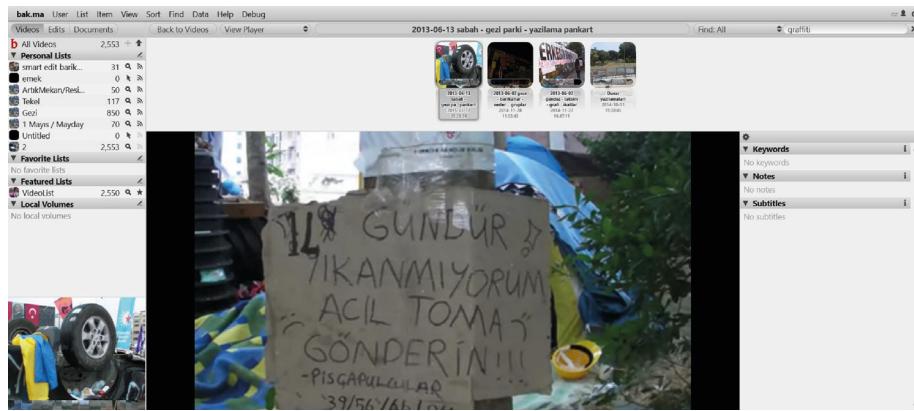


Fig. 2.1. Still from bak.ma, excerpt from screenshot of the video file '2013-06-13 Yazılımalar ve Pankartlar' (bak.ma 2014). All content on bak.ma is available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 License.<sup>12</sup>

The Gezi commune should be conceived as an amorphous, bigger collective body that included smaller collectivities and networks. People spontaneously gathered and formed collectives in the park, mobilizing and sharing information about the resistance process, maintaining safety and solidarity, initiating councils and neighborhood assemblies, and disseminating press releases and news from the inside within non-hierarchical, autonomous, gender-inclusive, and non-discriminatory structures. These collectivities created the 'Gezi spirit'. McGarry et al. claim that the 'Gezi spirit denotes the enactment of solidarity rather than a collective identity so that performing solidarity is created through different voices being heard'.<sup>13</sup> Those different voices were heard via their resistance and solidarity in action but also via social media and the protestors' dedicated Gezi media.<sup>14</sup> Gezi media was an important part of the Gezi commune. Countless alternative media platforms appeared in various forms during the protests, in guerrilla television channels as well as live video form, through video activist groups,<sup>15</sup> and via newspapers, journals, radio stations, social media platforms, blogs, and

12 Poster: 'Urgent: I haven't washed for two days, send a TOMA [Police Water Canon Vehicle] here'.

13 Aidan McGarry, Itir Erhart, Hande Eslen-Ziya, Olu Jenzen and Umut Korkut, 'Introduction' in Aidan McGarry, Itir Erhart, Hande Eslen-Ziya, Olu Jenzen and Umut Korkut (eds), *The Aesthetics of Global Protest Visual Culture and Communication*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020, 15–38.

14 In the (Turkish language) video, 'Neden Gezi Parkındınız?' (Why Are We in Gezi Park?), protestors respond to the question, <https://bak.ma/ASV/player>.

15 Seyri Sokak (Street Watch), Videoccupy, İnadına Haber (News Out-of-Spite), Çapul TV (Loot TV), Naber Medya (What's up Media), Kamera Sokak (Camera Street), çekimyapankadınlar (womenrecording), and Ankara Eylem Vakti (Ankara Time to Act) were among the video activist groups.

webpages. News, videos, and photographs from the park were circulated from the perspective of the communers.

Video activism aims to unveil sociopolitically disregarded and neglected incidents, people, and phenomena. Thus, activist media, specifically video activism, was recognized for the first time in Turkey during the Gezi Park protests. Ülkü Doğanay and İlkyay Kara offer three main reasons for this: 1) mainstream media was not the only source of information for citizens 2) video activism made the demands of the protestors more visible, and 3) it gave crucial encouragement to citizens to participate.<sup>16</sup>

The multiple video activisms that emerged and spread during the Gezi Park protests portrayed a multitude of oppositional voices. The video activist documentation also provided images that were legally admissible as evidence. The evidential value of the footage was acknowledged both during and after the protests. At the time, it constituted a partial control mechanism over state brutality, since security forces were aware that they could easily be filmed and individuals identified in subsequent investigations. In the case of Ethem Sarıslük's murder by the police, the perpetrator was identified using a video stream recorded by one of the demonstrators.<sup>17</sup> The video recordings of Gezi media were used as evidence by volunteer lawyers and human rights advocates who formed the *Gezi Law* platform to monitor the detentions, defend the rights of detainees, and file lawsuits.

Activist collectives are generally nondurable, but their impact can be more effective than many permanent structures. As Özge Özdüzen describes, Videoccupy was a temporary 'single-event focused initiative' that 'remained as a symbol of the Gezi protests'.<sup>18</sup> Immediately after Videoccupy's dissolution, those of us who could devote our time and labor to the archiving process decided to create another collective. Motivated by the spirit of the time, forming such an infrastructure was easy, and we were able to maintain the collective identity.

## Taking the archive out on the streets

The second phase in the emergence of bak.ma involved accordingly the formation of another video activist collective to generate the archive. Seven female members of Videoccupy thus created and organized vidyokolektif. We formed the collective as an extension of the whole process to understand, digest, and re-produce together, and we went on to record further protests and commemorations, edit short videos, and share them on our YouTube channel.<sup>19</sup>

16 Ülkü Doğanay and İlkyay Kara, 'Video Activism in Turkey as a Case of Alternative Media Practice: Gezi Resistance in Focus', in Dilek Beybin Kejanlioğlu and Salvatore Scifo (eds), *Alternative Media and Participation: Interviews and Essays.*, Istanbul: COST Action IS0906 Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies, 2014, 10–14.

17 Doğanay and Kara 'Video Activism in Turkey': 10.

18 Özge Özdüzen, 'Bearing Witness to Authoritarianism and Commoning through Video Activism and Political Film-making after the Gezi Protests', in Aidan McGarry, Itir Erhart, Hande Eslen-Ziya, Olu Jenzen and Umut Korkut (eds), *The Aesthetics of Global Protest Visual Culture and Communication*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020, 191–210.

19 vidyokolektif YouTube page, <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC6wxs6-4tb9vYGmj8E4cuXA/videos>

We worked on organizing the archival footage and searching for an open-access portal. Slowly, vidyokolektif emerged as a feminist video activist collective. Not all the members identified themselves as feminists initially, but we became convinced over time of the appropriateness of using our medium with a feminist approach. In short, we had emotional and political reasons for forming a women's collective—but we also had a mission: we wanted to set up the archive because we cared about the footage and wanted to publicize the video collections.

Women are traditionally associated with care. In the case of vidyokolektif, instead of the traditional connotations of care in society, I think about care as associated with feminism and with respect for archival material. Fisher and Tronto's article reconceptualizing caring from a feminist perspective steers me to consider our archival work as carework.<sup>20</sup> Fisher and Tronto define care as the activities people do to maintain, continue, and repair the world that includes human bodies and the environment and their intertwinement within a complex and life-sustaining web.<sup>21</sup>

According to Alam and Houston, this definition 'helps expand care ethics beyond its conceptualization within social science and health research as an informal, essentialised, gendered-based activity'.<sup>22</sup> It suggests approaching care not as narrowly associated with domestic labor as identified with women but expansively, associating it with the environment and maintaining human and non-human relations. Alam and Houston thus discuss care as an alternate infrastructure. They claim that the 'feminist ethics of care shift away from the universal, abstract, principles of morality and justice' and advocate for 'more attention to 'a situated response to unjust situations' by recognizing the relational, interdependent and unequal capacities of care actors'.<sup>23</sup>

The feminist ethics of care that emerged in our collective experience was fragile, relational, and an embodied practice. Thus, vidyokolektif transformed into an infrastructure of care that we created and nurtured to empower one another as we discussed, shared, produced, and relived together. We reflected on our relationship with the sensitive archival material and on how to organize the raw footage and edited material.

In their article on the ethics of feminist care in archival work, Caswell and Cifor argue that 'an ethics of care is an inclusive and apt model for envisioning and enacting justice in archival contexts'.<sup>24</sup> They also emphasize relationality and the responsibilities raised by connections. Caswell and Cifor propose four interrelated shifts based on radical empathy in archival relationships: between archives and records creators, between archivists and records subjects, between archivists and records users, and between archivists and larger communities impli-

20 Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto, 'Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring' in Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson (eds), *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives*, Albany: SUNY Press, 1990, 35–62.

21 Fisher and Tronto, 'Toward a Feminist Theory': 40.

22 Ashraful Alam and Donna Houston, 'Rethinking Care as Alternate Infrastructure', *Cities* 100 (2020): 1–10.

23 Alam and Houston, 'Rethinking Care': 2.

24 Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, 'From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives', *Archivaria* 81 (2016): 23–43.

cated within their records.<sup>25</sup> Their conception of ‘archivists as caregivers bound to records creators, subjects, users, and communities through a web of mutual affective responsibility’<sup>26</sup> reflects vidyokolektif’s experience.

Daniela Agostinho underlines the ‘affective orientation’ that Caswell and Cifor associate with the ethical responsibilities of the archivist who cares about, for, and with subjects, claiming that this ‘represents a radical shift in the archival encounter, premised as it is on ethical responsibility rather than liberal modes of access and legal rights’.<sup>27</sup> We developed a mutual responsibility between us and the video records, events, protestors, commoners, potential users, other collectives, the Gezi spirit, and the commune. By developing a feminist ethics of care within vidyokolektif, we carried the work to another level.

At this point we decided to use pan.do/ra software as it allows users to manage large, decentralized video collections and collaborative creations of metadata and time-based annotations online and serves as a web application. Archive users have a mission in most of the pan.do/ra archives; such mission differs from a visitor or a researcher in the archive in its traditional sense. Users are generating the archive together collaboratively.<sup>28</sup> The collaborative ethos and open-source software vision of pan.do/ra as embodying the knowledge-sharing philosophy of the copyleft movement corresponded to our practice. Thus, following the initial online meetings with the software developers, we organized a workshop in Istanbul to learn the software and launch the uploading. Finally, in June 2014, during the first anniversary of the Gezi Park protests, the uploading process started with samples of rough footage from the collection on the website.

We considered titles for the online archive that would be in tune with our practice. Referring to our previous discussions, we agreed on ‘bak.ma’, which means ‘do not look’ in Turkish. We used the URL extension ‘.ma’ for ‘media archive’, which is Morocco’s national URL extension. Using an URL extension for another country also helped us with security issues and to establish a kinship with Pad.ma.

The inspiration for naming the archive ‘bak.ma’ had come from our internal discussions in Videoccupy and vidyokolektif. We shared quotations from Cypriot thinker Ulus S. Baker on our social media channels, one of which addressed a police announcement in 1995 that became part of our internal discussions during the protests as we witnessed similar police announce-

25 Caswell and Cifor, ‘From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics’: 25.

26 Caswell and Cifor, ‘From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics’: 24.

27 Daniela Agostinho, ‘Care’ in Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, Daniela Agostinho, Annie Ring, Catherine D’Ignazio and Kristin Veel (eds), *Uncertain Archives: Critical Keywords for Big Data*, Cambridge (Mass.): MIT Press, 2021, 75–87.

28 Becoming a user on most of the pan.do/ra archives is very simple. On bak.ma, each visitor in the archive can have an account and become a member by clicking the sign-up button on the top of the main page. Without signing up, each visitor can play the videos and download them. In addition, visitors can access the collections, groups, collectives, and other files, e.g., photographs and pdf files on ‘Documents’. However, signing up on the main page is necessary to upload any type of data.

ments.<sup>29</sup> The police announcement entailed ordering normal citizens passing through the protest area by chance not to look because police forces were planning to commit violence, and normal citizens should not witness it. From the beginning of our video activist and archiving practice, we discussed the differences between seeing and looking, looking and acting, and how our video practice disrupted mainstream media's manipulative and authoritative gaze. Video activists testified to the police violence and human rights abuses. For them, the video becomes the eye of citizens.

The name 'bak.ma' was chosen for the archive for other reasons, also. We were there to see, and these were testimonials. Moreover, we thought that users might be prompted by this name to enter the archive and browse, and see. But bak.ma is not only about looking and seeing; there are many significant characteristics that pan.do/ra software provides and includes in the archive. Not only does pan.do/ra serve the main default options of viewing, uploading, downloading, categorization, and annotations, but it also ensures the accessibility of the archive and admits collective creation, participation, and collaboration. In general, digital activist archives prioritize archival access, but not all are open to public participation and collaboration when it comes to building the archive. They usually provide access to their data via file-sharing programs, but users and visitors cannot upload files. Some of those archives are event-based and are not open to data transfer regarding their restricted context.<sup>30</sup>

In June 2014, we created a publicly accessible portal, but the content was still missing because uploading 4TB of data corresponding to more than 800 hours of video footage was difficult. The most practical way to upload that amount of data was 'mass uploading', which requires several desktop computers to run with Linux/Ubuntu. Another member of Videoccupy, who was familiar with coding and programming, undertook with me the task of uploading the footage. After long hours of co-working, we uploaded the entire content before the end of the year. Mass uploading requires full-capacity computers, so we worked at computer labs.

After uploading the video archive of Gezi generated by the members of Videoccupy and vidyokolektif, bak.ma was ready for inclusion in more collections. Between 2013 and 2015, the goal was achieved, and an online archive was created, comprising the Gezi collection. The fundamental structure was constituted. However, it required further archival work, such as categorizing the collection, creating metadata, and entering annotations, keywords, and necessary information in the archive. There were already a few people who had joined Videoccupy and vidyokolektif from my previous video collective, Artıkişler (leftoverworks), and we decided to do the archival work.<sup>31</sup>

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29 Ulus S. Baker, 'Normal Citizens Get Lost', 1996, <https://bak.ma/documents/YY>. The original article (in Turkish), 'Ölüm Orucu – Notlar', Birikim 88, <https://birikimdergisi.com/dergiler/birikim/1/sayi-88-agustos-1996/2285/olum-orucu-notlar/3180>.

30 For example, the other two pan.do/ra archives that have political activist content – 858.ma: An Archive of Resistance and leftover.rs – do not allow their users to upload any files; they provide only viewing and downloading data. On 858.ma, a tutorial for visitors explains how to use the archive to search and play the videos. Users have the option to create personal lists by signing up, a feature not available on leftover.rs. Also, users cannot create metadata or tag and annotate the data on these archives.

31 The Artıkişler video collective was formed by a group of documentary filmmakers, researchers, and video activists in Ankara in 2008 and was most active between 2008 and 2021. The collective tried to

## Expanding the archive and its affective potentials

The third phase of bak.ma began when Artıkışler undertook to do the work of organizing the archive and producing its metadata with the support of a few members of Videoccupy and vidyokolektif. Besides working in the archive, we decided to upload our own collections comprising video recordings of earlier political events. Then, we collected archival footage from syndicates, activist collectives, and human rights organizations in 2015 and 2016. We were invited to present the archive in Turkey and abroad by various organizations, where we were able to meet individuals and groups who were interested in collaboration. The openness, participatory approach, autonomous, and collective structure of bak.ma drew much attention.

Many people and groups were interested in contributing to using the archive, uploading videos, and participating in making the archive, and some contributed to the archive with their own collections and video footage of specific political events.

A guerilla tv network, *Sendika TV* (Syndicate TV),<sup>32</sup> gave us tapes, video CDs, and digital video discs that had been rescued from police raids in the basement of their office in Ankara. They asked us to digitalize the videotapes and upload them on bak.ma with the rest of the other material. While watching the footage, we realized that most of the footage belongs to the 'Tekel Workers' Resistance'.<sup>33</sup> The rest documented various political events, including the May day celebrations between 1977 and 2015. We rescued nearly 90 percent of the Syndicate TV videotape collection from decay. Unfortunately, the tapes had been damaged by the poor preservation conditions, mostly from dust and humidity.

The Tekel Resistance was linked to the Gezi Park protests in the way it demonstrated the power of a struggle for rights and built solidarity networks across the country which paved the way for the Gezi protests. Only after watching hours of footage did I realize this. In the occupied area, in a central part of Ankara, the workers created a 'tent city' like in Gezi Park. Every day was filled with actions, including marches, strikes, rallies, gatherings, concerts, film screenings, talks, and demonstrations. The resistance was a key moment in the history of social movements in Turkey since it not only expressed a class-conscious politics and solidarity but also conquered fears around occupying and commoning in public spaces.

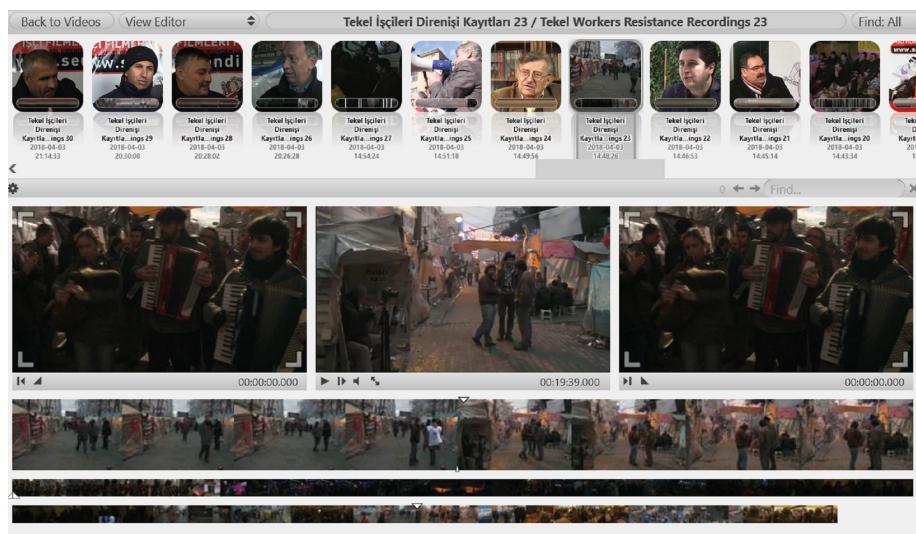
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create collective production and distribution spaces in the fields of contemporary visual culture and arts, through collective working, exhibition, and screening in collaboration with other groups and collectives with similar orientations on controversial issues in Turkey's recent social history (urban transformation, gentrification, forced migration, labor in urban space, archiving, collective political memory, etc.).

Artıkışler's videos were shown in many international biennials, festivals, events, and assemblies, received awards from international film festivals and organized solo exhibitions. Videos, texts, visual research projects, and exhibitions are accessible at <http://artikisler.net/>, <https://vimeo.com/artikisler>, and <https://bak.ma/>

32 Sendika TV is a joint project of the news portal, <https://sendika.org/>

33 The resistance started in December 2009 following the privatization of Tekel, the state monopoly of tobacco and alcoholic beverages and its 43 factories. The Turkish government announced that the factories would close, with the 12,000 workers redeployed to other public sector jobs on 11-month temporary contracts with pay cuts of up to 40% and reduced employment rights. This sparked industrial action, which began on 15 December, with the workers protesting against the cut of their monthly wage and the rescission of their right to severance pay.



*Still from bak.ma, excerpt from screenshot of the video file 'Tekel İşçileri Direnişi Kayıtları 23 / Tekel Workers Resistance Recordings 23', (bak.ma 2015). All content on bak.ma is available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 License.*

I had visited the tent city several times and joined the demonstrations at the end of 2009 and the beginning of 2010, but only after watching the video footage could I fully comprehend the resistance in all its aspects. This experience is in line with the point made by Kate Eichhorn with respect to feminist archives; namely, that alternative archives are a site for knowledge production.<sup>34</sup> Rather than searching for preproduced knowledge in places and ways that erase ideas, Eichhorn invites the reader to engage in the ‘making of archives’ as this is often ‘where knowledge production begins’.<sup>35</sup>

Archives are not only resources for knowledge and information. Thus, Buchanan and Bastian underline the need to ‘shift from seeing archives as purely informational repositories, to a wider understanding of users’ relationships to records, in particular the affective contours of this relationship’.<sup>36</sup> Activist archives are not just about justice and rights but also about trauma and grief, victory and defeat, brutality and intimacy, banality and compassion, and the quotidian routines of daily life. They are testimonies to the individual spirit, to people in action, and are laden with affect, overflowing with feeling, and deeply expressive of human emotion.

34 Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014, 4.

35 Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn*, 3.

36 Alexandrina Buchanan and Michelle Bastian, ‘Activating the Archive: Rethinking the Role of Traditional Archives for Local Activist Projects’, *Archival Science* 15 (2015): 429–451.

Accordingly, Cifor proposes affect as an underlying factor in archival scholarship and practice.<sup>37</sup> Affect, she argues, is a central component of social justice work: 'the pain of others that can be found in archives does not simply belong to others; rather, as inevitable witnesses to such pain, archivists are deeply implicated in webs of affective relations'.<sup>38</sup> Cifor speaks about 'emotional justice' as something that needs to be expanded in the archival field and its ethical orientation. For me, the bak.ma collections are about rights and justice as much as they are about affect.

Collecting and collating footage as well as the archival work of record-making and -keeping lead to interlacing affective relations with the content, its creators, and their collaborations. Similarly, in the '10 Theses on the Archive', co-founders of Pad.ma suggest we think of the 'affective potential' of the archive as there is 'both a political as well as an aesthetic question in its ability to activate one's capacity to act, and it is on the very faculty of imagination and possibility that this conflict is located'.<sup>39</sup> The affective potential of activist archives comes from relations among people and groups and the connections between them and political events. They reach deep into belonging and empowerment, reminiscence about past losses and achievements, and ongoing hopes for the future.

The affective potential of activist archives is realized in the formation of a basis for public debate. As Duygu Doğan and Sidar Bayram argue, the visual records in these archives contribute to creating public spaces beyond the juridical space, including academic institutions and human rights initiatives but also wider artistic and cultural spaces.<sup>40</sup> The emergence of accountability and the potential of judicial remedy depends on human agency and the publicity that comes together around these records. When this kind of publicity is not possible and injust conditions persist, these records preserve and bring their tacit potential to the future, argue Doğan and Bayram.<sup>41</sup> Thus, such archives are powerful mobilizers of knowledge and memory that can create global accountability with a force that encompasses not just the past, but also the present and future.

## Connecting movements: present and future

Bak.ma continued to grow in 2016 as we collected further collections from video activist collectives. A mission developed of rescuing footage before it was lost to decay or to wastebins, physical or virtual. In this way, bak.ma created a kind of juxtaposition between social and political movements in Turkey and the leftover images of other groups and collectives. This enabled different archival sites of knowledge to be linked to each other in digital space.

37 Marika Cifor, 'Affecting Relations: Introducing Affect Theory to Archival Discourse', *Archival Science* 15 (2015): 1–25.

38 Cifor, 'Affecting Relations': 19.

39 Shaina Anand, '10 Thesis on the Archive' in Özge Çelikaslan, Alper Şen and Pelin Tan (eds) *Autonomous Archiving*, Barcelona: dpr-barcelona, 2016, 79–97.

40 Duygu Doğan and Sidar Bayram, 'Görsel Kayıtlar Hesap Sorabilir mi?: İnsan Hakları Arşivleri ve Geçiş Dönemi Adaleti' in *Türkiye'de Geçiş Dönemi Adaleti: Dönüşen Özneler, Yöntemler, Araçlar*, İstanbul: Hakikat Adalet Hafıza Merkezi, 2020, 186–220.

41 Doğan and Bayram 'Görsel Kayıtlar Hesap Sorabilir mi?', 214.

Through this work, parallelisms among the movements, both major and minor, became increasingly apparent and available, as in the case of Gezi and Tekel. Digital activist archives enable us to create these contexts, affinities, and narratives. They play a significant role in connecting movements, joining and combining what may otherwise seem separated and distant. They can meet under the same tags and annotations or by being aligned, side-by-side and one under the other. New, nonlinear stories, mappings, and timelines are thereby created on the archive.

Alongside collecting the residual images of others, bak.ma continued to document current political events and social issues. Starting in 2018, it crossed geographical limits and embraced transnational collaborations. People and collectives from other countries uploaded their video recordings, texts, photographs, and sound recordings onto the bak.ma archive. Many people, including previous members of Videoccupy and vidyokolektif as well as anonymous users, were engaged in this third phase of the archive. As of 2021, bak.ma has not been administered by a specific group or organization. Instead, software developers sustain the online accessibility of the archive, and a few admins are responsible for the stewardship. Users generate the archival content since they are automatically granted the permission to download and upload static files and moving images.<sup>42</sup> The number of users varies. At the time of writing, in 2022, there were 252 signed-up users. Users are composed of 246 members and six admins. They can create content and access all publicly shared videos and documents. In addition, they can organize, annotate, and edit videos and other documents.<sup>43</sup>

The bak.ma video collections consist of audiovisual media of different formats and lengths but mostly digital raw footage of activist recordings, feature documentaries, and short films. As bak.ma is an ever-expanding archive, the size of these collections changes over time. It is also an archive in progress; classification and annotation of the collections are ongoing operations. Thus far, the greatest effort has gone into the preservation, accessibility, and maintenance of the video collections and the website. Admins and users have been focused on the fundamental constitutional needs of bak.ma rather than on further expanding and improving the archive. Many efforts have been made to keep the online archive alive – covering the yearly software expenses and the costs of renewal of hard drives and domain.

Structural problems experienced at bak.ma, including the coordination of the workflow among the volunteers and the lack of financial sources, make the archive's future uncertain; its admins and editors cannot constantly fix problems as they arise. In general, if resources are limited, then the labor, space, time, financing, and knowledge limitations of activist archives mean they encounter difficulties in sustaining their work. The lack of a curatorial and organizational order is a common problem that directly affects maintenance. Deficient

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42 Users of bak.ma can create public, private, or group collections and lists; and they can edit the data and metadata, add new titles, maps, documents, annotations, and tags, and link all the information. Once uploaded, each file has its own URL; moreover, each frame can receive its own URL through time-based annotations. Each video file and each frame can be edited, not only by inserting text, subtitles, or keywords but also by selecting various forms of visual timelines.

43 The number of visitors (non-registered users) varies each month and year; as of now, it has exceeded 100,000.

financial sources cause a lack of coordination and loss of labor. The voluntary basis of the workflow is not very efficient, since sustaining a systematic archival workflow requires the input guarantee supplied by paid workers, and most grants and funds do not cover staff costs. Activist archives have to tackle this problem since it hinders their sustainability.

However, activists do not have to tackle these problems from within discrete silos. I have observed a strong sense of isolation among activists because of a lack of communication between those involved in different initiatives. More connectedness between different activists involved in archiving is needed for the structural problems to be overcome. Since these archives are based on the reproduction of relations, then solidarity, collaboration, and connection among the actors of activist, autonomous infrastructures, commons, and collectives are key principles to maintain them. The solidarity networks will definitely empower these practices, provide solutions to their problems, and ensure the maintenance of the archival work. Accordingly, bak.ma also will maintain itself as long as it stays in relation with others of like mind, in alliances, and to the extent that it responds to the needs of its users, visitors who devote themselves to care for archival material.

## Conclusion

Through its archival footage, bak.ma invites us to discuss power structures, the disruption of social inequalities, and labor conditions, both in Turkey and transnationally. Mobilized activist archival footage enables us to correlate important political events in history and comprehend today's authoritarian politics in a broader context. Thus, bak.ma addresses the need for collaborative archiving practices in conflict-affected areas as part of the struggle for human rights, justice, freedom of speech, and the right to access knowledge. By housing records of activist collectives, bak.ma becomes their collective memory, and the archive becomes an agent for testimony as material witness. Via the lens(es) of bak.ma, users and visitors can take a close look at a political history that transforms the way of seeing. This look leads to a mutual, affective sense of responsibility between the subjects and objects of the action. Encountering fragile and sensitive archival material is an emotional process. My investigation of the historiography of bak.ma has shown that emotional connectedness and affective responsibility are grounded in a caring that transforms our relations with the past and present and shapes future actions.

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## 03. MAYDAY ROOMS: BUILDING ARCHIVAL RESOURCES FOR CONTEMPORARY MOVEMENTS

**ROSEMARY GRENNAN**

MayDay Rooms (MDR) is an archive, resource space and safe haven for social movements, experimental and marginal cultures and their histories. This piece will look closely at a digital archiving project initiated by MDR, called Leftovers. The project is ongoing and seeks to create a shared online archive of radical, liberatory, and working class movements, and the documents they have left behind. This contribution has been treated as an opportunity to lay out some of the thinking behind, and practice around building the online collection, and how it has created new possibilities for creating different forms of archives and archival engagement.

It will look at how MayDay Rooms practices around our paper archive have been reflected and developed in a digital environment, asking questions such as: how can building shared and collaborative digital archives move away from preoccupations around preservation, which dominates much archival practices, towards promoting use and reuse of historical material? How can digital archives be structured and categorized in such a way that they become a resource for contemporary movements rather than a static repository? Finally, it will look at how Leftovers has started to develop networks of sisterly archives who share digitizations and back-up each other's data. These practices ultimately help to break down the authority of the archival object, transforming it into something that can be shared, copied, and reactivated in the present rather than remaining confined to history. []{#\_heading=h.30j0zll .anchor}

### **Archiving from below**

MayDay Rooms was established in 2013 in the midst of brutal austerity cuts to public services in Britain, which saw the closure of many public libraries, community centers, and cultural spaces. Austerity policies, in combination with the anti-squatting laws passed in 2011, which criminalized the squatting of residential property, resulting in a real loss of social and communal spaces, which have often acted as containers of cultural memory and histories. Within this context of increasing loss or destruction, MDR was founded as a counter-institution dedicated to safeguarding histories and documents of struggle and resistance with a remit connecting them with, and making them freely available to, contemporary struggle and protest.

The founder members of MDR were able to secure a large building on Fleet Street right in the middle of the City of London. Fleet Street is famous for being the historical center of print culture in Britain since the 16th century, from the Chartists to the seditious printing and distribution of Paine's Rights of Man. It became later the center of the British newspaper industry until the Wapping Dispute in 1986, when Rupert Murdoch broke the Printers

Union.<sup>1</sup>

The building was bought by the Glass House Trust who funds MDR and the location was chosen to be a symbol of urgent resistance in an area where tower blocks of luxury flats blossom out of the old newspaper offices and which now is dominated by bankers, lawyers and speculative real estate.

This urgency was reflected in MayDay Rooms' name, which is drawn firstly from International Workers' Day, and secondly from the international distress signal. Both references express the emergency facing the radical heritage through austerity cuts and the enclosures of space, but also an anticipation of future festivities in a better world of our own making symbolized by 1st of May. The 'Rooms' part of the name emphasizes the importance of having a physical space as a meeting point around radical histories and present struggles. Alongside our archive collection, the building houses communal spaces, meeting rooms and offices, which are used by a wide range of cultural, political, and activist groups.

MDR started with a number of 'unboxing' events at the Marx Memorial Library in London, where our three founding depositors – George Caffenlis, Silvia Federici and Peter Linebaugh –, each addressed one of the collections that they deposited: the Marxist-feminist campaign *Wages for Housework NYC* (1972-81), *Midnight Notes Journal* (1971-2001) and *New England Prisoner Association News* (1973-75). Whilst opening up his suitcase to reveal several archive boxes containing his Zerowork's<sup>2</sup> collection, Linebaugh likened them to Pandora's box, where different fragments and past dramas fly out. However, he went on to say that MayDay Rooms' commitment to collectively working on archives took the pressure off these histories being the sole responsibility of the depositors and orients this endeavor toward future organizing.

From these three modest collections, the MDR archive has grown over the last ten years to a paper archive of over 60,000 items, over 2000 films and videos, and a digital archive of over 19,000 digitizations. The collection at MDR focuses on social struggles, radical art, and acts of resistance from the 1960s to the present: it contains everything from recent feminist poetry to 1990s techno paraphernalia, from situationist magazines to histories of riots and industrial transformations, from 1970s educational experiments to prison writing. Central to building these collections has been the cultivation of informal networks and relationships with those involved in social and labor movements past and present, formed in and around the MDR building (particularly whilst having drinks on the roof terrace or cooking together in the kitchen). Some of our depositors bring us a few pamphlets found under the bed or in the corner of a cupboard, others bring us great volumes of material revealing traces of lives lived in struggle. This approach to collecting material is necessarily fragmented and contingent, and speaks to the fact that archives of radical politics have

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1 See MayDay Rooms online exhibition called 'Print Subversion in the Wapping Dispute', <https://exhibitions.maydayrooms.org/wapping/>

2 The Zerowork publishing group was formed in 1974 and could be said to have been informed by an early take up of Italian autonomist theory.

seldom been systematically assembled.

Our work, around the collection, proceeds from the understanding that social change can happen most effectively when marginalized and oppressed groups can get to know – and tell – their own histories ‘from below’: our archival practice and organizational structure reflects this. Marcus Rediker defines ‘history from below’ as a type of social history that describes the experience of working-class people as well as their history-making power, which has long been left out of ‘top-down’ historical narratives. It is a method of approaching the past ‘that concentrates not on the traditional subjects of history, not the kings and the presidents and the philosophers, but on ordinary working people, not simply for what they experienced in the past but for their ability to shape the way history happens’.<sup>3</sup> Peter Linebaugh comments in *Incomplete, True, Authentic, and Wonderful History of May Day* on the kind of documents that this approach to history encompasses and their ability to actualize political programs in the present:

In our day, the traces of our radical movements are being thrown into rubbish pits, as state-sponsored ‘austerity’ demands the commodification of every inch of space, and with sinister intent destroys the evidence of our past, its joys, its victories. Clear out the closets, empty the shelves, toss out the old footage, shred the underground press, pulverize the brittle, yellowing documents! Thus neoliberalism organises the transition from the old to the new; they must silence alternatives. We do not want the voice of George Jackson to be silenced. His words still eloquently describe a desirable program, a necessary program.<sup>4</sup>

Our aim has always been to create a counter archive that resists dominant historical narratives and rethinks the way we learn from the past. We tried to do this through developing new free forms of dissemination, access, research-collaboration, and collective education. This historical work is a collaborative process, often open-ended, sometimes messy, and not always successful. But it continues to build a space of critical opposition to capitalist relations and to inspire future struggles. Some recent examples of the types of activities we have done are: collective scanning and cataloging workshops, bringing archives to picket lines during strike actions, a series of events which profile historical examples of resistance to the ‘cost of living crisis’, social events and fundraisers for no border networks, youth workshops with sisterly archives, writing to people in prison using material from the archive, travelling and online exhibitions.

3 Carl Grey Martin and Modhumita Roy, ‘Narrative Resistance: A Conversation with Historian Marcus Rediker’, *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor* 30 (2018): 56.

4 Peter Linebaugh, *The Incomplete, True, Authentic, and Wonderful History of May Day*, Oakland: PM Press, 2016, 106.



Fig. 3.1. Scanathon for the Lucas Plan collection at MayDay Rooms in 2018

MDR attempts to learn from the politics that are represented in the collection and is organized non-hierarchically around two different collectives and a board of trustees. First, the staff collectively runs the archive that sits at the heart of the building. There have been a number of different iterations of this collective, each bringing with them different political commitments and experiences which in turn has brought new focuses, networks and collections. The second is the Building Collective who use the space for their own activities and in exchange help us run the building and make it accessible to people who want to use the space for meetings and events. The Building Collective currently consists of various groups: the two trade unions Cleaners & Allied Independent Union and Industrial Workers of the World; the radical research groups MayDay Radio and the workerist-inspired groups Pagliacci Rossi and Red Therapy; the June Givanni Pan African Cinema Archive; Statewatch, an organization monitoring state and civil liberties; and the LGBTQAI\* support group Living Free and Trans Legal Clinic.[] {#\_heading=h.1fob9te .anchor}

## Leftover ephemera

Despite this important emphasis on cultivating a place for people to meet, learn from history and struggle together, MDR has also been committed to developing models of digitization, online distribution and dissemination. The next section will explore some of the thinking behind and strategies of building Leftovers, our shared online archive. In contemporary archival practices, there is much emphasis on the digitization of collections for reasons of both access and preservation. However, access to material is often still restricted by questions of rights and remains on internal archival systems. In addition to this, digitization of material for preservation purposes takes resources (such as storage and equipment) that smaller

independent archives do not have. When we first started thinking about the form of our digital collection, we looked at how features of digital objects (reproducibility, mobility and potential for circulation) could re-imagine an archive that bypasses traditional concerns of preservation in favor of dissemination, collaborative contributions and truly open access.

At MDR we were greatly inspired by the work of friends and comrades from different ‘shadow libraries’, particularly [aaaarg.org](http://aaaarg.org), and Memory of the World.<sup>5</sup> Back in 2015, we collaborated with Marcell Mars of Memory of the World to develop a cataloging system which would enable us to contribute to their online collection as librarians. The idea was to host our digitization on [memoryoftheworld.org](http://memoryoftheworld.org) through a hacked version of the ebook management system Calibre in combination with the plugin letssharebooks. However, we soon realized that the historical ephemera (posters, pamphlets, flyers, bulletins, etc) which MDR mainly dealt with was not quite suited to a library which was structured around books. We then started collaborating with Jan Gerber from 0x2620 in Berlin,<sup>6</sup> who had already helped us process and host our video archive.<sup>7</sup> 0x2620 had previously worked on Pad.ma (Public Access Digital Media Archive) an online archive of densely text-annotated video material, primarily footage and not-finished films. Through discussion, we found productive similarities and alignments between print ephemera, unfinished film and video footage; this opened up new ways of thinking about the form of our digital archive.

We came up with the name Leftovers to highlight the centrality of thinking through the qualities of ephemera when creating an archive. The book or academic text is in some ways a relatively self-contained durable object – it has a blurb, a recognizable author – that does not need additional material to become understandable, and its use in some ways is predetermined. Whereas political ephemera has a different temporal scope: it was not meant to endure, and its contemporary use is different from its first production or original purpose. For example: leaflets that mobilize people for a protest, bulletins that communicate actions on a picket line, or newspapers that maintain organizational forms. All of these materials were meant to organize in haste and communicate in the moment, but not to last. Both Jess Baines and Nick Thoburn have written about ‘socialist’ or ‘communist objects’<sup>8</sup> to describe radical print production. Baines proposes that, ‘in contrast to the enslaved, sedated and “finished”

5 Shadow Libraries is a term that refers to mass online libraries which operate outside formal institutions as well as outside copy-right law. The largest examples of these are Sci-Hub and Libgen although smaller collections such as [Aaaaarg.org](http://aaaarg.org) and [memoryoftheworld.org](http://memoryoftheworld.org) are also referred to by this term. Aaaaarg.org is an online repository with over 50,000 books and texts. It was created by Sean Dockray and serves as a library for the Public School – an online platform that supports offline autodidactic activities. Memory of the World is a collaborative online library. It advocates completely bypassing the existing distribution system by creating a peer-to-peer library system, in which users become librarians of their own digital book collections and share them.

6 0x2620 are based in Berlin and have initiated and collaborated on different software and archiving projects, most notably Pad.ma with CAMP in Bombay, bak.ma, an archive of video from the protest movements that started around Gezi Park in 2013 (see Çelikaslan in this volume) and 858.ma with Mosireen Collective a collection of material from the 2011 uprisings in Egypt.

7 See Activist Media Project, <https://amp.0x2620.org/about>

8 Nicholas Thoburn, *Anti-Book: On the Art and Politics of Radical Publishing*, Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2016.

possessions of bourgeois commodity culture, the socialist object would be a co-worker, an active and equal comrade that, like its mode of production enriched the bodies of the socialist project'.<sup>9</sup> The material archived on Leftovers was not intended as a static commodity but represents fragments of historical moments woven through different tendencies and movements; so it needs a critical mass of other 'comradely' material and different archival strategies to make it understandable. In addition to this Steve Wright's idea of 'document work'<sup>10</sup> which sees political ephemera as active objects, rather than simple texts, has been very useful in formulating these ideas. In his long study of the material culture of Italian workerism of the 1970s, Wright looks at material such as 'La Classe' or 'Potere Operaio'. He analyzes how printed matter like pamphlets are written and read, made and consumed, and he argues that these activities create kinds of social relations. These ideas foreground the creation and use of print material rather than just transmitting information, and this has been a guiding focus when building Leftovers.



Fig. 3.2. Item records for Big Flame Newspaper from Leftovers

The structure of the leftovers archive has tried to reflect these ways of thinking about the material culture of social movements. Our collaboration with 0x2620 and working with their software Pan.do/ra, has presented both technical and conceptual possibilities around the way in which digital objects can be pulled apart and accessed in full as opposed to being treated as a single and opaque entity. Much like the distinction Baines makes between a publication that embodies sedate commodity relations and one that is an open and active part of political movements. In the video archives that 0x2620 has been involved in creating, material can be addressed in many different ways; as a clip, a frame or a pixel. This has been key to developing different ways of representing video within the archive, for example as graphical representation of temporal changes of video timelines.

9 Jess Baines, 'Radical Print Revolution? Objects Under Capitalism', *Strike Magazine* 8 (2014): 20.

10 Steve Wright, "'I Came Like the Thunder and I Vanish Like the Wind": Exploring Genre Repertoire and Document Work in the *Assemblea operaia e studenti* of 1969', *Archival Science* 12 (2012): 411–436.

When the software was adapted for an archive of documents such as Leftovers, it resulted in something that might be best thought of as a cut-up inspired, non linear-approach, to historical material. All 19,000 documents are available in full as pdf, but we have added the possibility to directly look at a page, a clipping, and the OCRed text.<sup>11</sup> This has opened up the material for different forms of extraction, recombination and analysis. We have been developing a collaborative tool for working together on the digital collection and creating new ways of interrogating the material remotely. The tool enables users to take clippings from the documents in the archive, then recombine and annotate them to create ‘scrapbooks’ or montages. We have held a series of workshops to test and further develop these tools, and through this, have co-created different scrapbooks around the topics of Health Autonomy, Abolitionist Struggles, Rent Strikes, and Radical Spaces.

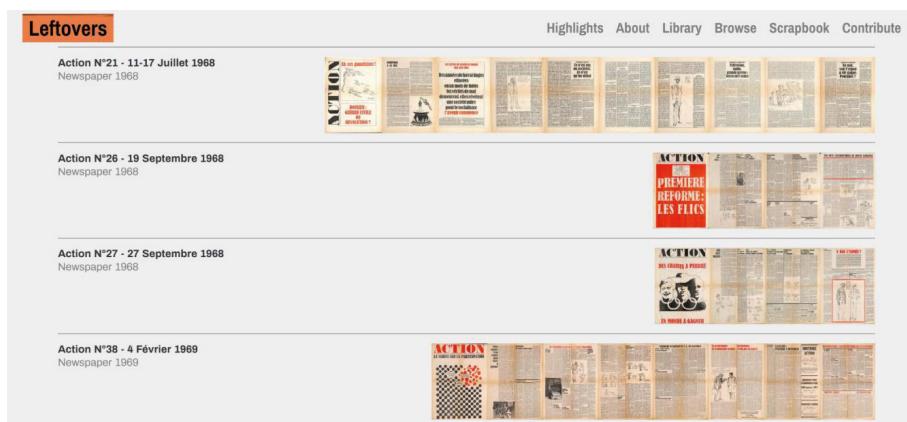


Fig. 3.3. The timeline view from Leftovers.

Our approach has led us to develop our own metadata system for Leftovers, rather than relying on hierarchical systems of classification or inherited metadata conventions. A good example of this is the category of ‘Tactics’. This field was introduced to re-orient the collection as something that can be used as resources for current struggles and developing metadata suited for the collection we hold. The intention behind this field was that if a group wanted to organize a rent strike they could filter or search the collection by ‘Tactics’, choose ‘Rent Strike’ and view every document which mentions the expression. To help further define this category, we used the full-text functionality of the platform which allows you to search *within* the document, not only for data *about* the document. This might sound like a minor technical point, but it has proved highly significant in opening up digital archives and using the actual document’s content as the basis of classification. We made a list of different tactics of left and social movements and searched all documents in Leftovers for them. Some of the results are below with their occurrences in the archive to give an impression of the variety:

<sup>11</sup> Optical Character Recognition (OCR) is the process by which you can convert an image of text into a machine-readable text format. For example, a digitization of a page from a journal becomes an image that also contains text data.

Occupation (2858) Rent Strike (164) Riot (1630) Picket (1451) Strike/Grève (3640) Direct Action (2401) Rent Strike (170) Prefigurative (18) Sabotage (2053) Protest (3399) Sit-in (905) Blockade (607) Pirate Radio (76) Collective (4584) Road Block (42) Boss-napping (4) Wildcat Strike (124) Squatting/Squat (614) Slowdown (46) Boycott (1367) Forgery (1) Barricades (1310) March (3850) General Strike (245)

Some of these terms, such as ‘Occupation’, occurred too many times or were too broad to be a useful way of filtering an item. But other terms, such as ‘Rent Strike’, are specific enough to be a useful means of clustering documents.

Another interesting metadata category which is worth mentioning is the field of ‘Author’, which in Leftovers is almost completely redundant, as most material in the archive is produced by a group, a collective, or is anonymous. The reasons for collective authoring on the left and in social movements are various; whilst some material is intentionally authored under a group name, others remain anonymous or produced under a collective identity, not as a choice but as a societal position in relation to the state, whereas in some cases other groups are actually a single person masquerading as a group in order to explore imaginary formations. With all of these examples, anonymity is not merely dropping one’s name, but speaks to the complex nature of the production of the documents, where the writing of newsletters, pamphlets, positioning papers, and bulletins becomes a form of internally constituting groups, not individual acclaim, and writing and action combine as a form of collective political organization.

Angela Davis recently spoke in Berlin on the occasion of the ten year anniversary of the occupation of Oranienplatz by the refugee resistance movement in opposition to the ‘Asylverfahrensgesetz’ (Asylum Procedure Act). Whilst highlighting the work and lives of Black Feminists who have been at the forefront of struggles for freedom and rights, Davis added, she is not presumptuous to add her own name to a long list: the ‘reason that people know my name has more to do with what people did to save my life all over the world, including in Germany’.<sup>12</sup> Davis spoke about the ‘1 Million Rosen für Angela’ campaign at state-wide solidarity campaign in the GDR, where postcards of roses were sent, including many from school children, to Davis whilst she was in prison between 1971–1972. Davis went on to describe herself as a figure standing in for collective and mass struggle, this was not to lessen the legacy and leading-role many Black feminists have taken but an acknowledgment of the thousands of other people who create mass movements and social change. Here Davis acknowledges the unknown figures that are integral to the political movements that the material in Leftover is part of. The category of author is often bound up with proprietary forms of ownership, but moving away from this as a dominant metadata category, in favor of an emphasis on movements, collective and groups, acknowledges all those who were part of the production of the material. This started to acknowledge that political movements and campaigns are always a work of collective action and remain so.

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12 Angela Davis, ‘Angela Davis Speaks at Oranienplatz, Berlin 2022’, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WGJ5LHZkYSg>, 2022.

## Archives of archives

Although MDR initiated the project, Leftovers does not solely consist of our digital collection; it draws in digitizations from many different sources: from torrent files of 1970s newspapers to an autonomously-run online collection of the Ultra-Left in France, to Women's Liberation movement material from state archives. Sean Dockrey, in 'HyperReadings', puts forward the idea of a 'library of libraries', which does 'not to manifest in a single, universal library, but to realize it progressively and partially with different individuals, groups and institutions'.<sup>13</sup> This idea was influential in imagining Leftovers as a shared archive which contains many archives and users uploading and maintaining the material in the collection. We see ourselves as custodians of the material in the collection rather than having some kind of exclusive claim. All material in Leftovers has a 'Source' field that takes you back to the original source of the digitization, so aggregating these materials on one platform not only brings them into proximity with one another but also highlights the work of many small independent archives and protects against archival destruction.



*Fig. 3.4. Overview of a section of Spare Rib magazine in Leftovers.*

One of the publications in Leftovers is *Spare Rib*, which was published between 1972 to 1993 and represents the biggest Women's Liberation publication in British history. It was originally digitized by the British Library; however, in their online collection much of the content had been redacted due to copyright claims (see above). After Britain and Northern Ireland left the European Union, the copyright directive that covered the digitization no longer applied and the digital copies were taken down. To my knowledge, Leftovers now holds the only digital copies of this material. We can see here the fragility of digital collections which can disappear at any time and in turn the imperative to freely spread material across many archives and platforms. Dušan Barok advocates the copy, not as something that just 'mirroring or making backups', but opening up for possibilities to start new libraries, new platforms, new databases'.<sup>14</sup>

Leftovers is also used by many different archival collections, from smaller archives that have only just started embarking on creating digital collections and want to use Leftovers to host their collections to more established archives contributing to Leftovers in addition to hosting their own materials. A good example of this was when we ran a workshop with Glasgow Housing Struggles Archive, a new project from members of a tenants' union called Living Rent. This project was aimed at uncovering Glasgow's hidden history of squatting, rent strikes, and council tenant organization, and at looking at how they can use Leftovers to build a resource and take the archive into everyday organizing. Through this pooling and sharing of digitizations

13 Sean Dockrey, 'README.md', <https://samiz-dat.github.io/hyperreadings/>, 2018.

14 Annet Dekker, 'Copying as a Way to Start Something New: A Conversation with Dušan Barok about Monoskop' in Annet Dekker (ed), *Lost and Living (in) Archives. Collectively Shaping New Memories*, Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017, 188.

and resources we have built networks with sisterly archives, that is, with other physical and online collections such as Sparrows' Nest Archive and Library (UK), Archivio Grafton (IT), Rebal.info (IT), and Archives Autonomies (FR).



Fig. 3.5. Section of the workshop scrapbook with Living Rent and London Renters Union members in 2020.

Although it has been very important to network with other archives to build the collection, not every contributor to Leftovers does so knowingly. We have searched and scraped pdfs from many different sources on the internet: from national collections to static pages hosting material; from single campaigns or publications to torrents of carefully packaged collections. For example, *The Black Panther*, the newspaper of the Black Panther Party,

was scanned at a university in the USA and then did the rounds on the internet as a torrent. We downloaded it and OCRed the scans and uploaded them to the collection. We were not the ones who scanned it, downloaded it from the university, and distributed it online and the scans are not only hosted on Leftovers, but we felt it was important that it become part of the archive and be freely accessible. All of these online searches for material reveal the breadth of radical history resources online and, through bringing them together in one place, we have been able to make connections between documents and collections that would usually be dispersed. []{#\_heading=h.2et92p0 .anchor}

## Dissemination as preservation

Leftovers was founded on the idea that radical archiving should be outward facing and promote distribution, accessibility and use, rather than being a static repository. This is an idea that is mirrored by many radical archives, including Interference Archive in New York, whose members argue that use itself is a form of preservation.<sup>15</sup> Pad.ma (Public Access Digital Media Archive) in their *Ten Theses on the Archive*, further advocate for this vision of the archive:

15 Jen Hoyer and Josh MacPhee, *Interference Archive: Building a Counter-Institution in the United States*, Brooklyn NYC: Interference Archive, 2022.

When Henri Langlois, founder of the Cinémathèque Française, stated that ‘the best way to preserve film is to project it’, he hinted at the very opposite philosophy of archiving: to actually use and consume things, to keep them in, or bring them into, circulation, and to literally throw them forth, into a shared and distributed process that operates based on diffusion, not consolidation, through imagination, not memory, and towards creation.<sup>16</sup>

During the *Archive Ausser Sich* conference in HKW in Berlin in 2022, Didi Cheeka, in his talk ‘Reclaiming Nigeria’s Audiovisual Archives: Result & Prospects’, spoke about the issue of restitution of cultural items made about, or made by, formerly colonized people. He argues that restitution is not just about artifacts but audio-visual material too that needs to be returned to their country, or countries, of origin so that people there can have an idea of their own film heritage. Citing Walter Benjamin, he argues that film and sound recordings are technically reproducible, so the act of returning could also be the act of copying. That the restitution of audio-visual heritage from extractive archives and collections in Europe and North America does not even need to be the ‘original’ but a reproduction that can be seen by people whose history it belongs to.<sup>17</sup> Cheeka’s simple advocacy of the copy as a means of restitution highlights how questions of rights are used as justification by archives to sit passively on their holdings, rather than making them actively accessible and bringing them into circulation.



Fig. 3.6. Screenshot of a Tweet from Archivio Grafton. Archivio Grafton

16 Pad.ma Public Access Digital Media Archive. ‘10 Theses on the Archive’, [https://pad.ma/documents/OH\\_2010](https://pad.ma/documents/OH_2010)

17 Didi Cheeka, ‘Reclaiming Nigeria’s Audiovisual Archives: Result & Prospects’, *Haus der Kulturen der Welt* (HKW), <https://archiv.hkw.de/en/app/mmediathek/audio/91369>, 2022.

This tweet from Archivio Grafton, about their material hosted on Leftovers, forms a really fitting conclusion to this piece. It states ‘when you publish something on the net, let everyone take it and freely distribute it’. It points to the fact that the aggregation of all this radical ephemera into Leftovers also brings them into circulation and creates a type of common non-proprietary ownership. Through developing tools, and ways of disseminating, programming, integrating, and re-using the collection rather than it just being a repository where material is merely stored, Leftovers hope to continue to re-imagine what it means to create a digital archive as an active resource shared in common with social movements today.

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## 04. FROM PEOPLE'S PARKS TO THE PEOPLE'S ARCHIVE: POWER, IDENTITY, AND THE RIGHT TO REPRESENTATION IN THE MEDIA SINCE THE 1960S

KERA LOVELL

### Introduction

The amorphous People's Park movement was a sporadic chain of more than four dozen protests across the United States in the late Vietnam War era in which activists protested a range of issues including police brutality, gentrification, and systemic racism by taking over vacant lots and insurgently converting those lots into informal parks they often called 'people's parks'. Most of these park projects were ephemeral, often being fenced and torn down by police only days or weeks after construction began.<sup>1</sup> Because of their inherently short lifespan as well as the fact that these illegal formations at times ignited violent conversations over spatial power, park creators in the late 1960s and early 1970s created their own informal archives of parks to galvanize support for their movements. In this chapter, I use the People's Park Movement to explore how activists worked as archivists—creating and compiling their own materials outside the bounds of institutional archives. While scholarship on the relationship between archives and activism has tended to focus on community archives, the People's Park movement resulted in a disparate constellation of archival materials across the United States that offer a kaleidoscopic view of the movement.<sup>2</sup> From regulated institutions to social media accounts, the People's Park movement presents an alternative lens through which to explore power and representation in the historical memory of social movements.

Archival materials on largely white male-dominated park creations abound with a wide array of accessible primary sources, including: photography, film, audio recordings, oral history interviews and testimonies, and newsprint media as the basis for galleries, books, and later archival collections, websites, and social media accounts. Since the late 1960s, supporters have used this archival material to not only validate that these spaces and projects existed, but to construct their own historical memories of these protest actions counter to the state. Documenting park protests not only served as a tool for park creators to control their own

- 1 Kera Lovell, *Radical Manifest Destiny: Mapping Power over Urban Green Space in the Age of Protest, 1968–1988*, PhD dissertation, Purdue: Purdue University, 2017; Kera Lovell, "Everyone Gets a Blister": Sexism, Gender Empowerment, and Race in the People's Park Movement', *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 46.3-4 (2018): 103–119; Kera Lovell, 'Free Food, Free Space: People's Stews and the Spatial Identity Politics of People's Parks', *American Studies* 57.3 (2018): 103–119.
- 2 For more on activist histories in community archives, see Diana Wakimoto, Christine Bruce and Helen Partridge, 'Archivist as Activist: Lessons from Three Queer Community Archives in California', *Archival Science* 13 (2013): 296–316; Rosa Sadler and Andrew Martin Cox, "Civil Disobedience" in the Archive: Documenting Women's Activism and Experience through the Sheffield Feminist Archive', *Archives and Records* 39.2 (2018): 158–172; Marika Cifor, Michelle Caswell, Alda Allina Migoni and Noah Geraci, 'What We Do Crosses Over to Activism: The Politics and Practice of Community Archives', *The Public Historian* 20.2 (2018): 69–95.

narrative separate from the mainstream media and the state, but also to create satellite spaces to memorialize them after their demolition. While social media has quickened the pace of building activist movements, an analysis of the social media archives of Berkeley's People's Park and more contemporary parks reveals how digital organizing has not changed the tactics of protesters who seek to build 'an archive of feelings'<sup>3</sup> that connects the personal with the political. Despite the wide variety of parks created by racially diverse groups in this era, an abundance of material on Berkeley's People's Park in the late 1960s has contributed to an 'archival fever' on this site, which, in turn, has centered white men in the archives and histories of this movement.<sup>4</sup> Putting the archival tactics of people's parks in conversation with the work of women who participated in contemporary occupations like Occupy Wall Street and the Taksim-Gezi Park protest allows us to creatively explore the racialized and gendered historiographical gaps on these emotional archives.

## The park as an archive

People's Parks served as archives for the street people, activists, and outliers of their communities. The original callout for Berkeley's People's Park offered the parcel as a blank slate with suggested programming that might attract a variety of interested workers: 'We could have a child care clinic or a crafts commune which would communicate its wares by having medieval style fairs, a baseball diamond, a rock concert, or a place to think and sleep in the sun'.<sup>5</sup> Recorded footage demonstrates how some users brought chairs, car seats, and sleeping bags to both Berkeley's People's Park and People's Park #6, yet otherwise the space had minimal seating.<sup>6</sup> Piecing together the memoirs of those who attended Berkeley's People's Park illuminates a landscape of scattered jugs of wine, Band-Aid wrappers, and possibly the crusts of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. At San Diego's Chicano Park, you would have navigated through leftover tamales and water hoses, likely flyers for the neighborhood's Chicano Free Clinic featuring the symbolic flag of Aztlán. At Chicago's Poor People's Park, as documented by historian Studs Terkel, the park contained flyers in support of various organizations advocating for affordable housing, as well as kids toys and playground equipment.<sup>7</sup> Flexible spaces and objects that created opportunities for work, rest, and play could emerge spontaneously, allowing park goers to explore their own ideas and identities through materiality. Sculptures, stages, and swings became seats and play areas, opportunities for self-reflection and socialization. At Herrick Peace and Freedom Park, park goers hung inspirational signs in newly-planted fruit trees.<sup>8</sup> Later on that same lot that would

3 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003, 7.

4 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

5 Robin Hood's Park Commissioner (Stew Albert), 'Hear Ye, Hear Ye', *Berkeley Barb* 8.16 (April 18–24, 1969): 2.

6 'People's Park Mobile Annex (Berkeley)', Archival Film Footage, KRON-TV News, Young Broadcasting of San Francisco, Inc., May 1969, San Francisco Bay Area Television Archive, <https://diva.sfsu.edu/collections/sfbatv/bundles/208853>; 'People's Park (Berkeley)', Film, KRON-TV, San Francisco Bay Area Television Archive, May 1969, <http://bit.ly/2d1wIDe>

7 Studs Terkel, 'Interview with neighborhood residents', Studs Terkel Radio Archive, released 1970, <https://studsterkel.wfmt.com/programs/interview-neighborhood-residents-0>

8 See JAS, 'Berkeleyans Busy Behind the "Dozers"', *Berkeley Barb* 6.19 (May 10–18, 1968): 9; 'At

become Berkeley's People's Park, someone dragged four large three-dimensional orange letters spelling 'KNOW' where teenagers lounged.

Stories like these are celebrated in Terri Compost's published archive, *People's Park: Still Blooming*, which features photos, scans of publications, and most importantly, brief oral histories on the various experiences park goers had with objects and spaces within the park.<sup>9</sup> The vast array of objects collected there as well as the laborers and park goers these spaces attracted often resulted in gawking onlookers who were head-scratchingly confused.<sup>10</sup>

When underground reporters (initially park organizers) described Berkeley's People's Park as it was being built, they did so by listing an inventory of objects, people, and activities the park manifested: 'Flower and vegetable gardens were planted...Nursery swings and a sliding board appeared...old benches and newly-made ones were fine for sitting down and being amazed at what was happening'.<sup>11</sup> Wildflower and vegetable gardens as well as new trees, shrubs, and flowers were concentrated in the far west and peripheral edges of the park. Park participants appear to have randomly scattered wooden benches and small scaffolds whose rustic look and feel countered the smooth surfaces of the 'cheap mass "plastic" accoutrements of suburban life'.<sup>12</sup> Seating areas, platforms, and interactive sculptural elements emerged like stalagmites in a sea of dusty gravel-speckled dirt in the far southeast corner. Parks were canvases for collaborative folk art, with users contributing their own artifacts to the landscape that were subsequently moved and reimagined by park goers. Many of these objects and spaces were mentioned by park goers in the underground press and by scholars in subsequent histories of People's Parks in ways that read like lists—the variety of objects and spaces a metaphor for the diversity of people the park attracted. The park contained a collection of objects—the objects, in turn, serving as 'proof' that these spaces were used and enjoyed by many, even loved.

Park objects were most often destroyed when parks were fenced or raided. As bulldozers demolished Herrick Peace and Freedom Park in 1968, park supporters took photos of fledgling trees snapped in two. In one photo, the bulldozer heads toward a folk-art mannequin with a body made of old cans and wood, the mannequin lounging on a twin mattress in the park. Dust clouds the ripper teeth of the bulldozer's bucket. Photographs represent the demolition as a traumatic event, what park creators described as a double loss of life of both Chuck Herrick and the park they had constructed in his memory after his death in an automobile accident.<sup>13</sup> Because parks were often suddenly demolished in early mornings to take park creators off guard and because park creators resisted these demolitions by doubling down as occupiers, no institutional archive

9 People's Park Just Water Plants to Keep Chuck Alive', *Berkeley Barb* 6.19 (May 10–18, 1968): 4.

10 Lovell, *Radical Manifest Destiny*.

11 Stew Albert, 'People's Park: Free for All', *Berkeley Barb* 8.17 (April 25-May 1, 1969): 5.

12 See Sim Van der Ryn for more discussion on how the park's aesthetics countered mainstream suburban modern America. Sim Van der Ryn, 'Building a People's Park', in Kerry G. Smith (ed), *The Troubled Campus: Current Issues in Higher Education*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1970: 54–71.

13 See photos in Ecology Action Records BANC MSS 88/126, Box 3, Folder 'Chuck Herrick Peace and Freedom Park', Bancroft Library, UC Berkeley.

contains objects from the People's Park movement in the late Vietnam War era. Occupy Wall Street offers a model for what objects park creators might have archived. Like the participants of Berkeley's People's Park, Occupiers had emotional connections to certain objects within Zuccotti Park because of experiences they had during the protest.

Even Occupy Archivist Amy Roberts, thinking back on her favorite item archived from Occupy, lights up describing a polyester neon orange sign used for the Occupy Kitchen. When police were attempting to use orange mesh fencing to corner and ultimately arrest Occupiers, the activists commandeered it and converted it into a sign for their own use. Roberts was part of a small group that had ventured to the City of New York Department of Sanitation to retrieve the sign after police evicted occupants in a late-night raid. Its safe retrieval after so many items in the park, especially the People's Library, had been destroyed by trash compactors, was a small victory of symbolic resistance.<sup>14</sup>

Some protesters, like Esen Kara who was a graduate student taking part in the Gezi Park occupation in 2013, cannot recall saving anything from their multi-week experience living in the protest camp. Despite wearing handkerchiefs everyday as quick protection against tear gas attacks, Kara does not recall keeping or reminiscing about any flyers or photos over the past decade. When the Gezi Park occupation started over the proposed demolition of 600 trees to make way for the reconstruction of the former Taksim Military Barracks and a shopping mall, Kara dropped what she was doing and immediately flew to Istanbul to join the protest. Yet as Turkish author Ece Temelkuran argued, 'it was never just about the trees, but the accumulation of many incidents'. Temelkuran, whose words originally written on Twitter are now archived on the Gezi Park occupation liveblog *Mashallah News*, tweeted, 'With the world's highest number of imprisoned journalists, thousands of political prisoners (trade unionists, politicians, activists, students, lawyers), Turkey has been turned into an open-air prison already'.<sup>15</sup> For both Berkeley and Istanbul, the demolition of trees within waning access to urban green space signified lack of control over their country. During the occupation, occupiers replanted seedlings in the park in the shape of a peace symbol, as well as in empty tear gas canisters. Park goers taped signs to the remaining trees with the names of Kurds killed in the Uludere/Roboski massacre.<sup>16</sup> To memorialize her own participation, Esen Kara had a tree tattooed on her upper arm with a 'swirling trunk...meant to look like a female body, as the symbol of the 'woman in red' of the Gezi Park protests'.<sup>17</sup> Ceyda Sungur, an urban planning graduate student at the protest, would become the 'lady in red' when police troops sprayed her with pepper spray so forcefully that it sent her hair and red dress into a whirlwind.<sup>18</sup> For Kara, the trees, and by extension the woman protecting them, became a symbol for much larger issues about human rights and the abuse of state power — 'the symbolic figure that started it all' that shaped her own memories of the protest. At Berkeley's People's Park, the site's old growth redwood trees similarly captivated

14 Amy Roberts, Personal Interview (24 October 2022).

15 'Gezi Park Occupation Liveblog', *Mashallah News*, 31 May 2013, <https://www.mashallahnews.com/gezi-park-occupation-liveblog/>

16 'Gezi Park Occupation Liveblog', reprinted from Gezi Medya Facebook Page (private).

17 Esen Kara, Personal Interview (18 November 2022).

18 Amar Toor, 'How a "Lady in Red" Became the Symbol of Turkey's Unrest', *The Verge*, 8 June 2013, <https://www.theverge.com/2013/6/7/4405412/ceyda-sungur-lady-in-red-photo-becomes-symbol-of-turkey-protests>

park goers, and still serve as a symbol for protestors of the capitalist-driven motivations for demolishing the park. Over the past few decades, as the University of California-Berkeley has reignited its campaign to reclaim power over the site, activists continue to argue that protecting the trees is essential to maintaining the free-thinking, spatially-liberated community that the park embodies to them.

## The Press in the early era

The local underground newspaper, the *Berkeley Barb*, serves as one of the first archives and recruitment tools for Berkeley's People's Park. Most coverage of the park in its early days is written from the perspective of largely white middle-class journalists and photographers, including Stew Albert, Art Goldberg, Paul Glusmen, Jon Jakobson, and more who wrote for the *Berkeley Tribe*, *Ramparts*, and the *Daily Californian*. Park construction was messy and disorganized, with its 'contribute what you like' attitude creating an aura of chaos under the facade of a countercultural 'happening'. Park coverage mimicked this mindset by focusing on topless women and famous (male) political figures who stopped by the park as a way to promote its popularity.<sup>19</sup> Very few women were able to publish reports on Berkeley's People's Park in the white male-dominated *Berkeley Barb*. As tensions escalated and reports on the park's demolition and defense became headline news, women and people of color were among the photographers whose work was later shown in exhibitions at Berkeley Phoenix Gallery and its printed catalog, including Mitch Ikuta, Jerry Takigawa, Jeanne Raisler, and Ruth Rosen among others. Those names are buried beneath that of the exhibition's white male curator.<sup>20</sup> Turning over the large, thick photo placards at the Library of Congress where the 'Alan Copeland' collection is held, you can see their names faintly written in pencil on the back, written so lightly as if with the intent to ultimately be erased.

As scholar Jarrett Drake has argued, the foundational principles of ownership and authorship structuring archival science—and I would argue by extension print journalism—"valorize and venerate white western masculinity", resulting in skewed initial reporting that has produced white and male-dominated archival materials on Berkeley's People's Park in particular.<sup>21</sup> While shaped by gendered and racialized mindsets and power structures, the Alternative Press Syndicate worked with the company Bell and Howell to microfilm tens of thousands of newspapers from the postwar era in the 1980s—the base set forming more than 400 microfilm reels that are accessible at more than 100 universities as well as through Interlibrary Loan.<sup>22</sup> In the past decade, open access digitization of thousands of issues of the underground

19 Lovell, *Radical Manifest Destiny*.

20 Alan Copeland and Nikki Arai (eds), *People's Park*, New York City: Ballantine Books, 1969.

21 Jarrett Drake, 'RadTech Meets RadArch: Towards a New Principle for Archives and Archival Description', speech at Radcliffe Workshop on Technology and Archival Processing (4–5 April 2016), reprinted on Medium, 7 April 2016, <https://medium.com/on-archivify/radtech-meets-radarch-towards-a-new-principle-for-archives-and-archival-description-568f133e4325>

22 Laurie Charnigo, 'Occupy the OccupAST: Echoes of Dissidence in the UPS Underground Newspaper Collection', *Occupy Wall Street Library* (February 28, 2012), <https://peopleslibrary.wordpress.com/2012/02/28/occupy-the-occupast-echoes-of-dissidence-in-the-ups-underground-newspaper-collection-pt-4-of-4/>

press has allowed scholars to quickly search terms across categorical divides, such as seeing representations of Berkeley's People's Park in the campus underground versus its representation in Black Power or feminist periodicals.<sup>23</sup> While digital access to these early reports has increased public knowledge about nearly a dozen activist-created parks created in the Bay area at this time, the initial archive created within the underground press often reiterated sexist stereotypes and racial tropes that reinforced white men as the leaders in alliance with Black male outsiders.<sup>24</sup> In turn, some park creators of color in other cities around the country adapted the tactic of park creation as a method of protest, but positioned their working-class park as oppositional to countercultural back-to-the-land movements with simply 'hip people fighting for some greenery'.<sup>25</sup>

After Berkeley's People's Park was fenced, coverage in the local newspapers revealed mounting antagonism between park defenders and the state—with park supporters threatening to reclaim it and the state arguing it was obligated to protect private property rights violently if necessary. While a group of students and faculty in support of the park attempted to negotiate with university administrators over the course of the week, California Governor Ronald Reagan was outspoken in his critique of leniency. Reagan had been elected on a platform of quieting student unrest after Berkeley's notorious Free Speech Movement had garnered international attention just a few years earlier. After violence broke out over the park on May 15 known as 'Bloody Thursday', Governor Ronald Reagan stationed more than 2000 National Guardsmen in the park and on streets to regulate pedestrian access across nearly eighteen square blocks in the South Berkeley area. The city became a military occupation. Alameda County Sheriff Deputies moved throughout the city, matching frustrations by locals with escalated aggression. Rock throwing and fists held high were met with fixed bayonets, nightsticks, and gas masks. Law enforcement squads guarded vacant lots and parks, enforced an evening curfew, and restricted public gatherings, assemblies, and loitering. By Monday, May 19, groups of protesters began flying kites in vacant lots to keep hovering helicopters preparing to teargas the city at bay.<sup>26</sup> During this period of conflict, hundreds of civilians were arrested in various altercations with police and National Guardsmen while at least a dozen new activist-created parks were planted and at times literally stomped out by police across the city within hours or days.

The *Instant News Service*, the *Berkeley Barb*, and other Left-leaning newspapers began focusing their attention on how the military and police had lacked restraint in regulating the protests, often escalating violence through violent attacks on passersby. Eli Leon, who would later become an important collector of African American quilts in the Bay area, began collecting witness statements on the abuse of police force in an effort to strengthen the defense for those wrongfully arrested or injured and seeking compensation. Cathy Clark's statement focused on May 15, as she expressed shock at seeing police shoot activists without warning and laughing as victims writhed in pain.<sup>27</sup> After Bloody Thursday, supporters of

23 See 'Independent Voices' in the Reveal Digital online archive: <https://about.jstor.org/revealdigital/>

24 Lovell, *Radical Manifest Destiny*; Kera Lovell, "'Everyone Gets a Blister'.

25 'People's Park in Chicago', Y.L.O. 1, no. 4 (1969): 4.

26 'Kiting for our Cause', *Berkeley Barb* 8.21 (May 23-29, 1969): 13.

27 Cathy Clark, 'Witness Statement (May 22, 1969)' in Leon Eli Collection of Witness Statements Relating to People's Park and General Unrest in Berkeley, California, 1969 (BANC MSS 99/80), in Bancroft

the park creation immediately responded by attempting to reclaim the park and construct new ‘liberated zones’ or activist-controlled mini parks and encampments throughout the city. In addition, park creators also began creating their own archives of their memories of People’s Park in an effort to acknowledge its existence and confirm its value through shared use and approval. Photographer Alan Copeland collected dozens of negatives, newspapers, and photographs taken by a wide range of photographers of militarized Berkeley that became an exhibition at Berkeley’s Phoenix Gallery in September and October of 1969.<sup>28</sup> Park supporters like Copeland approached their archival work (both material and digital) as forms of activism, seeking to collect audio, visual, and written documentation showing that the parks were being created and that the state was enacting violence against park goers. Yet park advocates and troops returned—this cycle of insurgent gardening and, in response, forced removal created a trail of growth and destruction, celebration and defense, across the city. As park creations became more ephemeral, newspapers became an extension of urban space and allowed for informal parks to be legitimized and memorialized. The underground press continued to serve as a form of ‘information activism’—an accessible technological medium that allowed park supporters to create a diverse movement through shared experiences of displacement and police brutality, as well as shared goals of urban autonomy, ecological design, and communal infrastructures.<sup>29</sup>

## Institutionalized archives versus websites and social media

Due to the widespread media attention directed at Berkeley during altercations between park allies and the police, archival material on Berkeley’s People’s Park is exhaustive, encompassing hundreds of boxes of material across numerous archives from the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. The extensive material on Berkeley’s People’s Park contrasts sharply with the dozens of other case studies of activist-created parks as civil disobedient placemaking projects that I have identified in my own research, some of whom only have one folder’s worth of material formally archived. The voices of men—particularly white heterosexual middle-class men in positions of power—are the most well-documented. The papers of white male politicians and university administrators are collected and organized chronologically within university and state archives, making them more accessible for researchers. Additionally, white male political leaders in the New Left who had access to the press as a platform for power have also had their papers collected and stored, while print, microfilm, and digital archives of their writings have reinforced their dominance within 1960s activism. In contrast, some parks created by people of color might have only been documented by one photograph, with the park’s creators now scattered across the United States and, more than fifty years later, with little memory of the park’s development. In a

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Library, University of California, Berkeley. These accounts are echoed in ‘The Battle for People’s Park: Round One’, (Episode 1 of 8) (BB2422.1), KPFA, produced by Carol Amyx and Don Kaufman (recorded, April-June, 1969, air date, May 15, 1970), in Pacifica Radio Archive: <http://www.pacificaradioarchives.org/recording/bb242201>

28 See photos (ca. 1969), in the People’s Park collection (PR 13 CN 1978: 196), in the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

29 Cait McKinney, *Information Activism: A Queer History of Lesbian Media Technologies*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

historical moment in which protestors were wary of hierarchical leadership structures and eager to make cross-cultural, transnational connections in anti-racist organizing, the names of white men ironically became fundamental to telling the stories of Berkeley's People's Park and the larger People's Park movement.

However, if the original park creators had thought through the institutionalization of social movement archives, I imagine they would be outraged at the rigidly regulated access to their materials found at archives like the Bancroft Library. Even before Covid, accessing the Bancroft Library's reading room was nothing short of entering a prison, with an extensive multi-week wait to view refrigerated audio-visual materials, multiple bag checks upon entry, and strict limitations such as the allowance of only five pieces of loose-leaf paper. Likewise, there are many obstacles to access to the Chicago Red Squad Records, hosted by the Chicago Museum, containing hundreds of boxes of surveillance reports produced by the local police as part of the Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO). These reports include references to activist-created parks in the city. The collection evidences aggressive and illegal policing tactics used to subvert and fragment local social justice organizations. After paying your entry fee to access the archive, you are required to sign a nondisclosure agreement (NDA) that you will never cite anything from the collection. When I asked a Reading Room attendant why the collection required an NDA, the archivist responded that nondisclosure offered privacy to figures in the past. However, I would argue it protects police rather than all historical figures equally. As Jacques Derrida argues, 'There is no political power without control of the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation'.<sup>30</sup> Through its NDA, the Red Squad Collection's silencing of scholars, who are unable to write on the interrogation of activists, does more to preserve the power of the police than challenge it. The experience of Jose 'Cha-Cha' Jimenez offers a case in point. In an effort to expose systemic police brutality against the Puerto Rican and Chicago-based Young Lords Organization, leader Jose 'Cha-Cha' Jimenez requested access to his own arrest records via the Freedom of Information Act and included the police reports he received in the archive he created at Grand Valley State University. The Young Lords had been part of a cross-cultural coalition of activist groups in Chicago protesting urban renewal using a variety of means, including the creation of 'Poor People's Park'. The police records Jimenez archived reflect how the Chicago Police Department used informants to monitor urban renewal meetings, court hearings, and press conferences, utilized surveillance to follow attendees and their cars after demonstrations, and relied on police officers to collect business cards and other material on known affiliations from arrestees' pockets.<sup>31</sup> However, those same records in the Chicago Museum's Red Squad Collection cannot legally be referenced.

Since the early 1990s, advocates for People's Parks have used their own published media and the internet to create their own archive and platform in support of the project. Peoplespark.org was organized in 1996 as part of a larger resistance to the University of California, Berkeley's campaign to reclaim People's Park to convert it into volleyball courts. Although several public

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30 Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 4.

31 See 'Chicago Police Red Squad – Personal Subversive Files', in Folder, 'Young Lords Chicago Police Dept. Gang Analytical Files, 1969-1970', Box 4, Young Lords in Lincoln Park Collection (RHC-65), Special Collections and University Archives, Grand Valley State University.

hearings featured raucous critiques from Berkeley's Landmarks Preservation Commission, the Parks and Rec Commission, and the Peace and Justice Commission, UC Berkeley broke ground on the property in 1991. Protests were held at the lot every weekend, often featuring advocate David Nadel who shared an archive of photos while telling the history of the site.<sup>32</sup> After riots intensified and a woman named Rosebud Denovo was shot attempting to break into the Chancellor's home to protest the park takeover, park advocates underwent years of negotiation with the Berkeley City Council. By 1996 when PeoplesPark.org was created, the website was poised to serve as the first digitized archive of the protest. Featuring recorded speeches by muralist and homeless advocacy lawyer Osha Newmann, as well as photos of the park creation and park ephemera, over the past decade the website has transitioned to now include more links to other park advocates posting their own primary sources on the park across the internet.

Social media sites have allowed illegal park projects to create somewhat interactive, publicly accessible archives. Instagram in particular has allowed park organizers to recruit workers, solicit donations, and most importantly synthesize their message on a platform that seamlessly allows their political action to blend into the personal lives of their supporters. Twitter's use of geotagging and hashtags has helped transform protest, allowing protesters like Esen Kara at the Gezi Park Occupation the ability to be able to coordinate logistics and connect with fellow activists immediately.<sup>33</sup> According to reporter Ben Berkowitz, within 24 hours of the Zuccotti Park occupation in 2011, the hashtag #occupywallstreet had become so popular that one of every 500 tweets in the world included that hashtag.<sup>34</sup> Instagram has become an integral tool for contemporary park creations and occupations like Weelaunee People's Park (@defendatlantaforest) and Plaza del Pueblo (@missiondefence\_sf) to connect with other parks like Berkeley's People's Park and build a shared platform with other social justice organizations who are then tagged in stories and posts when they visit the park. While in 1969 it took days if not weeks for different newspapers to travel across the country and for different groups to respond, social media allows for instantaneous connections from a diverse group of perspectives largely outside the bounds of state interference. The speed of global social media, however, still presents new obstacles that 1960s-era park creators did not face, such as digital requirements for account creation, account deletion, institutional censorship through social media companies, and more.

While Twitter is useful for activists to share information about law enforcement and locations quickly, perhaps one of the most important purposes served by social media archives like those on Instagram is to keep energy levels high. On @thepeoples\_park, one of several official and unofficial Instagram accounts for Berkeley's People's Park, you can find photos and videos of supporters in the park. Children, the houseless, parents, college students, and

32 Tarri Compost (ed), *People's Park*.

33 Esen Kara, Personal Interview (18 November 2022).

34 Ben Berkowitz, 'From a Single Hashtag, A Protest Circled the World', *Reuters*, 18 October 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-wallstreet-protests-social-idUSTRE79G6E420111018>; for a scientific study on the uses of Twitter during the Occupy Wall Street protest, see Zuoming Wang and Kara Caskey, '#Occupywallstreet: An Analysis of Twitter Usage during a Protest Movement', *Social Networking* 5.4 (2016): 101–117.

neighborhood residents all stop to share their thoughts on the park. In the immediate aftermath of the fencing of Berkeley's People's Park in 1969, creating archives felt like essential and yet exhausting work for park supporters. The sheer volume of events, exhibitions, and printed memoirs on the park released during this time is difficult to sort through, and these archives were produced within the context of emotional trauma. In her own recollection of her experience at Occupy Wall Street movement, Amy Roberts described taking a pause from graduate school after Occupy dissipated due to suffering depression culminating from not only the traumatic early-morning police raid that put an end to the movement after months of occupation, but from 'an accumulation of stress from police brutality, government surveillance, blaming [herself], and at times toxic and abusive behavior' within the movement.<sup>35</sup> Archiving the protest while weathering the movement was deeply emotional. Frustrations carried through from Zuccotti Park to the archival group listserv, as sharp, bitter disagreements over what and where to archive the collection began to carry a sexist tone with no structure set up to resolve it. The critiques, harassment, constant arrests, and overly sexual poetry sent on the Archives Working Group Listserv by men to a working group of largely women—all of it left a bitter taste in her mouth. Roberts, who is still connected with some of the movement, said that many fellow Occupiers declined an offer to later publish a piece on Michael Bloomberg's presidential run despite his ardent attack on the Occupy Wall Street People's Library. Having donated her journals documenting her Occupy work as part of the collection, Roberts is now considering requesting they be returned now that her context and views on social movement archival organizing have shifted. Her own experiences beg the question of how the depression and anxiety park creators felt during the archival process shaped the archives that were produced in this era that largely focus on the trauma of police brutality.

After UC Berkeley swept the park on August 3, 2022, cutting down trees to make way for a new student housing project, social media coverage of the park soared.<sup>36</sup> On Instagram, multiple accounts dedicated to Berkeley's People's Park have focused on building camaraderie through celebrations of community support for the park. Arthur tells the camera: 'I just want to thank everyone who are (sic) protesting who are making a difference for that to stop happening'.<sup>37</sup> In another photo a white man kicks into the air as they swing gleefully on the recently-added makeshift swing hanging from the Caterpillar excavator still on site.<sup>38</sup> More recently the Instagram account @peoplesparkberkeley that posted pictures of their recent park barbecue, followers respond in the comments: 'The grass is starting to get green again amazing and beautiful it makes me happy to see green grass again (sic)'.<sup>39</sup> Thanks to the

35 Amy Roberts, Personal Interview (24 October 2022); Kylie Message, *Collecting Activism, Archiving Occupy Wall Street*, London-New York: Routledge, 2019.

36 Supriya Yelimeli, 'UC Berkeley Halts Construction at People's Park Due to Protest, Occupation', *Berkeleyside*, 3 August 2022, <https://www.berkeleyside.org/2022/08/03/uc-berkeley-fences-off-peoples-park-begins-construction-process>

37 Thepeoples\_park [@thepeoples\_park], Video 'Thank you Arthur', Instagram, 5 September 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CiHmh3FvokO/?igshid=OGQ2MjdiOTE=>

38 Thepeoples\_park [@thepeoples\_park], Photo 'People's Park Disorientation Weekendl Part1', Instagram, 3 September 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CiKNeAQPEeo/?igshid=OGQ2MjdiOTE=>

39 Thepeoples\_park [@thepeoples\_park], Photo 'Thank you to everybody', Instagram, 3 October 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CjOTDwAvR9B/?igshid=OGQ2MjdiOTE=>

workings of Instagram as a social movement archive, People's Park transforms from a physical site to a nostalgic one—an imagined space where the past and present, park supporters and spectators, can engage with the movement. While social media archives contain many of the same elements as institutionalized archives—photos, videos, graphics, and a digital trail of networking through comments, likes, and shares—one of the most important contributions that digital media archiving offers is the possibility of seeing community reactions to that archived material in real time.

## CONCLUSION

The underground press became a tool in the pre-internet era for social movement groups to network while creating their own archives of protest outside the bounds of institutionalized repositories. As the work of early archival activists transitioned through the emergence of the digital era, the motivations for preservation adapted from the mimeograph era in the later years of the Vietnam War era through the world wide web from the 1990s to the 2000s, to what some are predicting to be the social media decline of the 2020s. Despite more than fifty years passing since the first known protest park creations in 1967, imagery and other archived materials from the first wave are still popular on park organizing platforms today that help drive the relevance of these issues. From the underground press to Instagram stories, park supporters continue to politicize the archives they socially construct, using historic and contemporary media to create socio-cultural political spaces in ways that continue to claim power long after spatial takeovers are gone. Putting the early underground press and receipt-collecting eras in conversation with new social media tactics of activist archiving illuminates the adaptation of Derrida's concept of 'archive fever' across archival technologies. Bloody Thursday helped ignite an archival fever: 'a compulsive, repetitive, nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement'.<sup>40</sup> As contests over the lot at the corner of Haste and Bowditch have fluctuated over the years, the fever has shifted, at times spread, and is currently taking new forms through geotagging and reposting on social media by connecting contemporary occupations with historic ones. Examining the archival practices of the People's Park movement reveals how Vietnam War-era activists used sculptural and print and later digital media to shape discourse about their own political actions and identities. Activist-created parks themselves were archives of objects—layers of plant matter, tools, art, lost items, and waste that all became part of the landscape of protest that shaped how park goers related to the larger movement, bridging the personal with the political. When combined with later oral histories of the park such as those in Terri Compost's collection, the park itself served as what Ann Cvetkovich has called 'an archive of feelings'. Feelings and emotions are not only encoded into the contents of the objects and historical reflections on those objects, but 'in the practices that surround their production and reception'<sup>41</sup> within the park and within satellite archives and spaces. As trauma escalated at Berkeley's People's Park such on and after Bloody Thursday, this trauma has 'served as a point of entry' into the archive as a repository of those encoded feelings and histories.

40 Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 91.

41 Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 7.

As trauma continues to escalate over the right to space such as the recent police murder of Weelaunee People's Park creator Tortuguita in Atlanta, those emotional entry points into the archive make their way to social media spaces. While social media archives of parks largely remain hopeful, when police brutality and park demolitions cyclically escalate, putting the lives of people and plants at risk, trauma becomes centered in the narrative to catalyze an emotional response from park supporters to rally support during these moments of crisis.

While we do not have a record of the emotional toll of archival work by park supporters in the late Vietnam War era, we do know from activists like Amy Roberts, that the task of documenting a movement can, at times, feel impossible even for archival professionals. Roberts had been in graduate school for library and information sciences at Queen's College when joining the Archives Working Group for Occupy Wall Street, and knew that her activist organizing experiences could make her helpful to the movement. Yet disagreements within the Archives Working Group were constant, and tension caused by police harassment mounted. How can one 'loosely' defined horizontally-structured group with little accountability manage a project that could barely begin to account for the daily production of thousands of signs, art and other printed work, and material culture of the protest itself—let alone daily live-stream feeds in addition to tens of thousands of photos and videos? If anyone can transform a pizza delivery cardboard box into a protest sign in the Occupy Sign Garden, which of the thousands of handmade signs do we keep? What is trash and what is a historically significant banner? How do we preserve materials that have been outside and in the rain day after day of encampment or crushed in the trash compactor during a police sweep? How can materials constructed within Zuccotti Park account for the national and international reach of the Occupy Movement? And perhaps most important to the working group, what institution could we trust to preserve Occupy materials and make them accessible to the public? The working group had many questions with little time to resolve them before new challenges arose, but unlike many other protest movements, they had an archival management team to take the lead. Later into the occupation, the United Federation of Teachers offered Occupy an empty space for archival storage, expanding opportunities for archiving. The donation solved the problem of materials being damaged when exposed to the elements within Zuccotti Park while creating another; with a designated archival drop-off site accessible to everyone and plenty of space, any Occupier could designate an item as archivally worthy. Within a horizontal leadership structure, who maintains the responsibility of turning objects away? What is a 'good' object to archive? Rather than making administrative choices prioritizing certain materials, the working group accepted as much as they could. In turn, according to Roberts, the Occupy Wall Street Archives Working Group Collection at the Tamiment Library and Wagner Labor Archives is now home to a large piece of drywall. Looking to Occupy as a contemporary model, what dirty, odd, and even dangerous objects might People's Park archivists have collected if they had been given the opportunity? And would those objects have reflected more of the park's functional or ideological sides?

Putting Roberts's experience at Occupy Wall Street in conversation with Berkeley's People's Park and the broader People's Park movement begs the question of the future of social movement archiving. While the archives retaining the most amount of records for Berkeley's People Park remain institutionalized, the social media archives these movements are

creating continue to be socially constructed—embedded within social, political, and social power structures in a historical context of ‘cancel culture’ that encourages editing as a tool of self-preservation. Watching KRON-TV’s silent footage of Berkeley’s People’s Park in April of 1969 brings photos of the park to life before it was fenced.<sup>42</sup> The swing sets and sandboxes are filled with playful crowds. The coffee percolator boils on a steel beam atop a campfire. Adults pass around jugs of wine and paper grocery bags filled with bread. If given the opportunity to go back in time and archive the movement, what would I choose to preserve? As Cvetkovich has argued, ‘The often ephemeral nature of queer life necessitates a creative approach to archiving, an openness to unusual objects and collections, and an acknowledgment of that which escapes the archive’.<sup>43</sup> Despite Berkeley’s People’s Park serving as a sensory experience, merging visual culture, material culture, and performance, archives on Berkeley’s park and others are very traditional due to the institutionalization of the archives. There are no plant clippings, seeds, nor gardening gloves in the archives. There are no teargas canisters, no gas masks, no bloody shirts torn from buckshot that dominated coverage of Bloody Thursday. There are no wood chips left from the ‘people’s stage’, no food-crusted pieces taken from the aluminum trash can-turned soup cauldron.

Not only would I collect these pieces as the connective tissue that bound the park together, I would build on the work of the Community Soil Collection Project which has been working across the southern United States to gather soil at historical lynching sites to display in large jars at museums like the National Memorial for Peace and Justice.<sup>44</sup> By linking the systemic past murders of African Americans with modern-day soil, this archival work by the Equal Justice Initiative challenges the ephemerality of these experiences. The blood of lynched victims, even a century later, is symbolically embedded in the soil that serves as the bedrock for contemporary societies. People’s Parks too serve as palimpsests of centuries of colonization, histories of immigration, as well as contemporary practices of displacement, police brutality, and resistance. The soil of Berkeley’s People’s Park might contain broken pieces of Ohlone pottery from the area’s indigenous inhabitants, remnants from life on Spanish missions during Mexican rule, bent nails from the affordable housing complex demolished on site in 1967, traces of the mudflat that infuriated locals after construction stalled, ashes of hog roasts, particles of blood, sweat, and urine, and torn bits of flyers and pamphlets that fell from the park’s collective bulletin board on rainy days. The soil will contain histories of the park since its first occupation: the sand of the riot-sparking volleyball courts in 1991, traces of hundreds of vegan food giveaways over the years by Food Not Bombs, as well as vestiges from thousands of people over the past five decades that have made the park their literal home as housing prices in the Bay area have skyrocketed.

42 ‘People’s Park (Berkeley)’, Film, KRON-TV, San Francisco Bay Area Television Archive, May 1969, <http://bit.ly/2d1wlDe>

43 Ann Cvetkovich, ‘The Queer Art of the Counterarchive’, in David Frantz and Mia Locks (eds), *Cruising the Archive: Queer Art and Culture in Los Angeles, 1945-1980*, Los Angeles: One National Gay and Lesbian Archives, 2011, 32.

44 Cortland Millow, ‘The Soil Remembers the Barbarity of Lynching even though America Tried to Bury it’, *The Washington Post*, 23 October 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/the-soil-remembers-the-barbarity-of-lynching-even-though-america-tried-to-bury-it/2018/10/22/d2af11c0-d631-11e8-a10f-b51546b10756\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/the-soil-remembers-the-barbarity-of-lynching-even-though-america-tried-to-bury-it/2018/10/22/d2af11c0-d631-11e8-a10f-b51546b10756_story.html).

While the design of Berkeley's People's Park has transformed numerous times over the past five decades, the occupied soil itself maintains its power as an archive of feelings about the relationship between space and power. The insurgency with which parks were created transformed material culture into what political ecologist Jane Bennett calls 'vital materiality', blurring borders between life and matter, human and nonhuman, in ways that became a form of embodied consciousness raising. Park creators often imagined the vacant lots they targeted as dead wastelands—made empty, lifeless, and dangerous from housing demolition. The plants they nourished and the objects they brought to and created within parks were not only for utility, communication, and decoration, but served as 'vibrant matter' that enlivened lots and by extension the communities displaced by demolitions. In this way, the objects placed within parks not only created a politicized landscape entrenched in urban environmental utopianism, but were imbued with their own 'thing power' that allowed park goers to imagine their territorial placemaking as procreative. The vitality of park materialities allowed park goers to imagine themselves as biologically and emotionally connected with their liberated landscapes in ways that have shaped the historical memory of these political placemaking projects as childlike play spaces and sacred grounds.

In a chapter on imagining nontraditional archives for queer figures like organic farmer Elisa Gidlow, Greg Youmans dismisses the idea of taking cuttings and seeds from Gidlow's garden, arguing that removing plant matter would 'dehistoricize' them by relocating them from the site to the archive. Instead Youmans suggests using plant matter as a metaphor:

The solstice seeds offer us a concept of history as an experience of generational connection based not on facts and substance but on the impermanence and mutability of matter. Perhaps we can develop an archival practice along similar lines, by understanding the papers stored in our collections not as cold records, or as what remains as and after people pass on, but instead as both recipes and main ingredients of the larger alchemical process that is queer history.<sup>45</sup>

What if similar to Gidlow's own 'plant-strewn messages' that weaved together poetry, letters, and autobiography, the archival materials of people's parks served as instructions 'to graft the garden to the archive as another site in which to nurture a connection with the past'?<sup>46</sup> In this light, the seemingly bland paper-filled boxes serving as the archives on people's parks are not reflections but recipes—carrying the idea that the relationship between space and power can be reimagined in the present and future.

45 Greg Youmans, 'Elsa Gidlow's Garden: Plants, Archives, and Queer History', in Amy Stone and Jaime Cantrell (eds), *Out of the Closet, into the Archives: Researching Sexual Histories*, New York: University of New York Press, 2015, 119.

46 Youmans, 'Elsa Gidlow's Garden', 119.

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## 05. VIBRANT ARCHIVES. ARCHIVING AFGHAN EXILE ART AND ACTIVISM ON INSTAGRAM

ANN-KATRINE SCHMIDT NIELSEN

### Introduction

A video on Instagram shows a woman on a small ladder meticulously pasting a green poster onto a Parisian street sign.<sup>1</sup> The poster resembles the sign in layout, color, and graphics, but it carries another name: *Allée du Commandant Massoud* is, according to the poster, re-named *Allée de Frozan Saafi*. The substitution of the name of the Afghan military commander, also known as the Lion of Panjshir, on four street signs in central Paris for the names of four female Afghan activists was a performance carried out by artist Kubra Khademi on the 30th of January 2022. It is documented, distributed, and archived on her social media profiles on Twitter and Instagram. This is not the first time Khademi, working with feminist and politically engaged art, employs digital media as a central element in her work. In 2015 she walked the streets of Kabul wearing armor with enhanced female forms, a public performance that led to death threats and her subsequent migration to France.<sup>2</sup> It was documented with a video camera and uploaded to YouTube where it can still be found under its title *Armor*.<sup>3</sup>

Khademi is, sadly, not the only artist or activist who has been forced to leave Afghanistan in the past years. The fall of Kabul on August 15, 2021, and the ensuing takeover by the Taliban set in motion another period of mass-migration from the country and its capital in the late summer of 2021. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that 2.6 million Afghans are currently living as refugees while 3.5 million are internally displaced and The Artistic Freedom Initiative, an organization devoted to assisting artists at risk of persecution in their homelands to resettle elsewhere, reported that they alone received almost 3,000 individual requests from Afghan artists after the Taliban takeover.<sup>4</sup> Artists and activists are an especially persecuted group under the Taliban regime that has, amongst other things, beaten protesters, moved against the playing of music in public spaces, and painted over murals in Kabul and other cities.<sup>5</sup>

1 Kubra Kademi [@kubra.kademi], Video of performance ‘Les Héroïnes d’Aujourd’hui’, Instagram, video by [@roxane.gouguenheim](<https://www.instagram.com/roxane.gouguenheim/>), 30 January 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZW-1LMhWRm/>

2 Morag Rose, ‘Catcalls and Cobblestones: Gendered Limits on Women Walking’, in Samuel Burgum and Katie Higgins (eds), *How the Other Half Lives*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2022, 100–115.

3 Kubra Kademi, ‘Armor’, YouTube, 23 February 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nXuNtZPMdQ&t=1s>

4 UNHCR, ‘Afghanistan’, <https://www.unhcr.org/afghanistan.html> and Artistic Freedom Initiative, ‘AAPP United States’, <https://artisticfreedominitiative.org/projects/aapp/usa/>

5 Rukhshana Media, ‘Taliban Banned Playing Music in Wedding Halls in Herat’, *Rukhshana Media*, 4 July 2022, <https://rukhsana.com/en/taliban-banned-playing-music-in-wedding-halls-in-herat>

As Omaid Sharifi, founder of ArtLords, an Afghan activist grassroots movement, says, 'It is not possible for the Taliban to live with art'.<sup>6</sup>

This chapter investigates how three female exiled Afghan artists, Kubra Khademi (b. 1989), Shamsia Hassani (b. 1988), and Rada Akbar (b. 1988), all working with feminist issues and anti-war agendas, employ social media as new distributional and archival spaces. In the chapter, I thus ask: How do female Afghan artists use social media platforms, specifically Instagram, to document, distribute, and archive artistic and activist practices and performances?

I argue that in the turmoil of conflict and relocation Instagram functions not only as a means of communicating with friends, family and followers but also as an alternative deterritorialized exhibition space and archive where site-specific and/or lost works and performances can be shared and preserved in spite of their material destruction and their institutional and cultural marginalization.

In the chapter, it is suggested that the social media platform is used by the artists to fulfill three fundamental functions: 1) It documents and distributes the work and protests of precarious activists, artists, and groups, 2) it is used as an integral element in their aesthetic practices, works, and performances, and 3) it provides the digital infrastructure for the recording of lived experience and expressions of affects in so-called archives of feeling.<sup>7</sup> Through the sampling of digital texts and analyses of aesthetic works, communicative content and archival practices, the chapter thus aims to show how artists employ social media not only to *curate* and *circulate* expressions of Afghan feminist art and activism, but also to *claim* and *reframe* the cultural production of Afghan women's voices and subject positions.<sup>8</sup>

## Context and theoretical framework

Afghanistan has been the scene of various wars and conflicts for the larger part of the past four decades. In 2001, the US led alliance invaded the country as a response to the 9/11 attacks and the Taliban's refusal to surrender the leaders of Al-Qaeda. The invasion turned into a lengthy military operation in the country and The Costs of War project, monitoring the human and economic costs of the post-9/11 wars, reports more than 176,000 deaths caused directly by war in Afghanistan alone.<sup>9</sup> The 20-year presence of American and allied forces came to an end in August 2021 where the withdrawal of the remaining international soldiers

6 Sharif Hassan, 'Afghan Art Flourished for 20 Years. Can It Survive the New Taliban Regime?', *New York Times*, 31 October 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/31/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-artists.html>

7 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings. Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

8 Samuel Merrill, Emily Keightley and Priska Daphi, 'Introduction: The Digital Memory Work Practices of Social Movements', in Samuel Merrill, Emily Keightley and Priska Daphi (eds), *Social Movements, Cultural Memory and Digital Media. Mobilizing Mediated Remembrance*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 1–30.

9 Neta C. Crawford and Catherine Lutz, 'Human Cost of Post-9/11 Wars', Watson Institute at Brown University, 1 September 2021, [https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Costs%20of%20War\\_Direct%20War%20Deaths\\_9.1.21.pdf](https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2021/Costs%20of%20War_Direct%20War%20Deaths_9.1.21.pdf)

caused the panic scenes in the airport of Kabul which were circulated globally by news media and on social media platforms. Many Kabulis were desperate to escape the Taliban which took over the capital and the country. Amongst those fleeing the new regime were members of the Afghan art scene. They, thus, joined the group of exiled artists who had already been forced to leave the country during the decades of conflict and unrest.

Despite the grave sociopolitical context, Afghanistan has continued to produce a wide range of popular cultural, traditional, and contemporary artists and Kabul has – before August 2021 – been described as having a small but ‘rich culture of artistic production’.<sup>10</sup> Certainly, a new generation of artists working with street art, visual art, photography, and performance art has seen the light of day and female artists such as Kubra Khademi, Shamsia Hassani, Fatimah Hossaini, Malina Suliman, and Rada Akbar are now gaining international recognition. Not much research has been done on these Afghan artists and their aesthetic practices though. Curator and arts consultant Jemima Montagu notes how the international aid organizations have intervened, financially and creatively, in the Afghan art scene and caused the widespread instrumentalization of art.<sup>11</sup> Sociologist Bilquis Ghani has investigated the pedagogy of public art – the street art of the aforementioned Sharifi and Hassani, for example – and the use of art as a space to produce counter-narratives in opposition to the widespread Islamophobia and stereotyping of Afghans in the Western cultural imagination.<sup>12</sup> This chapter adds to this field knowledge of how Afghan artists in exile employ social media platforms to reach a global audience and to create and preserve artistic and activist practices.

Western stereotypes and expectations are certainly relevant to address when working with female Afghan artists challenging social roles, specifically those related to gender, in their work and using social media to, as Ghani puts it, ‘offer counter-narratives to global mainstream media’ and their depictions of Afghans.<sup>13</sup> The so-called West has for a long time cultivated a certain orientalized image of Afghan women as silent and subordinated beings to be saved.<sup>14</sup> The burqa wearing woman has served as a legitimizing symbol of the continued military presence in the country. International soldiers were in Afghanistan, the story in Western media goes, to secure Afghan women’s human rights and Afghan girls’ education. This intense

10 Bilquis Ghani and Lucy Fiske, “Art is my Language”: Afghan Cultural Production Challenging Islamophobic Stereotypes’, *Journal of Sociology* 56.1 (2020), 118; Bilquis Ghani, ‘Culture and Conflict: Kabul Art as Public Pedagogy’, *Journal of Curriculum and Pedagogy* 18 (2021): 273–294; Christina Papsø Weber, ‘Når burkaen bliver politisk’, *Periskop* 17 (2017): 133–147; Lauryn Oates, ‘Painting Their Way into the Public World. Women and the Visual Arts’, in Jennifer Heath and Ashraf Zahedi (eds), *Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011, 333–341.

11 Jemima Montagu, ‘Contemporary Visual Art in Afghanistan: “An Art Of Laughter And Forgetting ...”’, in Michaela Crimmin and Elizabeth Stanton (eds), *Art and Conflict*, London: Royal College of Art, 2014, 44–54.

12 Ghani and Fiske, “Art is my Language”; Ghani, ‘Culture and Conflict’; Bilquis Ghani, *Their Soul Listens’. A Sociology from Art Praxis in Kabul*, PhD dissertation, Sidney: University of Technology Sidney, 2020.

13 Bilquis Ghani, ‘*Their Soul Listens*’, 93.

14 Sujatha Fernandes, *Curated Storytelling*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes. Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse’, *Feminist Review* 30 (1988): 61–88; Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London: Penguin Books, 2003 [1978].

preoccupation with Afghan women and girls, however, has not created a sustained interest in, or ability to listen to, the actual experiences and opinions of these women in Western media publics. As Vera Mackie concludes in her analysis of globally distributed photographic representations of Afghan girls, ‘these representations position the first-world viewer as active and articulate spectator and the third-world woman (sic) as passive and silent sufferer’.<sup>15</sup> The three contemporary female artists, through their continued practice, all challenge this problematic dichotomy as well as local Afghan expectations of what women can and ought to do.<sup>16</sup>

Accordingly, following Chantal Mouffe’s definition of critical art as ‘art that foments dissensus’ and aims ‘at giving voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony’, the selected artists can all be said to work within a critical aesthetic realm. According to Mouffe, critical art plays a decisive role in challenging consensual views on society and in opening up possibilities for ‘the construction of new subjectivities’.<sup>17</sup> As such, art becomes a transformative vehicle for societal change in its ability to challenge existing hegemonies and produce new perspectives on the social, political, cultural, and economic order. Activist and art scholar Stephen Duncombe, moreover, stresses that art is also an important element in activist endeavors to change existing material realities because it can affect its audience. The production of activist effects goes through the aesthetic production of affective stimuli and, thus, ‘when it comes to stimulating social change, affect and effect are not discrete ends but are all up in each other’s business’.<sup>18</sup> Even if one can never be certain as to the outcome of the affective stimuli given by a work of art, the activist artist can work towards one or more transformational goals: change the way people think, feel, and talk about a certain issue (cultural shifts/change) and/or effectuate concrete material or structural change in the world (material impact/result).<sup>19</sup>

Khademi, Akbar, and Hassani produce work critiquing the structures pertaining to gender-based and geopolitical violence and marginalization. Hence with Duncombe’s transformational goals in mind, we can observe how they work towards long-term cultural and material changes as they challenge sedimented social and political power structures and perceptions of the world. Finally, Duncombe defines the activist artist to be any ‘artist who hopes to bring about social, economic or political change through art’.<sup>20</sup> This inclusive definition of activism and activist art allows us to consider how the three exiled artists are all engaged in feminist quests for the transformation of societies and international relations through art. It is, however, interesting to note that Khademi and Akbar offer seemingly opposing reflections upon their roles as activists and artists in two research-interviews I conducted with them in the fall of 2022. Khademi stresses how she has always considered herself an artist. While acknowledging

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15 Vera Mackie, ‘The “Afghan Girls”: Media Representations and Frames of War’, *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 26.1 (2012): 126.

16 Ghani, ‘Culture and Conflict’, 275.

17 Chantal Mouffe, ‘Art and Democracy. Art as an Agonistic Intervention in Public Space’, *Open!* 14 (2007): 6. <https://www.onlineopen.org/art-and-democracy>

18 Stephen Duncombe, ‘Does It Work? The Effect of Activist Art’, *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 83.1 (2016): 119.

19 Duncombe, ‘Does It Work?’: 124.

20 Duncombe, ‘Does It Work?’: 117.

the importance of activism, she resists the title of activist since art is her primary medium of expression, adding ‘but I do say, I am a feminist’. On the other hand, Akbar considers herself to be first and foremost an activist since she has ‘chosen art as a tool to do activism’, but also stresses the feminist goals of her work. Akbar furthermore explains how, for her, social media are primarily tools for her activism. I will continue to use the term activist artist – rather than, e.g., activist, artivist, or political artist – throughout the chapter to capture the flexibility and the productive tension inherent in the compound term.

The merging of artistic measures and political ends is, of course, not new. However, what has changed remarkably within the last decades is the availability of digital technologies and platforms that can be used to produce, distribute, and archive these artistic and activist practices. Leah Lievrouw suggests four basic features are characteristic of new media: they are interactive and (seemingly) ubiquitous; they evolve through the recombination of existing media forms; and they promote a networked organization of society and technology.<sup>21</sup> Through platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, users can share, produce, promote, alter, and connect to relevant, and irrelevant, media content at almost all times and places. This, MacDowall and Budge argue in their work on Instagram and art, has significant implications for all art professionals and artists: Instagram ‘embodies a new cultural logic of the networked art image’.<sup>22</sup> However, I would add, it has particular value and meaning for exiled artists who in the turmoil of conflict and relocation can reach a diverse, geographically scattered audience with works, opinions, and updates without the interference of and dependency on cultural institutions, museums, and mainstream media. The circumvention of traditional art institutions also opens for the possibility that artists online can influence audiences who ‘highly unlikely [...] will ever travel to such a place’ with their artistic work.<sup>23</sup>

Since a basic affordance of the mentioned social media platforms is the continued accumulation of content on personal profile pages, ordered in reverse chronological order like the original blog format, it has been suggested that we can understand social media as personal archives and as taking part in forming an ‘archival culture’.<sup>24</sup> The relation between social media and the concept of the archive is, however, one of dispute and ambivalence. Social media are, for one thing, controlled more by tech companies’ economic interests and algorithmic modulations and by users’ personal and volatile ideas of what to post, how to post it, and for how long to keep it, than by institutional endeavors to serve public interests to preserve media texts for the future (as in the case of the Internet Archive).<sup>25</sup> As such, conceptualizing

21 Leah A. Lievrouw, *Alternative and Activist New Media*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011.

22 Lachlan John MacDowall and Kylie Budge, *Art After Instagram: Art Spaces, Audiences, Aesthetics*, London-New York: Routledge, 2021, 2.

23 MacDowall and Budge, *Art After Instagram*, 5.

24 Lucia Bainotti, Alessandro Caliandro and Alessandro Gandini, ‘From Archive Cultures to Ephemeral Content, and Back: Studying Instagram Stories with Digital Methods’, *New Media & Society* 23 (2021): 3656–3676; David Beer, ‘Archive Fever Revisited. Algorithmic Archons and the Ordering of Social Media’, in Leah Lievrouw and Brian Loader (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Digital Media and Communication*, London-New York: Routledge, 2020, 99–111.

25 Anat David-Ben, for example, points out that due to the commercialization of data and the Facebook ban on the extraction of data, Facebook, today, ‘functions as a new “archon”, all the while being unarchivable by design’. Anat Ben-David, ‘Counter-archiving Facebook’, *European Journal of*

social media as forms of archival spaces might require, as David Beer contends, that we are aware that these new ‘commercial’ archival spaces have ‘a very different logic to the archives of the past’ and that we do not over-stress the transparent, emancipatory, and democratic potential of this form of idiosyncratic social media archiving.<sup>26</sup>

One way to work with the artists’ social media profiles as ambivalent cultural memory spaces is to adhere to the distinction between ‘recordmaking’ and ‘recordkeeping’ suggested by Rebecka Taves Sheffield. She contends that while recordmaking (‘the use of any kind of media to communicate to others information about an individual or collective experience or action’) is an inherent part of recordkeeping, recordkeeping also entails the practice of ensuring ‘that records are authentic and reliable, have integrity, and are usable in the present and a potential future state’.<sup>27</sup> Thus, even if social media are recordmaking-technologies, they are, according to Sheffield, harder to conceptualize as recordkeeping-spaces since there are no agents and infrastructure to ensure media texts’ preservation in a fixed and retrievable form for future use. Sheffield’s distinction is useful when working with the records of activist and artist practices online. However, the distinction relies on a formalized practice of keeping records that is often not possible to conduct and/or maintain in loosely defined, informal, emergent, and less mature or less formally organized social movements.<sup>28</sup>

As such, I recognize that, at least from an archivist point of view, social media are not platforms fit to fulfil the recordkeeping functions of the traditional, or *proper*, archive but also suggest that often these unordered and unorderly records are all that we are left with in the cultural memory work regarding activist artists’ practices online. Furthermore, as the analysis will show, the three artists do often show an acute awareness of not only making but also of *keeping* records such as artworks, activist communication, and prosaic media texts which is why I, despite all theoretical and practical reservations, will continue to use the terms ‘archive’ and ‘archiving’. We might view the artists’ profiles as informal, vibrant, and with Levey, ‘*de facto*’ archives of artistic-activist oeuvres which would otherwise risk both destruction (due, for example, to the momentary and extra-institutional character or the site-specific and vulnerable materiality of the artworks) and cultural oblivion (due to the peripheral position of the exiled activist artist and the ensuing ‘institutional neglect’).<sup>29</sup> These archival spaces are inherently unstable and vibrating with the unfolding of the global, local, and personal crises of migration and war. To the extent that they question the in- and exclusions of institutional archival processes and the hegemonic production of knowledge, they can be likened to count-

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*Communication* 35 (2020): 251.

- 26 David Beer, ‘Archive Fever Revisited’, 107; Helle Strandgard Jensen, ‘Digitale arkiver som medskabere i ny historieskrivning’, in Kirstner Drotner and Sara Mosberg Iversen (eds), *Digitale metoder. At skabe, analysere og dele data*, Copenhagen: Samfundsletteratur, 2017, 69–86.
- 27 Rebecka Taves Sheffield, ‘Facebook Live as a Recordmaking Technology’, *Archivaria* 85 (2018): 101.
- 28 Sheffield, ‘Facebook Live’: 96–120.
- 29 Cara Levey, ‘Archiving the Repertoire, Performing the Archive: Virtual Iterations of Second-generation Activism in Post-Dictatorship Argentina’, in Samuel Merrill, Emily Keightley and Priska Daphi (eds), *Social Movements, Cultural Memory and Digital Media. Mobilizing Mediated Remembrance*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 218; Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 8; Rick Prelinger, ‘The Appearance of Archives’, in Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (eds) *The YouTube Reader*, Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009, 268–274.

er-archives found in unexpected places and forming ‘a collection of absences: the documents that are not collected or do not exist’ elsewhere.<sup>30</sup>

Such peripheral, sometimes dissident, digital archives are, according to Arjun Appadurai, often of great significance to migrants and exiled groups since they not only present ‘a guide to the uncertainties of identity-building under adverse conditions’, but also allow for the construction of a counter-narrative to the dominant ‘narratives of public memory in the new home of the migrant, where the migrant is frequently seen as a person with only one story to tell – the story of abject loss and need’.<sup>31</sup>

To flesh out these differential functions of the informal, vibrant social media archiving, I turn to Merrill et al. who, in their work on social movements’ use of digital media, suggest that there are three fundamental clusters of media practices to be found in online memory work: curation (i.e. documentation, selection, display), circulation, and claiming.<sup>32</sup> We may consider the profiles of the three activist artists as alternative exhibition spaces functioning both to *collect* and *curate* artistic work, processes, and performances and to *circulate* professional communication, political messages, personal perspectives, and intimate emotions. Finally, I argue, the artists also *re-claim* and reframe the discursive stereotyping of Afghanistan and ‘the Afghan woman’ through their construction of an activist-aesthetic archive of images, performances, feelings, and protests.

## Method

Even if most of these practices are carried out across platforms, I will focus on the Instagram profiles of Kubra Khademi, Shamsia Hassani, and Rada Akbar. Instagram has been chosen because it is the platform where all three artists have most followers (compared to Facebook and Twitter) and because it prioritizes visual content, which makes it an interesting place to investigate the distribution and recording of activist art.<sup>33</sup> All three artists have public, open-access profiles and all seem to consider the media content shared on the platform public rather

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- 30 Rebecka Edwards, ‘The Counter-Archive of Elizabeth Nielsen’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 64 (2010): 111; Ben-David, ‘Counter-archiving Facebook’. It is important to add that even if the Afghan activist artists’ records are not, to my knowledge, currently being kept by an institution (museum or archive) or organization (grassroots or State), it does not mean that archivists are blind to the challenges of archiving Afghan lives, experiences, and movements. Archivist Moska Rokay has, for example, argued for the need to create digital archives ‘with oral histories and digital artifacts’ in order for Afghan-Canadians to ‘learn about themselves’. See Moska Rokay, ‘Critical Ethnography as an Archival Tool. A Case Study of the Afghan Diaspora in Canada’, *Archivaria* 91 (2021): 198. Archivist Liladhar R. Pendse, UC Berkeley, initiated the impressive archiving of 83 websites, containing more than 846,000 individual documents, in the immediate aftermath of the Taliban takeover to create the *At-Risk Afghanistan Web Archive* focusing on official governmental, activist, NGO, and media web sites at risk of deletion by the new government. Liladhar R Pendse, ‘Collaborating to Create the At-Risk Afghanistan Web Archive (ARAWA)’, *C&RL News* no. 2 (2022): 70–75.
- 31 Arjun Appadurai, ‘Traumatic Exit, Identity Narratives, and the Ethics of Hospitality’, *Television and New Media* 20 (2019): 562–563.
- 32 Merrill, Keightley and Daphi, ‘Introduction’.
- 33 MacDowall and Budge, *Art After Instagram*.

than private; witness their bio texts, which all emphasize professional identities and contact information. Informed consent to use the media texts for research has, nevertheless, been obtained directly from Akbar and Khademi and Hassani's manager. While Akbar and Hassani each have one profile under their own name, Khademi has two – one solely dedicated to art and one with a more mixed content. The following table provides an overview of the profiles:<sup>34</sup>

Username	Active since	Number of followers	Number of posts	Bio text
radaakbar	10.2012	9,970	396	Conceptual artist. Photographer. Founder @abarzanan. www. abarzanan.com
shamsiahassani	01.2015	256,000	508	Official Instagram profile of Shamsia Hassani (شمسیا حسنی) the Afghan graffiti/street artist. For inquiries, contact: shah@ shamsiahassani.net www. shamsiahassani.net/
kubra_khademi	04.2019	8,130	254	Multidisciplinary artist from Afghanistan / based in Paris, France / Contact @ galerieericmouchet
khademikubra	11.2015	7,204	968	Multidisciplinary Artist / From Afghanistan / Based in Paris, France / 2nd Instagram: @kubra_khademi

When considering that some of the most followed Instagram accounts have 300-500 million followers, the artists' number of followers – except maybe for Hassani's 256,000 – might not seem spectacular. However, for an upcoming artist, reaching a potential audience of 7,000-9,000 people with each artwork posted can represent not only a significant increase with respect to the number of people expected to attend traditional smaller scale art exhibitions but also in terms of audience diversity. Characteristic of all three artists' profiles is the fact that they appeal to an international audience (comments include ones in English, Dari, French, and Spanish), which means that the artists can use Instagram to reach a global cohort of people interested in, for example, art, Afghanistan, feminism and/or activism. Furthermore, all three artists use English in most posts to address this globally scattered audience. Writing as a European citizen, I am part of the heterogenous social media audience that the media texts address. In the following analysis, I will focus on the content shared by the artists themselves. This qualitative approach has been chosen to analyze 'the specific ways in which artists use or understand the Instagram platform' as a distributional and archival space.<sup>35</sup>

34 Based on information and data retrieved in October 2022.

35 Lachlan John MacDowall and Poppy de Souza, "'I'd Double Tap That!!': Street Art, Graffiti, and Instagram Research', *Media, Culture & Society* 40.1 (2018): 10.

In terms of sampling, I will work with posts publicized between August 2021 and October 2022. This period has been chosen with reference to the Taliban takeover in August 2021. On this occasion, Hassani and Akbar were forced to leave the country that Khademi had already fled. The reinstatement of the Taliban regime presents both a personal moment of upheaval for the artists and an international crisis. In the aftermath, the artists have in different ways utilized their profiles and artworks to speak up against Taliban and geopolitical power relations as well as to raise awareness of the continued humanitarian and political crises in Afghanistan. The artists posted, in total, 300 times on Instagram in the period studied: Hassani 79, Khademi 176 on her primary and 29 on her secondary profile, and Akbar 16; I will also address Khademi and Akbar's use of the story function. The posts present a variety of content with a majority focusing on recording artistic processes, presenting finished artworks, and promoting upcoming exhibitions. I will use my analysis, however, to show the different types of recordmaking and -keeping carried out on the four social media accounts: the documentation of site-specific and/or destroyed art works, the creation and circulation of critical performances, and the use of digital texts as repositories of feeling. I will focus on one function in each of the three artists' online practices, this structuring device, however, does not mean that all three do not use the platform for *curation and documentation, creation and circulation, and re-claiming*.

## Analysis

### *Documenting disappearing lines of flight*

On September 16, 2021, street artist and former art lecturer at Kabul University Shamsia Hassani posted two pictures and a text on her Instagram profile (fig. 5.1.). The first picture is split in two and shows a 'before': a mural of a woman with a burqa-like head-attire but a bared neck and a red, glittering heart on top of her black dress, and an 'after': a whitewashed wall. The second picture shows the artist next to her work at some point before its erasure. Hassani's text – in both English and Dari – informs the audience of what they are witnessing:<sup>36</sup>

I just received this image after the arrival of T aliban [sic]. They painted over one of my graffitis in Kabul. Probably they painted over my other murals in the city as well (I still don't have any pictures of them). [...] I never imagined that our world will suddenly fall and we will never get to the day that I was waiting for.<sup>37</sup>

The post documents Hassani's site-specific street art piece and circulates it among a large digital audience – it has more than 56,000 likes and 2,600 comments. It also documents the gradual disappearance and erasure of existing urban art *in situ* in Kabul and, thus, pinpoints the immediate necessity for the artists to develop self-reflexive strategies for preserving their own work online.

36 Thanks to Saeedeh Salimifar for assisting me with her linguistic expertise.

37 Shamsia Hassani [@shamsiahassani], Picture of mural before and after, Instagram, 16 September 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CT3Qn0jJK1/>



*Fig. 5.1. 'Mural. Before/After' (@shamsiahassani, 16.09.2021), with the permission of Shamsia Hassani.*

The Taliban's infamous practice of painting over murals has been covered widely by global news media. To a regime reacting violently to forms of dissidence, Hassani's mural might present a specifically problematic envisioning of feminist liberation. In the artwork, located in a Kabul residential area, the woman's burqa-like veil is cut or unraveled at the beginning of her neck, but a red zigzagging line – a loose thread? – continues from the burqa through the heart, which is broken in two by the same line, mirroring pop cultural depictions of a broken heart. The piece could, thus, be taken to depict the heartbreak resulting from being forced into certain types of garments and womanhood, or the invisibility of female individuality, ache, pain, and sorrow hid, literally and figuratively, under the hyper visibility of the burqa. Read as such, the piece critiques both conservative gender norms and coalitional governments' and international help organizations' preoccupations with the burqa as a metonymy of all Afghan women.<sup>38</sup> The mural unmistakably resembles Hassani's general style and graffiti works which

38 It is important to note that Hassani is not partaking in a general, often Western led, move to unveil all Muslim women, on the contrary, her own figures continue to wear a more or less traditional head scarf covering their hair. See Lilia Abu-Lughod, *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard

all depict large female figures with closed eyes, elongated lashes, and no mouths. They often wear colorful clothes and hold flowers or musical instruments and present poetic pockets of resistance in cityscapes characterized by the imminent danger of gendered and geopolitical violence.<sup>39</sup> The absence of the mouth, the traditional instrument of democratic participation and self-assertion, may confound some viewers: Are these female figures not able or allowed to 'speak up' or 'speak for themselves'? Hassani has however, in an interview, connected the absent mouths in her female figures to the empowering features of musical instruments and the non-verbal language of music: 'She can use musical instruments to talk with people, to speak louder and [get] more attention, as she has no mouth. But the musical instrument gives her power to speak in society'.<sup>40</sup> This paradox suggests a dismantling of the traditional discourses of power: to speak efficiently in and against a militarized society, these women use another language than the one used by male politicians, military commanders, insurgents, soldiers, diplomats, and NGO-workers. In Deleuzian terms we may thus conceive of these murals as lines of flight, 'those parts of an assemblage that escape the structure of which they are a part'.<sup>41</sup> Speaking and connecting through the language of music, poetry, and art, rather than politics, war, and economics, these murals work to break down the gendered structure of public space and discourse in Afghanistan and to point to transformational modes of relating and 'speaking'.

In Hassani's post mourning their disappearance, the short explanatory text is followed by a range of hashtags which categorize the media text according to content (#mural, #graffiti, #painting, #wall), time and place (#homeland, #kabul, #afghanistan, #warzone, #2021), and sender (#artist, #afghanartist, #homeless). Hashtags generally function as tools of categorization and as contextual guidance to readers' interpretation of a media text.<sup>42</sup>

This is also the case for Hassani who, by tagging, connects her work to the broad categories/catalogs used on Instagram, especially those relating to art and graffiti, and thus makes it visible to more users exploring the platform's content. The last tag, #homeless, in particular, carries with it an affective poignancy that suggests the isolation of exile and the despair of watching the destruction from afar. The fact that Hassani received the 'after'-image from someone in Kabul indicates that other people in the city care enough for the piece to document its destruction and partake in the recording and continued virtual preservation of the mural. This act of care shows that even if Hassani's work is being materially destroyed, it has made a lasting imprint on some Kabulis. However, thanks to social media, the piece's afterlife does not solely rely on the memories of Kabul residents. According to MacDowall and de Souza, writing on how Instagram has reshaped graffiti and street art, the act of sharing the erased

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University Press, 2013.

39 Ghani, 'Culture and Conflict'.

40 Hassani in Cristina Burack, 'Shamsia Hassani: The Afghan Female Graffiti Artist Capturing Women's Voices', *Made for Minds*, 19 August 2021, <https://p.dw.com/p/3zA86>.

41 Edward Thornton, 'On Lines of Flight: The Theory of Political Transformation in *A Thousand Plateaus*', *Deleuze and Guattari Studies* 14 (2020): 436.

42 Tina Thode Hougaard, 'Hashtags: a New Textual Construct', *RASK – International Journal of Language and Communication* 44 (2016): 57–73.

work online ‘gives it a second life in which images circulate among a community of interest’.<sup>43</sup> In the case of street art, a site specific and easily destructible form of critical art, social media has radically changed the possible reach and preservation of these statements of dissidence. At the same time, however, Hassani subtly points out another kind of precarity surrounding these digital ghosts of urban art living on in the virtual spaces of Instagram when she writes ‘T aliban’ rather than ‘Taliban’ in the posted text. In the time around the Taliban takeover several Muslim social media users experienced having their content and even accounts removed if they used words such as ‘Taliban’ as they were seen to promote a dangerous organization by the platform’s algorithm.<sup>44</sup> Hassani tries to avoid the censoring algorithm by inserting a blank space into the ‘perilous’ word and thereby also makes the audience aware of the doubled perils of censorship surrounding her work. Not only are her physical murals being painted over, but their digital traces are also in danger of being deleted by the very communication platform to which she turns in order to document and preserve them. This problem becomes even more evident when we turn to Kubra Khademi’s performative challenges to the exclusionary logics of both the traditional archive and the social media platforms themselves.

## Creating and circulating change

In the introduction, I touched upon the performance *Les Héroïnes d’aujourd’hui* where Khademi showed support for four Afghan women’s rights activists – Frozan Saafi, Fowzia Wahdat, Hoda Kamoosh, and Rokhsana Rezai – by pasting their names over the name of Ahmad Shah Massoud, Afghan military commander and resistance leader, on street signs in Paris. Khademi was later invited to recreate the performance in Roubaix where she honored other activists by the same means. The act of substituting masculine singularity with female multiplicity displays the militarized and masculinized norms of public spaces in Afghanistan as well as in Europe where most public buildings, streets, and squares are still named after male leaders and military victors. As such, Khademi’s performance directly revolts against the exclusion of women – especially Muslim women – from the archive of publicly honored persons. Khademi had invited *Le Figaro* to report from the happening itself.<sup>45</sup> Their reportage was published the following day and ‘demonstrates the continued importance of established media for the diffusion of images of activism’.<sup>46</sup> However, the performance was also recorded with a mobile phone camera by one of Khademi’s accomplices. These recordings show Khademi’s deed in the deserted park on a crisp January morning, and they were distributed and stored on Khademi’s Instagram profile along with the article, close-up pictures of the street signs, and portraits of the four women. The social media texts not only document but add material, information, and perspectives to the performance itself, unavailable to any

43 MacDowall and de Souza, “‘I’d Double Tap That!’”: 10.

44 Rayhan Uddin, ‘Afghanistan: Muslim Instagram Users Complain about Censorship’, *Middle East Eye*, 27 August 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/afghanistan-instagram-muslim-users-complain-censorship-posts>.

45 Delphine Minoui, ‘L’intégriste artiste Kubra Khademi rebaptise une allée parisienne du nom d’héroïnes afghanes’, *Le Figaro*, 1 February 2022, <https://www.lefigaro.fr/arts-expositions/l-intrepide-artist-kubra-khademi-rebaptise-une-allee-parisienne-du-nom-d-heroines-afghanes-20220131>

46 Graham Meikle, ‘Introduction. Making Meanings and Making Trouble’, in Graham Meikle (ed) *The Routledge Companion to Media and Activism*, London-New York: Routledge, 2018, 1.

'audience' accidentally present in the park, to such a degree that one might ask what the actual artwork is: the live performance or the subsequent distribution and digital collection of documents, videos, and pictures? According to performance scholar Philip Auslander, this kind of performance documentation traditionally belongs to the theatrical (producing events for/through forms of documentation), rather than the documentary (recording evidence of the occurrence of an event), since it not only records a previous performance, but – due to the lack of an original audience except for the reporter, the camera operator, and by-passers – actually 'becomes the only space in which the performance occurs' for the broader audience.<sup>47</sup> Auslander further questions the ontological distinction between performance and document when he concludes that 'the act of documenting an event as a performance is what constitutes it as such'.<sup>48</sup> The constitutive role of recordings and media texts is evident in Khademi's work where they not only function as documentational traces but as performative elements in the activist artwork itself. The transgressive performance needs the recording eye to become something other than a sheer act of vandalism, to become art. *Les héroïnes* exemplifies the power of art to alter existing realities, if only for a while, and the integral role that media, and especially social media, play in its creation and distribution.

Khademi also shares more personal and explicitly activist messages, campaigns, and happenings on her profile. In the wake of a suicide bombing in Kabul killing more than 50 Hazara students, mostly young girls, Khademi used the story function, a newer function on Instagram allowing profile holders to share content for a shorter period of time before it disappears, to share information on the bombing, display personal portraits of some of the girls, and spread the hashtag #StopHazaraGenocide to help mobilize international political awareness of the persecution of the Hazara minority in Afghanistan. Unless they are saved by profile holders as so-called 'highlights', stories disappear from the profile after 24 hours.<sup>49</sup> They thus function more as a tool for mobilization and awareness-raising than for archiving and indicate the instability of the social media records.

Another aspect to consider when working with social media as a vibrant but instable form of archive is the interference and modulations of the platforms themselves mentioned earlier. With her direct form of expression and transgressive art practice, Khademi seems to have encountered the regulative power of the platform on several occasions. One such encounter was during a residency in the US where she posted a selfie flipping off the camera.<sup>50</sup> The text explained her contempt for President Biden who days before had ordered the redirection of billions of dollars of Afghanistan's frozen funds to American victims of terror:

Biden! you are the worst US president afghans have ever seen, after all the shit you did, now how could you take the \$3,5 Billions of Afghan's money to the victims of 9/11 famili[e]s? [...] Feeling: vomiting up on your banks Biden, Fuck you!<sup>51</sup>

47 Philip Auslander, 'The Performativity of Performance Documentation', *PAJ* 84 (2006): 2.

48 Auslander, 'The Performativity': 5.

49 Stories are also per default saved in a personal archive on Instagram which is only available to the profile holder. This automatic archiving can, however, be turned off to further enhance the ephemeral character of the Instagram story.

50 <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZ5ufTWLtEL/>

51 Kubra Khademi [@kubra.kademi], Screenshots of original Khademi's post and Instagram

The original post was removed by Instagram. Khademi, however, reposted not only the original picture but also the entire communication behind the removal in which Instagram in a standard communication formula informed Khademi of community guidelines. By reposting screenshots of the original post as well as Instagram's request, Khademi makes an obvious statement against Instagram guidelines to which she refuses to adhere. However, the post also becomes a testament to the fragility of online archives of dissidence. At any point, the media platform may decide to censor, block, or even permanently ban users, thus stripping them not only of their online presence but also of access to and control over their personal records. By reposting her outcry, Khademi not only critiques exploitative geopolitical economic structures but also technosocial infrastructures that are referring her and others without the support of institutions such as national media, archives, and museums to the instable self-archiving at the mercy of global tech companies.

## Re-Claiming the everyday through the archive

The analysis so far has primarily focused on the way Instagram presents promising and problematic spaces for the circulation and archiving of activist art by exiled artists. In this last part, however, I am going to focus on how the social media profile also can become an archive of feelings and space for reclaiming the memory of the lost home. According to Ann Cvetkovich marginalized publics constituted around trauma often 'challenges common understandings of what constitutes an archive'.<sup>52</sup> This means that lesbian, queer, or diaspora archives – to mention just some of the alternatives to the dominant national archive – take an unusual and ephemeral form and provide a different kind of memory-based and affective knowledge about the past. 'These publics', Cvetkovich argues, 'are hard to archive because they are lived experiences, and the cultural traces they leave are frequently inadequate to the task of documentation'.<sup>53</sup>

Turning once again to the ephemeral stories on Instagram, I argue that these actually can come to constitute a central part of the vibrant archive of exile. This is the case when the profile holder chooses to save and display the stories on their profile by turning them into collections of 'highlights'. Any highlighted stories are accessible to other users at the top of the individual profile page. The stories default temporary character means that their contents are often more prosaic and their aesthetics rawer than the polished pictures posted on the profiles of Instagram.<sup>54</sup> The stories remind us of Instagram's original endeavor to be a platform for instant visual communication<sup>55</sup> – a market function which other applications such as Snapchat and BeReal has largely captured. Profile holders can categorize their highlighted stories according to subjectively meaningful categories, and on the profile of photographer

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communication for removal, Instagram, 13 February 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZ5ufTWLtEL/>

52 Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 7.

53 Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 9.

54 Lucia Bainotti, Alessandro Caliandro and Alessandro Gandini, 'From Archive Cultures to Ephemeral Content, and Back: Studying Instagram Stories with Digital Methods', *New Media & Society* 23 (2021): 3656–3676.

55 MacDowall and de Souza, "I'd Double Tap That!!": 7–8.

and conceptual artist Rada Akbar we find the five categories ‘Press’, ‘Paris’, ‘AFG’, ‘Food’, and ‘Home•Plants’.

The category ‘AFG’ is of special interest since it contains almost 100 pictures and short film clips from Afghanistan.<sup>56</sup> The highlighted and, thus, preserved stories all show different aspects of the artist’s everyday life in Afghanistan: food, trips, selfies, views, shops, cats, citizens, etc. The story function, thus, provides a digital infrastructure for the archiving of affectively meaningful moments of everyday life. In contrast to the monumentality of the artwork and the transformational vigor and critical stance of the activist campaigns, they are transient testaments to a lived experience and pervasive feelings of love, loss, and grief as they provide re-views of what has been lost. The affective tonality of the AFG-archive is enhanced by the last element in the story-collection which is a short video where the camera zooms in on a large Afghan flag on top of a hill. This, the tricolor flag of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, was immediately replaced by the white flag of the Taliban movement and the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan at the Taliban’s takeover, but still functions as a sign of dissidence and disagreement with the Taliban regime; for example, on social media where users post pictures of it or use it next to their profile names. Viewing the video is deeply affected by the inescapable knowledge that this is one of the last times Akbar would enjoy this specific view of her home. The text accompanying the footage underlines the loss and attests to the trauma of war and migration: ‘today was the worst day in my life! my beloved Afghanistan collapsed before my eyes   <sup>57</sup>’ The highlighted story in words and action marks the end of Akbar’s living archive of Afghanistan and the beginning of her life in exile. In Akbar’s stories, and in many other scattered digital records, however, exiled Afghans can re-view and remember the intimately known landscapes of their home country.

At the same time, the highlighted stories serve to re-claim the cultural imagining of Afghanistan. For those followers unfamiliar with Afghanistan as anything other than the tragic subject of news media and political discourse, the stories provide an unknown insight into everyday life in the Afghanistan and Kabul that existed prior to August 2021. The AFG-collection of stories shows an everyday life absent in most Western media representations of a war-ridden and deprived country from the handheld camera’s affectively engaging first-person point of view. As such, Akbar’s archive of stories claims and reframes memories of the home country and, even if they are not explicitly critical or activist, they provide a means of restructuring and transforming the media induced view of Afghanistan. They become an affectively powerful part of the counter-archive formed by the artists’ perpetual digital recordmaking and -keeping.

56 Rada Akbar [@radaakbar], AFG (collection of Instagram video stories about daily life in Afghanistan), Instagram, 2021, videos by Rada Akbar, <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17946530722159966/>

57 Rada Akbar [@radaakbar], last story of the collection AFG (collection of Instagram video stories about daily life in Afghanistan), Instagram, 2021, videos by Rada Akbar, <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/17946530722159966/>

## Conclusion

The analysis has shown how the three Afghan activist artists not only self-reflexively partake in making records for the future, but also actively seek to preserve and keep these records on their social media profiles. Whether it is through the documentation of site-specific, destroyed and/or performative pieces, the challenge to political and platform censorship, and/or through the self-aware recording and stor(y)ing of glimpses of lost everyday life, the three female artists all partake in shaping and preserving records of their lives, works, and experiences as exiled Afghan female artists. The Instagram profiles can, thus, be viewed as a means of producing a counter-archive vibrating with agency, art, affect, and activism and rupturing mainstream media framings of Afghan women as the silent and passively suffering symbols of Western warfare. But, these ambivalent cultural memory spaces also fundamentally challenge our understandings of the longevity and stability of the traditional archive. Instagram profiles are, certainly, not eternal and the records made and kept on this platform are vulnerable due to the dependency on commercial tech companies and the continued investments and evaluations of the activist artists. Instead of disregarding the prosaic but highly self-conscious record-making and -keeping performed by the three artists on Instagram as not forming a *proper archive*, we might see it as an invitation to think more about practices than institutions, that is about supplementary forms of *archiving* rather than *archives*. Archiving can no longer be viewed as a disinterested activity performed solely by dedicated institutions and as such it is important to acknowledge and analyze how social agents partake in archiving, that is recordmaking and recordkeeping, activities on a daily basis with the means, technologies, and platforms available.

The three Instagram profiles can, thus, be said to function as vibrant *de facto* archives where art, activism, and affects are documented, preserved, and circulated, and agency, subject positions, and memories of Afghanistan are reclaimed. The analysis of the artists' social media practices teaches us at least three things about the potentials and problems of viewing Instagram as an archival space for art activism: 1) Social media can function as a site of collaborative archival work where dissident art is circulated and preserved despite material destruction or loss. This is an especially pertinent feature of social media archiving for exiled artists having lost access to and control over any works left in their home country. 2) Social media are constitutive not only as documentational spaces but also as performative platforms for creating and circulating critical art. This makes such critical works vulnerable to external interests and platform regulations. However, as Kubra Khademi has shown, these works can also effectively critique and question the infrastructures and exclusionary powers referring artists and activists to the unstable and vibrant archiving on Instagram. 3) Social media archives question what the traditional archive must and can contain. New technological functions provide new possibilities for the preservation of the prosaic and the affectively meaningful of lived experience.

For activist artists, turning to social media hold promises of reaching a broader audience, of curatorial self-determination, of creative experimentation, and of ensuring documentation and recording of their work for the immediate future, but the problems of control, regulation, and access must not be forgotten. Instagram is a flawed *de facto* archive acting as stand-in to the exiled and marginalized agent. To preserve these works and voices beyond the tech company-controlled platforms and for the generations to come the exiled artists' critical testaments

to conflict, gender inequalities, and geopolitics must also be included, recorded, and kept by (digital) archives controlled not by the need to make profit, but by the archival promise to document and preserve for the future.

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

DANIEL VILLAR-ONRUBIA

### 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.[\[...\] {#\\_ylmgacj7hrfw .anchor}](#)

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

While Benlloch used the words ‘performer’, ‘poet’ or ‘political and cultural activist’ to describe himself,<sup>1</sup> such terms fail to encapsulate the full extent of his virtually infinite identities.

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<sup>1</sup> Miguel Benlloch. *Cuerpo conjugado*, Sevilla: Instituto de la Cultura y las Artes de Sevilla (ICAS), 2018, 18, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7264652>

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.<sup>2</sup>

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,<sup>3</sup> 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’.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

2 Nuria Enguita, ‘Do, Say, Dissent: Miguel Benlloch’ in *Essays on Seediness. Readings of the Miguel Benlloch Archive*, Valencia: Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, 2021, 9–10.

3 See the entry ‘Activismo’ in the AMB’s website: <https://web.archive.org/web/2023112114641/https://archivomiguelbenlloch.net/obras/activismo/>

4 Translated as ‘Ours Certainly Is a World Championship’ and ‘Whatever Reagan Says, Vote No’ respectively, in Mar Villaespesa and Joaquín Vázquez, *Miguel Benlloch. Cuerpo conjugado–Conjugated Body*, Madrid: CentroCentro, 2019, 11, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7264780>

5 *Planta baja: 1983–1993*, Granada: Ciengramos, 2015.



*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 Benloch at a demonstration by the Andalusian Homosexual Liberation Front, Granada, 1982. Photo: Juan Ferreras, courtesy of the Archivo Miguel Benloch.

In 1988, Benloch 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.<sup>6</sup> While BNV came to art from political activism, Villaespesa followed the opposite pathway.<sup>7</sup> 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 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 'discovery' of America.

It is in that context where, exceeding the usual remit of a cultural producer, Benloch literally entered the sphere of performance art in the first person. After hearing from him of the traditional folklore song *Maria 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, Benloch 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 Benloch kept a fragment that is now part of the AMB. Apart from such visual and material remains, Benloch wrote a personal account of that experience for the book *Acaeció en Granada*.<sup>8</sup>

6 Joaquín Vázquez, 'Texto, tejido y confección en la producción contemporánea' in SVQ. *El arte contemporáneo desde Sevilla*, Sevilla: Ayuntamiento de Sevilla, 2002, 27–39.

7 Fernando López García, Mar Villaespesa and Tanya Díaz Bringas, 'Alianzas afectivas, efectos de excepción. Mar Villaespesa en conversación con Tamara Díaz Bringas y Fernando López García', *CONCRETA* 6 (2015): 20–37.

8 Miguel Benloch, *Acaeció en Granada*, Granada: Ciengramos TRN-Laboratorio artístico transfronterizo, 2013.





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

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:<sup>9</sup> *Tengo tiempo*<sup>10</sup> (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.

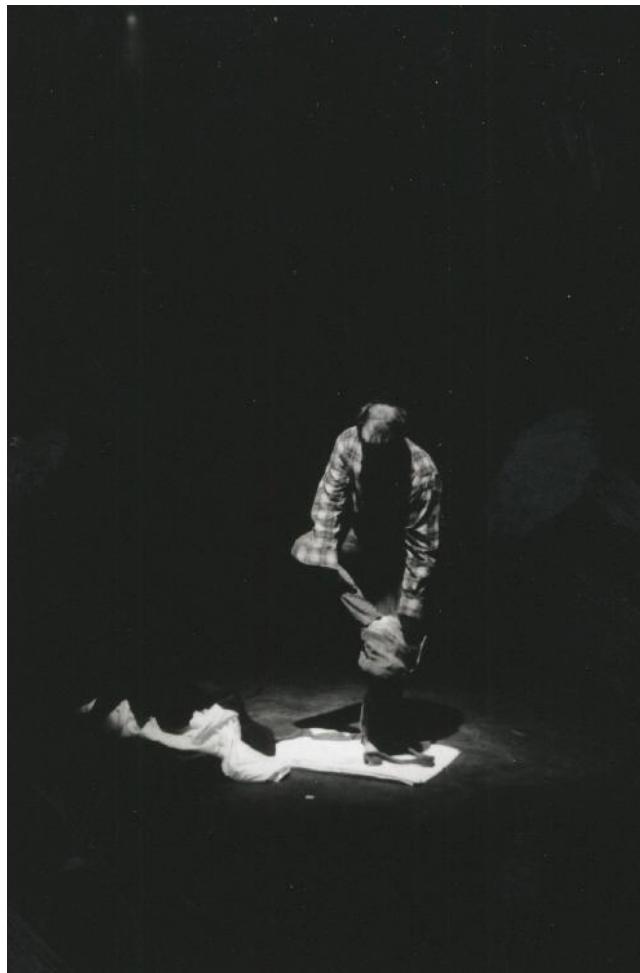


Fig. 6.5. Miguel Benlloch, *Tengo tiempo* at The Kitchen, Nueva York, 1994. Photo: Jeff Kahn. Courtesy of the Archivo Miguel Benlloch.

9 Alejandro Simón, ‘Essays on Seediness’ in *Essays on Seediness. Readings of the Miguel Benlloch Archive*, Valencia: Institut Valencià d’Art Modern, 2021, 31–46.

10 ‘Tengo tiempo’, Archivo Miguel Benlloch, 2023, <https://archivomiguelbenlloch.net/obras/tengo-tiempo>



*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'.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> 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'.<sup>13</sup>

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,<sup>14</sup> Benlloch's performative practice became a powerful activist-aesthetic endeavor articulated around what Villaespesa and Vázquez

11 Joaquín Vázquez, 'Bodies Alive in Action' in *Essays on Seediness. Readings of the Miguel Benlloch Archive*, Valencia: Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, 2021, 53.

12 María José Belbel, 'Forever Beautiful' in *Essays on Seediness. Readings of the Miguel Benlloch Archive*, Valencia: Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, 2021, 77–85.

13 Mar Villaespesa, 'My Dear Miguel' in *Essays on Seediness. Readings of the Miguel Benlloch Archive*, Valencia: Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, 2021, 21.

14 Vázquez, 'Bodies Alive in Action'.

define as ‘the vague, varied, playful, unbecoming, migrant, illegal, non-identified, diluted and conjugated body’.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, his trajectory can also be understood as a process of intensified aesthetization of activism.



6.7. Miguel Benlloch, *Bandera tranxesual*, 1998. Digital image: Salvador González Barba. Courtesy of the Archivo Miguel Benlloch.



6.8. Miguel Benlloch, *La braga activista*, 2004. Photo: Gonzalo Sáenz de Santa María Poulet. Courtesy of the Archivo Miguel Benlloch.

15 Villaespesa and Vázquez, *Miguel Benlloch*, 11.

16 Boris Groys, ‘On Art Activism’, *e-flux journal* 56 (2014): 3.

## 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’.<sup>17</sup>

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’.<sup>18</sup> 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<sup>19</sup> and memory institutions.<sup>20</sup> As suggested by Petar Jandrić, the postdigital is a ‘wide-open position or perhaps even worldview which encompasses various reconfigurations between technologies and humans’.<sup>21</sup> 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.

17 Villaespesa, ‘My Dear Miguel’: 19.

18 Nicholas Negroponte, ‘Beyond Digital’, *Wired* (December 1998), <https://web.archive.org/web/2023112214129/https://web.media.mit.edu/~nicholas/Wired/WIRED6-12.html>

19 Tula Giannini and Jonathan P. Bowen, ‘Art and Activism at Museums in a Post-digital World’ in Jonathan Weinel, Jonathan Bowen, Graham Diprose and Nick Lambert (eds) *Electronic Visualisation and the Arts*, London: British Computer Society, 2019, 27–35.

20 Ross Parry, ‘The End of the Beginning: Normativity in the Postdigital Museum’, *Museum Worlds* 1.1 (2013): 24–39.

21 Michael A. Peters, Petar Jandrić and Sarah Hayes, ‘Postdigital-biodigital: An Emerging Configuration’, *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 55 (2023): 1–14.

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.<sup>22</sup> Embodied into various online interfaces, the permanent home of the AMB is the internet. Its own web domain<sup>23</sup> 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 Atíñ Aya (Seville City Council), just a few months before he died.<sup>24</sup> And it was in the context of conversations between Vázquez, Villaespesa and Soledad Gutiérrez about taking the exhibition to CentroCentro, Madrid,<sup>25</sup> 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,<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup>

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),<sup>28</sup> and in *Essays on Seediness*, at the Institut Valencià d'Art Modern (IVAM) in 2021-22.<sup>29</sup> 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

22 Such as *Dark Nights, Bright Star* (The Worm Gallery, 4 February 2022 – 26 March 2022, Aberdeen, UK) or *Rewinding Internationalism. Scènes van de jaren 90* (Van Abbe Museum, Eindhoven, Netherlands, 19 November 2022 – 30 April 2023).

23 [archivomiguelbenlloch.net](http://archivomiguelbenlloch.net)

24 *Miguel Benlloch. Cuerpo conjugado*, Sevilla: Instituto de la Cultura y las Artes de Sevilla (ICAS) – Ayuntamiento de Sevilla, 2018. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7264652>

25 'Miguel Benlloch. Conjugated body', CentroCentro, 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/20231112123958/https://www.centrocentro.org/en/exhibition/miguel-benlloch-conjugated-body>

26 Villaespesa and Vázquez, *Miguel Benlloch*.

27 Joaquín Vázquez, 'The Miguel Benlloch Archive' in Fernanda Carvajal, Moira Cristiá and Javiera Manz (eds) *Archives of the Commons III. Non-appropriable Archives?*, Buenos Aires: pasafronteras Editorial, 2022, 248.

28 'Miguel Benlloch. Cuerpo conjugado', *La Madraza - Centro de Cultura Contemporánea de la Universidad de Granada*, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20231112125009/https://lamadraza.ugr.es/evento/cuerpo-conjugado>

29 'Essays on Seediness. Readings of the Archive Miguel Benlloch', Institut Valencià d'Art Modern, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20231112125152/https://ivam.es/en/exposiciones/essays-on-seediness-readings-of-the-archive-of-miguel-benlloch/>

the Archive on computers as a research resource; now the archive itself is the original seed of the process of this exhibition'.<sup>30</sup> *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.



*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,<sup>31</sup> while another subdomain was allocated to a website specifically devoted to the *Essays on Seediness* exhibition.<sup>32</sup>

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.

30 Villaespesa, 'My Dear Miguel', 22.

31 The old version of the archive is available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20231112125535/https://versionantigua.archivomiguelbenlloch.net/>

32 'Ensayos Sobre lo Cutre', Archivo Miguel Benlloch, 2022, <https://web.archive.org/web/20231112125640/https://ensayos.archivomiguelbenlloch.net/>

## 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 jEH!, Acuchillad+s...*<sup>33</sup>

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).<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Personal correspondence with Mar Villaespesa, 2022, translated into English by the author.

<sup>34</sup> Villaespesa, 'My Dear Miguel', 21.

The AMB is one of those archives helping to preserve the memories and activism of LGBTQ+ people,<sup>35</sup> 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),<sup>36</sup> 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'),<sup>37</sup> 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 [...]<sup>38</sup>

35 Rebecka T. Sheffield, *Documenting Rebellions: A Study of Four Lesbian and Gay Archives in Queer Times*, Sacramento: Litwin Books, 2019.

36 See the entry 'PRPC' in the AMB's website: <https://web.archive.org/web/2023112130051/https://archivomiguelbenlloch.net/otrsyyo/prcp/>

37 Documentation of this performance can be found at the entry 'El fantasma invidente' in the AMB's website: <https://web.archive.org/web/2023112131626/https://archivomiguelbenlloch.net/obras/el-fantasma-invidente/>

38 Santiago Eraso, 'Miguel Benlloch: "Desidentificate"', *Santiago Eraso Beloki's blog*, 10 July 2019, <https://web.archive.org/web/2023112131811/https://santieraso.com/2019/07/10/miguel-benlloch-desidentificate/>. Translated into English by the author.

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.







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.<sup>39</sup>

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’.<sup>40</sup> 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

39 Matthew Reason, *Documentation, Disappearance and the Representation of Live Performance*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 27.

40 Amelia Jones, “Presence” in *Absentia*, *Art Journal* 56.4 (1997): 11–18.

as a performance that directly reflects an artist's aesthetic project or sensibility and for which we are the present audience'.<sup>41</sup> 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.<sup>42</sup>

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'.<sup>43</sup>

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 Benlloch'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

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41 Philip Auslander, 'The Performativity of Performance Documentation', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 28 (2006): 9.

42 Simon Jones, 'The Future Perfect of the Archive: Re-thinking Performance in the Age of Third Nature', in Paul Clarke, Simon Jones, Nick Kaye and Johanna Linsley (eds) *Artists in the Archive: Creative and Curatorial Engagements with Documents of Art and Performance*, London-New York: Routledge, 2018, 303.

43 Michelle Caswell, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*. London: Routledge, 2021, 6.

as possible. This adds to the notoriously complex task of managing intellectual property in relation to performance art<sup>44</sup> 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*.<sup>45</sup>

It was then that he/we gave a structure, denominations, etc. to his body of work: 'performances', 'signos', 'tipotopotropos', 'alborqués' [...] 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.<sup>46</sup>

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 Villaespesa 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.

44 Australian Copyright Council, *Performance Art & Copyright*, 2019. <https://web.archive.org/web/20231112173555/https://www.copyright.org.au/browse/book/ACC-Performance-Art-&-Copyright-INFO125/>; Nicky Frankel, 'Copyright Ownership and Performance Art', *Center for Art Law*, 10 April 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20231112173716/https://itsartlaw.org/2023/04/10/copyright-ownership-and-performance-art/>

45 Benlloch, *Acaeció en Granada*.

46 Personal correspondence with Mar Villaespesa, October 2022, quote translated by the author.

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'.<sup>47</sup>

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 *otrs+yyo* ('othersand!'),<sup>48</sup> which Benlloch coined himself and highlights the relational nature of his practice: '*Othersand!* 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, othersand! also forms a unity from which life can be understood as conflict, support and affect'.<sup>49</sup>

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.

47 Mar Villaespesa and Joaquín Vázquez, 'Presentación' in Benlloch, *Acaeció en Granada*, Granada: Universidad de Granada, 2020, 13. Translation by the author from the original text in Spanish.

48 <https://archivomiguelbenlloch.net/category/otrsyyo/>

49 Miguel Benlloch, 'Acción en el Género' in Mar Villaespesa and Joaquín Vázquez (eds) *Mirar de frente*, Madrid: CentroCentro, 2019, 23. Translation by the author from the original text in Spanish.

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).

## EL FANTASMA INVIDENTE



*El fantasma invidente* es la que sería la última acción de Miguel Benlloch, realizada en 2018 con motivo de su exposición *Miguel Benlloch. Cuerpo conjugado* en la Sala Ati Aya de Sevilla.

2018  
Acción  
Realizada en la inauguración de la exposición *Miguel Benlloch. Cuerpo conjugado*, Sala Ati Aya, Instituto de la Cultura y las Artes de Sevilla – ICAS, comisariada por Mar Villalobos y Joaquín Vázquez (BNV Producciones)

*El fantasma invidente* (2018), video-documento de 29' 20'', en la Sala Ati Aya, Sevilla

INICIO PROYECTOS

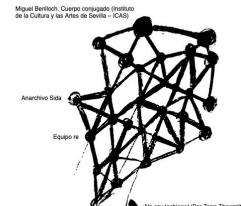
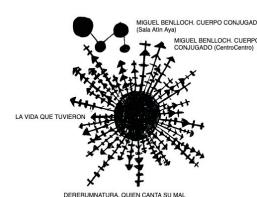


Fig. 6.15. *El fantasma invidente* on the first online incarnation of the AMB. Courtesy of the Archivo Miguel Benlloch.

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 alpha-

betical 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.<sup>50</sup> 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'.<sup>51</sup>

50 See 'Mapa de afectos', *Archivo Miguel Benlloch*, 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20231112175357/https://archivomiguelbenlloch.net/otrsyyo/mapa-de-afectos/>

51 Sy Taffel, *Digital Media Ecologies: Entanglements of Content, Code and Hardware*, New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2019, 16.

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.<sup>52</sup> 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’.<sup>53</sup>

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.<sup>54</sup> 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 Benloch’s sensibilities. Questionable aspects include Youtube’s ‘digital labor architecture’<sup>55</sup> and very problematic algorithmic biases,<sup>56</sup> as well as other characteristics typical of most commercial platforms that hinder the archival of activism and other socio-cultural practices:

52 Emiliano Treré, *Hybrid Media Activism: Ecologies, Imaginaries, Algorithms*. London: Routledge, 2018.

53 Autistici/Inventati and +KAOS, *Ten Years of Hacking and Media Activism*, Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2017, 107.

54 Daniel Villar-Onrubia and Victoria I. Marín, ‘Independently-hosted Web Publishing’, *Internet Policy Review* 11.2 (2022): 1–11.

55 Hector Postigo, ‘The Socio-technical Architecture of Digital Labor: Converting Play into YouTube Money’, *New Media & Society* 18.2 (2016): 332–349.

56 Sophie Bishop, ‘Anxiety, Panic and Self-optimization: Inequalities and the YouTube Algorithm’, *Convergence* 24.1 (2018): 69–84.

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.<sup>57</sup>

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’.<sup>58</sup>

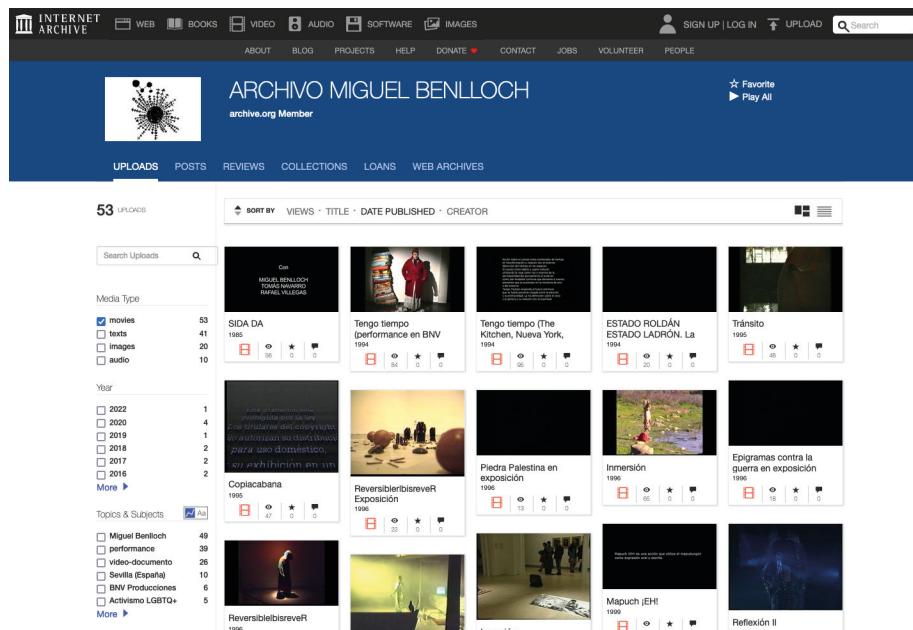


Fig. 6.17. Items uploaded by the AMB to the Internet Archive. Courtesy of the Archivo Miguel Benlloch

57 Howard Besser, ‘Archiving Aggregates of Individually Created Digital Content: Lessons from Archiving the Occupy Movement’, *Preservation, Digital Technology & Culture* 42.1 (2013): 32.

58 Brewster Kahle and Ana Parejo Vadillo, ‘The Internet Archive: An Interview with Brewster Kahle’, *Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* 21 (2015): 3.

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'.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> 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.<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup>

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,<sup>63</sup> decentralized online infrastructures such as PeerTube,<sup>64</sup> and public service internet initiatives<sup>65</sup> such as the Spanish Web Archive.<sup>66</sup>

59 Vanessa Barlett, 'Web Archiving and Participation: The Future History of Performance?' in Toni Sant (ed) *Documenting Performance: The Context and Processes of Digital Curation and Archiving*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017, 131–148.

60 By CERN (<https://home.cern/>), OpenAIRE (<https://www.openaire.eu/>) and the European Commission via its Horizon2020 program.

61 Muira McCammon and Jessa Lingel, 'Situating Dead-and-dying Platforms: Technological Failure, Infrastructural Precarity, and Digital Decline', *Internet Histories* 6.1-2 (2022): 1–13.

62 See news on various lawsuits against the Internet Archive at <https://blog.archive.org/tag/lawsuit/>

63 <https://conifer.rhizome.org>

64 <https://joinpeertube.org>

65 Christian Fuchs and Klaus Unterberger (eds), *The Public Service Media and Public Service Internet Manifesto*, London: University of Westminster Press, 2021; Ethan Zuckerman, 'The Case for Digital Public Infrastructure', *Knight First Amendment Institute*, 17 January 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/2023112222839/https://knightcolumbia.org/content/the-case-for-digital-public-infrastructure>

66 'Spanish Web Archive', *Biblioteca Nacional de España*, <https://web.archive.org/web/2023112210454/https://www.bne.es/en/collections/spanish-website-archive>

## 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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## 07. ARCHIVING DUTCH DISABILITY ACTIVISM: WHAT CAN DIGITAL CULTURE DO?

ELINE POLLAERT & PAUL VAN TRIGT

### Introduction

In 2022 *De Groene Amsterdamer* stated that the work of disability activists in the Netherlands is fragmented, faceless, and mostly forgotten.<sup>1</sup> Dutch anti-ableism activism is one of the most invisible forms of activism, struggling to achieve recognition comparable to that of feminist and anti-racist movements. No Netflix movies such as *Crip Camp* (2020) are created about the Dutch disability movement, although recent television series such as *Wheelchair Road Movie* (2019) and *Mari Stands Up* (2021) are starting to reach a broader audience.<sup>2</sup> Actually, the fact that the Netherlands has a rich history of disability activism since the 1970s (and even before) remains largely unknown and unacknowledged.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, digital culture holds great potential for the disclosure of historical disability activism and the activities of current day disability activists, but also comes with challenges because the accessibility of digital culture is not self-evident. The central question of this chapter is therefore: in what ways can digital culture play a role in archiving Dutch disability activism?

In this chapter, we use three case studies to reflect on current and past archival practices relating to disability activism in the Netherlands and the potentially transformative role of digital tools and networks for archiving disability activist practices. Before going into these case studies, we critically conceptualise dominant perceptions of activism in general and the implications they have for the recognition and visibility of disability activism. We then introduce our cases with specific attention to the role of ‘the digital’. Firstly, we discuss the activities of the disability justice collective Feminists Against Ableism. We will demonstrate how they use digital tools for maintaining their networks and participating in activist initiatives. In particular, we consider the role of these tools and potential obstacles in archiving practices. Secondly, we consider how digital culture has been used to archive disability activism, showing how the website DisPLACE.nl has been used to address the exclusion of disability (activism) in Dutch archives and to stimulate heritage institutions to ‘crip’ their collections. Thirdly, we reflect on a community project with the Kreukelcollectief (Crinkle Collective) on eugenics. In this project, we have tried to connect different histories, collections, and types of activists to create an interface in which activists and archives could interact.

Just as ‘the digital’ has implications for archiving practices, so does our positionality as researchers writing this article. Therefore, we finish this introduction with a short description

1 Naïm Derbali, ‘Men is tevreden met de kruimels’, *De Groene Amsterdamer*, 13 August 2022, <https://www.groene.nl/artikel/men-is-tevreden-met-de-kruimels>.

2 ‘Rolstoel Road Movie’ website, [https://www.npostart.nl/rolstoel-roadmovie/VPWON\\_1296793](https://www.npostart.nl/rolstoel-roadmovie/VPWON_1296793); ‘Mari Staat Op’ website, [https://www.npostart.nl/mari-staat-op/VPWON\\_1321256](https://www.npostart.nl/mari-staat-op/VPWON_1321256)

3 Jan Troost, *Troost Over Leven; 50 jaar belangengedrag en ondeugd*, Amsterdam: Inclusie Verenigt, 2022.

of ourselves and our involvement with archiving disability history and activism. Eline Pollaert (they/she) is a disabled, neurodivergent and queer 32-year-old PhD student in disability history. In addition to their academic work, they are a member of Feminists Against Ableism and the Kreukelcollectief, combining research and activism as a public historian. Paul van Trigt (he/him) is a 43-year-old assistant professor, does not identify as disabled and is involved in public history collaborations with activists such as the Kreukelcollectief and DisPLACE.nl. We are both involved in the NWO research project ‘Disability and Self-Governance: a Global Microhistory of Het Dorp Community and its Cultural Heritage from the 1960s’ which started in 2022 at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.<sup>4</sup>

## Problematizing dominant perceptions of (disability) activism

On March 12, 1990, dozens of people with physical disabilities gathered at the foot of Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. Inside, Congress was discussing the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Although the ADA was well on its way to becoming law, progress had been stalling and disabled people worried about the outcome of the vote. Suddenly, about 60 people in the crowd threw aside their mobility aids and spontaneously started crawling up the 78 marble Capitol steps. The activists wanted to draw attention to the physical and social obstacles they faced every day in the face of an inaccessible world, cheered on by others at the bottom of the stairs. Some got down on their hands and knees, others pulled themselves up by their arms, dragging their paralysed and atrophied legs upwards one step at a time. Videos and pictures of the crawlers spread far and wide, especially of the then 8-year old Jennifer Keelan wearing an ADAPT<sup>5</sup> bandana, telling ABC News: ‘I’ll take all night if I have to’. The day after, a smaller group returned, determined to start a sit-in inside the Capitol Rotunda. The Capitol police, dressed in full riot gear and unsure what to do, started dragging activists out after strapping them to their wheelchairs and using chain cutters to separate them. The protests had a major media impact and the ADA was passed shortly after.

Over 30 years later, the Capitol crawl still is an iconic image of disability activism.<sup>6</sup> The protest was bold, powerful and photogenic – people all over the country were taken aback by the images of the Capitol police restraining and forcibly removing peaceful disabled activists. In other words, this event lodged itself in the public mind because it was ‘ready to remember’.<sup>7</sup> But at whose expense? What other activist initiatives get overlooked because they are less spectacular and hence less archivable? Although it is understandable that provocative and photogenic actions tend to etch themselves firmly in the public’s mind, we argue that

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4 Rethinking Disability project website, <https://rethinkingdisability.net/projects/disability-self-governance/>

5 ADAPT (formerly American Disabled for Attendant Programs Today) is a United States grassroots disability rights organization with chapters in 30 states and Washington, D.C. They use nonviolent direct action in order to bring about disability justice.

6 In the context of this chapter, we define disability activism as any initiative relating to anti-ableism and the advancement of disability liberation – be it individual or collective, in person or online, planned or spontaneous. We point here to the distinction between disability activism (in which nondisabled activists can also engage) and the involvement of disabled activists in other forms of activism which are not directly related to disability and anti-ableism. The scope of this chapter does not include the latter.

7 Alexandra Juhasz, ‘Forgetting ACT UP’, *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98.1 (2012): 72.

conceptualising disability activism based on direct action initiatives actually obscures and excludes less visible and spectacular, but nevertheless equally important disability activism initiatives. Reiterating conceptions of ‘classic’ protests such as the Capitol crawl 1. excludes large numbers of disabled activists who are unable to attend in-person protests, 2. adds to the dismissal of online activism as inferior ‘armchair activism’ and 3. defines disability activism in terms of in-person protest, thereby enhancing its archivability (and in turn diminishing the archivability of other types of activism). The remainder of this section elaborates on these three consequential pitfalls.

### Pitfall 1: Exclusion of disabled activists at in-person protests

The first pitfall of focusing on activism defined as in-person protests is the fact that those types of events are only accessible to certain body-minds (fig. 7.1.).<sup>8</sup> In-person protests not only require certain levels of physical strength, emotional self-regulation capacity, and sensory processing, but also financial resources and privilege (i.e. not being at risk for losing benefits, care, medical devices or citizenship when arrested). Marginalised people are even more at risk of experiencing violence and police brutality. Very few in-person protests take into account disabled body-minds and their access needs, let alone the realities of multiply marginalised disabled people. In practice, this excludes many disabled people who want to raise their voices in support or protest from participating in in-person activist initiatives.



*Figure 7.1. Zoomed-in photograph of a disability activist whose wheelchair is stuck in tram rails, during the Women's March on March 8, 2020 (Amsterdam, the Netherlands). The person is wearing a dark blue wheelchair blanket and is surrounded by other activist using mobility aids. Photographer: Rebekka Mell.*

8 We follow Eli Clare’s use of the term body-mind here: ‘I followed the lead of many communities and spiritual traditions that recognize body and mind not as two entities but as one, resisting the dualism built into white Western culture... I settled on *body-mind* in order to recognize both the inextricable relationships between our bodies and our minds and the ways in which the ideology of cure operates as if the two are distinct – the mind superior over the body, the mind defining personhood, the mind separating humans from nonhumans’. Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2017, xvi-xvii. See for instance Annemarie Mol’s work on the body for an attempt within the west to rethink (and redo) body-mind relations: Annemarie Mol, *The Body Multiple. Ontology in Medical Practice*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2002.

Johanna Hedva, a Korean American contemporary artist, writer and musician, lives with a chronic condition that regularly incapacitates them for months at a time. They live in a predominantly Latino neighbourhood in Los Angeles, which is often an active place of protest. In their essay 'Sick Women Theory', they describe their experience with the Black Lives Matter protests in a nearby park in 2014 and they were unable to join due to their health:

I listened to the sounds of the marches as they drifted up to my window. Attached to the bed, I rose up my sick woman fist, in solidarity. [...] So, as I lay there, unable to march, hold up a sign, shout a slogan that would be heard, or be visible in any traditional capacity as a political being, the central question of Sick Woman Theory formed: How do you throw a brick through the window of a bank if you can't get out of bed?<sup>9</sup>

Are you less of an activist if your health does not permit you to physically attend protests and rallies? Does your body-mind matter less politically if your access needs are not met by the majority of activist initiatives? If most activist groups do not even consider ableism and disabled perspectives in their work in the first place? If the few disability advocates that are being invited into broader activist initiatives are so often white, educated, straight, and middle-class? Hedva's response is a resounding no. Instead, they offer a radical shift of perspective:

Sick Woman Theory is for those who are faced with their vulnerability and unbearable fragility, every day, and so have to fight for their experience to be not only honored, but first made visible. For those who, in Audre Lorde's words, were never meant to survive: because this world was built against their survival. It's for my fellow spoonies,<sup>10</sup> my fellow sick and crip crew. You know who you are, even if you've not been attached to a diagnosis: *one of the aims of Sick Woman Theory is to resist the notion that one needs to be legitimated by an institution*, so that they can try to fix you according to their terms. You don't need to be fixed, my queens – it's the world that needs the fixing [emphasis added, EP].<sup>11</sup>

## Pitfall 2: Dismissal of online and hybrid activism

As a consequence of inaccessible in-person protests, many disabled activists turn to online activism. Since it became available to the public in 1991, the internet has greatly impacted

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9 Johanna Hedva, 'Sick Woman Theory', *Mask Magazine*, 19 January 2016, 1 and 5, [https://pocatech.org/sites/default/files/digital\\_resources/Sick%20Woman%20Theory\\_0.pdf](https://pocatech.org/sites/default/files/digital_resources/Sick%20Woman%20Theory_0.pdf)

10 Christine Miserandino came up with the spoon theory in 2003 while sitting in a restaurant, wanting to explain to a friend her experiences with Lupus. She used the spoons on the table as a metaphor for the limited amount of energy chronically ill and disabled people have. Compared to nondisabled people, everyday acts such as washing oneself or cooking take more spoons, forcing disabled people to meticulously plan their activities. Since then, 'spoonie' has become a term of endearment amongst disabled and chronically ill people. Christine Miserandino, 'The Spoon Theory written by Christine Miserandino', *But You Don't Look Sick*, <https://butyoudontlooksick.com/articles/written-by-christine/the-spoon-theory/>, 2003.

11 Hedva, 'Sick Women Theory', 8–9.

organisers and activists in general. Maintaining (international) networks, organising activities and sharing knowledge became much easier with the rise of websites, social media, and video conferencing tools. Disability activism, and disabled activists in particular, profited from the low-threshold and accessible possibilities that the internet opened up, because online options allow people to (partially) bypass physical, emotional and cognitive constraints to participation in in-person activism. However, attitudes towards digital activism have not always been positive. Activist groups, and also society in general, used to in-person organising have dismissed online and hybrid activism as inferior, not the ‘real deal’ or armchair activism/‘slacktivism’ (referring to people talking about social justice issues online but not taking concrete action).<sup>12</sup>

The limitations of in-person activism became apparent all of a sudden when the coronavirus pandemic hit. Almost one third of the world population found themselves in lockdown, unable to carry on with life as we knew it. For most people, this meant a radical shift in terms of work, social life and pastime activities. Apart from key workers, most of us became more or less housebound – just like many chronically ill and disabled people have been for months, years or even decades. One crucial difference, however, was that those who had been living house-bound or even bed-bound before had all kinds of strategies and mechanisms in place to manage their daily activities and needs. While nondisabled people were scrambling up the walls in boredom, panic and frustration, the disabled community relied on online tools and communities that often had been years in the making.<sup>13</sup> All at once, online activism became the new normal for everyone: individuals, grassroots activist communities and even NGO campaigns.<sup>14</sup> Ironically, disabled activists did not receive credit for sharing their experience and knowledge of digital organizing. In fact, an onslaught of online discussions erupted, questioning the value of the lives of so-called ‘vulnerable’ people.<sup>15</sup> Many disability activists felt that not only their way of organising was dismissed, but that their online activism strategies and cultures were appropriated by nondisabled organisers.<sup>16</sup>

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- 12 Nolan L. Cabrera, Cheryl E. Matias and Roberto Montoya, ‘Activism or Slacktivism? The Potential and Pitfalls of Social Media in Contemporary Student Activism’, *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 10.4 (2017): 400–415. See also Kai Doran ‘The Problem with Armchair Activism’, *The M-A Chronicle*, 12 June 2021, <https://www.machronicle.com/the-problem-with-armchair-activism/>; Muhammad Jazli Adam, ‘Armchair Activism: Social Media during Social Unrest’, *UKEC*, 18 June 2020, <https://www.ukeconline.com/armchair-activism/>
- 13 Kerry Dobransky and Eszter Hargittai, ‘Piercing the Pandemic Social Bubble: Disability and Social Media Use About COVID-19’, *The American Behavioral Scientist* 65.12 (2021): 1698–1720.
- 14 Megan Elias, ‘Armchair Activism: How Social Media Changed the Way We Make Change’, *The Current*, Winter Issue (2020–2021): 38–42.
- 15 Andrew Pulrang, ‘What Disabled People Are Thinking and Feeling About The Pandemic, One Year Later’, *Forbes*, 21 March 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/andrewpulrang/2021/03/21/what-disabled-people-are-thinking-and-feeling-about-the-pandemic-one-year-later/?sh=511604113277>.
- 16 []{#\_Hlk129847577 .anchor}Covid-19: Appropriation of disability culture & movements, Asian American Arts Alliance (AAARTS), 10 May 2022, <https://www.aaartsalliance.org/events/covid-19-appropriation-of-disability-culture-movements>

## Pitfall 3: Domination of in-person protests when it comes to archiving

So far, we have concluded that in-person protests are often inaccessible and that online or hybrid initiatives from disabled organisers regularly have been dismissed for being ‘slacktivism’. This plays into a third pitfall: because in-person protests are continuously presented as actual activism, they become dominant in representation because they are perceived to be more archivable. Focusing on photogenic protests and charismatic leaders shifts the focus away from less public, popular, and visible forms of activism. Think for example of lobby activities, community work, and research projects. Although explicit in-person protest initiatives are sometimes highly effective in gaining public traction for certain topics, ‘behind the scenes activism’ is just as important to achieve social justice. However, this kind of activism is considered to be less archivable, adding another layer to the exclusion of disability activism and disability activists from archives. The invisibility of ‘soft activism’ applies to all types of activism, of course. Because disabled people in the Netherlands tend to be viewed as in need of (medical) support instead of civil rights and emancipation. Therefore, they are more often forced to move in policy and law contexts compared to other marginalised groups.

In addition, we might ask ourselves who is considered archivable enough to be remembered as a charismatic disability activist and why. Curator Katherine Ott of the National Museum of American History remarked that highlighting disability rights movement figureheads such as Ed Roberts, who started the Center for Independent Living in Berkeley in 1972, overlooks many others who were instrumental to the movement. One practical obstacle in the way of crediting all individual disability rights activists is a lack of (personal) objects relating to these persons and their activist activities, which could be used to showcase them in a museum exhibit. More importantly, she points out that the main takeaway should be that the disability rights movement ‘... was a grassroots movement and it was people inspiring each other all over the place’.<sup>17</sup> We have to ask ourselves what kind of socio-cultural biases affect the representation and archivability of dominating figureheads (who are often white, male, and middle-class) compared to others involved in disability activism.<sup>18</sup>

In the Dutch context, a critical engagement with dominant cultural and archival perceptions of disability activism is necessary. It is noteworthy that the archiving of social movements in the Netherlands is quite well developed in terms of dedicated archives related to women’s rights, queer emancipation, and the civil rights movement of Black Dutch people.<sup>19</sup> The International Institute of Social History (IISH), located in Amsterdam, is even dedicated to the preservation of often oppressed social movements.<sup>20</sup> However, no formal Dutch archives relating to disability history exist. Prior attempts to deposit private disability activism collections in the IISH and

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17 David Serlin, ‘Making Disability Public: An Interview with Katherine Ott’, *Radical History Review* 94 (2006): 205.

18 Juhasz, ‘Forgetting ACT UP’: 72.

19 Institute on gender equality and women’s history, <https://institute-genderequality.org/>; IHlia LGBTI Heritage, <https://ihlia.nl/en/>; The Black Archives. <https://www.theblackarchives.nl/home.html>

20 ⓘ Hlk129847303 .anchor Mission statement, International Institute of Social History, <https://iisg.amsterdam/en/about/mission>

secure their future as archives within the IISH were turned down, because disability was viewed as a medical topic rather than a social history topic; thus not archivable. Digital culture has the potential to crack open this impasse on several levels. The following case studies trace various roles digital culture might play in archiving disability activism, including potential challenges.

## Digital disability activism and archiving practices

With these general critical remarks about (disability) activism in mind, we will now take a closer look at digital culture in relation to archiving Dutch disability activism. Due to the sometimes ephemeral nature of sources, coalitions and initiatives, digital activism poses challenges to historians and archivists of activism.<sup>21</sup> This rings especially true for disability activism in the Netherlands, as grassroots disability activists tend to engage with issue-centred initiatives in a fragmented way (rather than in long-term, overarching collaborations). In addition, disabled activists oftentimes have limited time, energy and resources at their disposal. This significantly increases the risk of activist overwhelm or even burnout, causing short(er)-lived activist engagement. With regard to the latter, digital and online realms offer much needed tools and accommodations to 'crip' disability activism. In this section, we present three cases of disability activism in the Netherlands today (partly) relying on digital and online tools. We argue that the conceptualisation of activism is enhanced by taking digital activism into account in addition to in-person activism. We also use the three case studies to investigate various ways in which digital culture can aid in archiving disability activist practices.

### Case study 1: Disability justice collective Feminists Against Ableism

When a number of disabled activists found each other online in 2018, they started a Facebook group. Their aim was to draw attention to ableism – the interpersonal and systemic exclusion of disabled, chronically ill and neurodivergent folks. The Facebook group offered an increasing number of people the opportunity to share their stories and experiences with day-to-day ableism. A small core group of activists banded together, noticing that mainstream activist initiatives did not take ableism into account or think about the accessibility of their events. This core group then decided to start the disability justice collective Feminists Against Ableism (FAA hereafter).<sup>22</sup> Their first achievement was taking part in the national Dutch Women's March in Amsterdam in 2019. Disability activist Annika Mell gave a speech and the collective headed the march through the city centre. In addition, FAA organised the Online Disability March for those who were too tired, sick, or disabled to attend the in-person protest. Inspired by the

21 Lisa Lindström, *Archiving in the Era of Online Activism: Challenges and Practices of Collecting and Providing Access to Activist Social Media Archives*, MA thesis, Lund University 2019, <https://www.lunduniversity.lu.se/lup/publication/8980793>.

22 The disability justice movement emerged from the mainstream disability rights movement in 2006, specifically from and for disabled queer of colour communities. The framework was conceived by Patty Berne, Mia Mingus, Stacey Milburn, Leroy F. Moore and Eli Clare. Shayda Kafai, *Crip Kinship*, Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2021, 22; [Patty Berne, 'Disability Justice – A Working Draft by Patty Berne', Sinsinvalid, 10 June 2015, https://www.sinsinvalid.org/blog/disability-justice-a-working-draft-by-patty-berne.](#)

January 21, 2017 Disability March, which flanked the Women's March on Washington they asked people to share their story of why they were unable to attend, including a picture of themselves.<sup>23</sup> In their entries, participants in the online disability march indicated that both their health and the inaccessibility of the Women's March prevented them from being there. They also called attention to other obstacles disabled people face, such as lack of medical research, stereotypes and additional exclusion based on gender, ethnicity and socio-economic class.<sup>24</sup> Between 2019 and 2021, FAA was a regular at the Dutch Women's March stage (fig. 7.2.). Currently, FAA consists of around 15 core members of varying ages, ethnicities, genders and sexual orientations, all identifying as disabled, chronically ill and/or neurodivergent. The collective focuses on organising (online) events, advising organisations about anti-ableism and accessibility, speaking during demonstrations and meetings and creating social media content.



*Figure 7.2. Photograph of two members of disability justice collective Feminists Against Ableism, during the Women's March on March 8, 2020 (Amsterdam, the Netherlands). Jeanette Chedda (left) is a 30-something brown woman wearing a black hoodie, a yellow scarf and a green jacket. She is holding hands with Mira Thompson (right), a 20-something white woman wearing a green scarf and a brown jacket. They are surrounded by protest signs and smile broadly at the camera. Photographer: Rebekka Mell.*

How does FAA go about online and hybrid activist practices? In terms of building and maintaining its networks, the collective organises itself *exclusively* online. The members' communication switched from a Facebook group to a WhatsApp group to Slack and Discord servers. Although FAA is a relatively small collective with only 15 members, only some of them have

23 Disability March, <https://disabilitymarch.com/>

24 []{#\_Hlk129847160 .anchor}Online Disability March 2019 stories, <https://feministsagainstableism.nl/categorie/online-disability-march/verhalen-2019/>

met each other in person. The members have never been in the same space collectively. Both their internal and external connections take place almost exclusively in the online and digital realm, even prior to the coronavirus pandemic. The collective also works in a hybrid manner, for example with one or two people co-writing a speech in a shared online document and a third person reading it out loud at a protest march. This does not seem to hinder the growth of their following; more and more individuals and organisations approach them for requests. The activities that FAA (co-)organises often have an online or hybrid character as well. These workshops, protests and events are livestreamed for free when possible, including speech-to-text interpretation to provide access to those for whom auditory information is inaccessible.

FAA in no small part depends on digital and online tools for its anti-ableism activism. This also enables the collective to archive its own work, independent of formal archives. The aforementioned Online Disability March submissions are archived on a dedicated part of the FAA website, for example. The collective has chronicled its own history on their website as well, in addition to an overview of various types of resources featuring contributions by collective members (speeches, news articles, podcasts, etc.) and event recordings.<sup>25</sup> Despite offering a rich overview of its activities, FAA's online archive is incomplete. Although the collective is firmly rooted in digital culture, this does not automatically result in consistent online archiving practices. Several factors play into this. First, the composition of the collective has changed a lot over the years. Founding members left and new members joined, but administrative rights to the collective's online platforms have not always been passed on or shared. That leaves some previously used digital platforms unreachable to current members. Second, structured and consistent archiving practices require a level of expertise that the collective members do not have at their disposal. This includes knowledge regarding the accessibility of archiving services, both for the makers and users of the archives. In order to create a proper archive, ideally one or two collective members would dedicate themselves to crafting a durable archival structure. This ties in with the third factor, namely that the collective must choose wisely in what activities to invest its limited time, resources, and energy. Priority is often given to urgent, immediate matters that have a more direct or noticeable impact. This factor is compounded by the fact that not all 15 members are able to invest in the collective together at the same time due to their health and personal situations, which impacts the collective's load capacity as a whole. Choices must be made and archiving is not a top priority. In other words, disability activism does not only suffer from archival disinterest, but disability activists are not always interested in archiving their work either for a variety of reasons.

Looking at the Feminists Against Ableism case study, it becomes clear that digital culture is crucial in facilitating their disability activist activities. It also grants the collective agency to independently archive its work, despite various obstacles in terms of member composition, knowledge, resources and prioritisation interfering with the collective's archival consistency. In summary, the first role digital culture might play in archiving disability activism is one of *facilitation*.

25 <https://feministsagainstableism.nl/over-faa/ontstaan-van-faa/>

## Case study 2: DisPLACE

Archiving has not always been the first priority of activists who tend to focus more on their immediate goals for social change, as we have seen in the previous case study. However, some Dutch disability activists have long been aware of the importance of the past for their activism – and consequently the relevance of archiving practices. Before academics started to write about the history of Dutch disability activism, activists Jan Troost and Agnes van Wijnen already undertook digital initiatives to document the achievements of disabled self-advocates: they launched websites on which they presented a Dutch disability history timeline, bits and pieces of this history, and oral history interviews.<sup>26</sup> These websites were not primarily focused on preserving their individual activism, as is the case with Feminists Against Ableism, but rather on offering a broad overview of disability history and activism in the Netherlands. A website was the ideal medium because of the relatively low costs, potentially broad reach, and the possibility of adding unlimited information. In addition to their digital work, activists Troost and Van Wijnen also maintained non-digital archives and even took over parts of other archives in order to prevent relevant material from being thrown away. In fact, they turned to ‘the digital’ because it was not self-evident that official archives would include disability activism. Because Dutch disability activism has often been considered as non-existent, archival institutions such as the IISH have not acquired relevant collections in contrast with collected sources from more well-known activist groups such as from workers and anticolonial movements.<sup>27</sup> Disclosure thus was an important function of Troost’s and Van Wijnen’s websites.

When author Van Trigt became interested in the history of Dutch disability activism and aware of the existence of archives at people’s homes or in poor condition at organizations, together with Deaf historian and self-advocate Corrie Tijsseling, and public historian Manon Parry, he started the BIB Netwerk (Bronnen voor Inclusieve Burgerschap, meaning ‘Sources for Inclusive Citizenship’), to stimulate the collection and interpretation of disability histories.<sup>28</sup> Once again digital culture was used by the initiators to call attention to the history of disability activism in the first place. They secured a small grant which enabled them to build a website, designed by a digital heritage company with guidance from self-advocates, which was launched on March 20, 2019: DisPLACE.nl (fig. 7.3.).<sup>29</sup> This website was different from earlier initiatives because it has not only presented stories from the perspective of disabled people, but also documented these stories with information and illustrations from personal archives and heritage institutions. Each year, students work with volunteers from the BIB Netwerk to produce histories around a specific theme. In this way, DisPLACE is ‘cripping’ collections: the

26 Gehandicapten Schrijven Geschiedenis, <https://gehandicaptenschrijvengeschiedenis.nl>; Aparticipatie, <https://aparticipatie.nl>

27 A notable exception to this rule is the Dutch queer archive IHLIA (Internationaal Homo/Lesbisch Informatiecentrum en Archief), which dedicates a part of their archive to the intersection of queerness and disability.

28 Corrie Tijsseling, <https://corrietijsseling.nl/>; Manon Parry, [www.uva.nl/en/profile/p/a/m.s.parry/m.s.parry.html](http://www.uva.nl/en/profile/p/a/m.s.parry/m.s.parry.html)

29 Manon S. Parry, Corrie Tijsseling and Paul van Trigt, ‘Slow, Uncomfortable and Badly Paid. DisPLACE and the Benefits of Disability History’ in Adele Chynoweth, Bernadette Lynch, Klaus Petersen and Sarah Smed (eds), *Museums and Social Change*, London-New York: Routledge, 2020, 149–159.

website has pointed to the existence of disability in existing heritage collections, has provided these collections with a new interpretation and has presented new, often personal source material that complements official archives. Although the focus of DisPLACE is broader than activism only, it has made the history of Dutch disability activism more visible and has also contributed to its digital archiving. Moreover, the website was designed with disabled people in order to make it as accessible as possible for people with different disabilities.

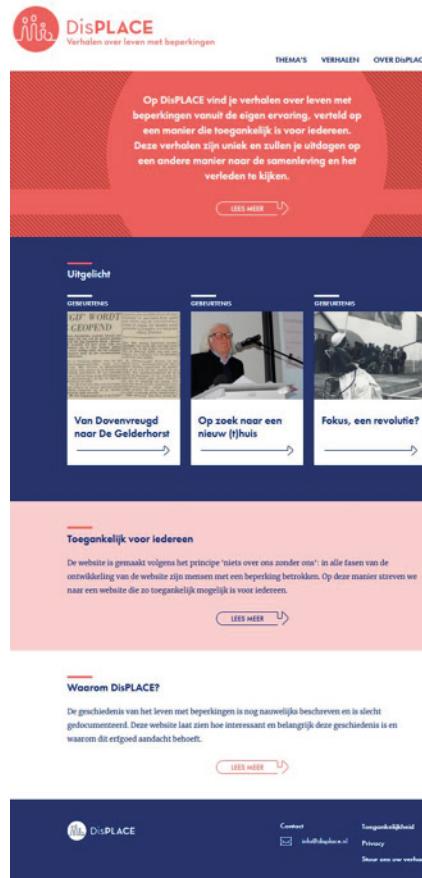


Figure 7.3. Screenshot of the DisPLACE website. The DisPLACE logo at the top is followed by a short description of the website, three highlighted posts, a section on accessibility and co-creation, DisPLACE's mission and finally the colophon. Screenshot taken on July 18, 2023.

DisPLACE has generally been received well by historians and self-advocates: during the launch of the website for instance, the initiative was praised by the chair of the main Dutch Association of Historians and by an activist employed by the main Dutch self-advocacy organisation Ieder(in). However, it has turned out to be a challenge to maintain the DisPLACE website and further improve it by adding new stories and materials. This is a matter of time and money, in particular because maintaining the accessibility of the website requires extra

investment. Despite these practical obstacles, the DisPLACE case study draws attention to the potential that digital culture holds for disclosing Dutch disability history and activism at large. In summary, the second role digital culture might play in archiving disability activism is offering an *interface*, deliberately connecting archival and historical materials to a broad audience of non-historians.

### Case study 3: Digital community project on eugenic histories

As has become clear from the previous case studies, we do not consider digital culture to be an active agent, neither do we see it as a simple tool for archiving activism that leaves archives and (disability) activism unchanged. The digital realm presents challenges and offers opportunities, holding potential for rethinking and innovating archival practices. In fact, we have initiated a project that explores the potential of digital culture to archive disability activism in a way that leads to new collections and new insights into past and present. A couple of years ago, we were approached by the D4D research team from the UK that wanted to bring together people from the UK, the Netherlands and Germany in order to explore the complex and troubling issue of eugenics and the impact that 'eugenic logic' imposed on disabled communities in both the past and the present. Because the pandemic made an international gathering impossible, we were asked to organize a Dutch event that would result in audio-visual material for the D4D website or even a virtual museum. We decided to make use of an already existing Dutch network and of an exhibition idea when we responded to the request from D4D and to use this project as a new step in archiving activism.<sup>30</sup>

Together with the so-called Kreukelcollectief (Crinkle Collective, consisting of disabled activists, artists and academics) we approached Dutch eugenics from the perspective of the Second World War and prenatal screening. We selected five stories and objects related to eugenics, including photographs, clothing, and videos, partially based on a forthcoming Kreukelcollectief exhibition called 'Places of Pride and Sorrow'.<sup>31</sup> The stories and objects were presented to the participants as the starting point of the workshop. The first story concerned the biographies of three inhabitants of the Willem Arntsz Hoeve, a psychiatric facility in Den Dolder where many patients died due to neglect and starvation during and right after World War II.<sup>32</sup> The second story presented the memorial that was revealed at the Willem Arntsz Hoeve in 2016, as an acknowledgement of these events.<sup>33</sup> The third object was a worn-out

30 Brave New World exhibition, <https://d4d.org.uk/workstreams/brave-new-world/brave-new-world-exhibition/>

31 The title of the exhibition refers to the 1996 landmark book *Pride and Sorrow: Disabled in the Netherlands*, which was the first Dutch publication on disability written by disabled people themselves. Yolan Koster-Dreese and Agnes van Wijnen (eds), *Trots en treurnis: gehandicapt in Nederland*, Amsterdam: Singel Uitgevers, 1996.

32 Marco Gietema and Cecile aan de Stegge, *Vergeten slachtoffers. Psychiatrische inrichting De Willem Arntsz Hoeve in de Tweede Wereldoorlog*, Amsterdam: Boom uitgevers, 2016. The outcomes of a larger follow-up research project investigating multiple psychiatric institutions will be presented in the fall of 2023: 'Mental institutions under pressure', <https://www.niod.nl/en/projects/mental-institutions-under-pressure>.

33 ⓘ\_Hlk129846779 .anchor}VGN, 'Gedenkteken voor vergeten oorlogsslachtoffers Willem Arntsz Hoeve', <https://www.vgn.nl/nieuws/gedenkteken-voor-vergeten-oorlogsslachtoffers-willem-arntsz-hoeve>

T-shirt from the 1990s depicting a DNA helix centred in a bulls' eye, with the phrase 'FAIR GAME?' underneath (see fig. 7.4.). This T-shirt had been worn during protests against the increasing prenatal screening for disabilities in foetuses. The fourth story was a recorded fragment of a 1995 satirical play entitled 'The Museum 2040' about a museum in a dystopian future where disabled people are exhibited, having gone extinct due to prenatal screening.<sup>34</sup> The fifth and final story was a snippet of the 2000 documentary *Dead End*, chronicling the life and death of the Dutch Jewish and disabled accountant and teacher Alexander Katan.<sup>35</sup> These five stories and objects were used not only to discuss eugenics with the workshop participants, but also to address ways to unlearn eugenics and to explore the 'otherwise'.<sup>36</sup>



*Figure 7.4. Photograph of late disability activist Jan Troost in 2021, wearing a worn-out white T-shirt depicting a DNA helix centred in a bulls' eye, with the phrase 'FAIR GAME?' underneath. Jan Troost is a white man in his 60s wearing glasses, gazing straight into the camera. Photographer: Paula Boek.*

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hoeve

- 34 Jan Troost, 'Theater Aaibaarheidsfactor10: Het Museum in 2030 over genetische defecten en hun hulpmiddelen', *Troost Over Leven*, 22 February 2014, <https://troostoverleven.nl/2014/02/theater-aaibaarheidsfactor10-het-museum-in-2030-over-genetische-defecten-en-hun-hulpmiddelen/>
- 35 []{#\_Hlk129846723 .anchor}Netherlands Film Commission, 'Dood spoor?', <https://filmcommission.nl/database/production/dood-spoor-3/>
- 36 Dagmar Herzog, *Unlearning Eugenics. Sexuality, Reproduction, and Disability in Post-Nazi Europe*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018.

In two virtual workshops which took place in 2021, we brought together 13 participants who self-identify as disabled and/or neurodivergent, with lived experiences of disability. During the first workshop a series of objects and documents related to the five cases was presented by members of the Kreukelcollectief to the participants as a starting point for discussion and questions: how might they re-interpret these objects? Which of the materials do they feel are most significant and tell the most powerful stories? Have they got ideas for alternative materials that they would like to see included? For the second workshop, then, we asked the participants to respond to the cases and materials presented and to use creative methods for their response, such as collage, creative writing, theatre performance and song. The workshops were recorded in an unobtrusive way, in order to use fragments for the D4D website about eugenics.

The five starting objects/stories presented during the first workshop were not all produced by activists, but were nevertheless (re)appropriated by them as relevant for their self-understanding as disability activists. This (re)appropriation was possible thanks to the digital availability of historical materials and the fact that they could be made easily accessible through digital tools. The workshops also provided insight in the different ways in which people do (or do not) relate to the past and the implications of this for archiving practices. The workshops as accessible online events made connections possible between activists from different backgrounds and generations. They facilitated a dialogue about these connections: we brought people together by inviting them to the workshop, but this does not mean that their histories are connected or that they experience them as such. It is important to articulate these dynamics, because they make us aware of the politics of archiving. What has to be archived, how, by whom, where and why? Due to the set-up of the workshops, they also resulted in new input for activist archives (fig. 7.5.). Because we asked the participants to respond, they not only produced new archival materials, but they also shared contemporary stories with urgent archival relevance. People told for instance how they were threatened in the recent past with clear references to what the Nazis did to disabled people before and during World War II. This is surprising, given that hardly attention is paid to this aspect of the war in Dutch public remembrance culture. Such stories are relevant to store. The belated appearance into circulation shows that archiving activism is an endless and urgent endeavour.



Figure 7.5. Photograph of a collage-painting made by Jacqueline Kool. Religious and archival images connected to life and death are placed in a tangle of tree roots, framed by a banner with the text 'Life... Oh... Life'. Multimedia (paper, acrylic paint, flowers from Alchemilla Vulgaris (lady's mantle), plastic). Photograph: Jacqueline Kool.

The presentation of the project on the D4D website is still in progress, but the workshops already showed how this digital format could serve the archiving of disability activism. The workshops enabled the activists to show materials from their personal collections and to share acquired knowledge about disability history with peers. This allowed them to exchange knowledge across disabilities, generations and activist practices. As such, it was in line with the aims of digital archival activist projects such as DisPLACE. Moreover, the D4D case study suggests that digital culture might play a role as a *generative hub* in archiving disability activism. As we concluded earlier, DisPLACE already functions as an interface by connecting public and private collections and by disclosing activism and activist archives. The D4D project then adds an extra layer of functionality to digital culture, by purposely generating interactions between activists and archives and thereby creating new networks and archival materials.

## Conclusion

Circling back to the main question: In what ways can digital culture play a role in archiving disability activism and what kind of challenges may arise in this process?

We started this chapter with a few reflections on dominant perceptions of activism in general, in order to position disability activism in relation to other forms of activism. Generally speaking, activism is conceptualised in terms of direct action and hands-on initiatives, usually disruptive in character. As a result of this ‘classic’ activism blueprint, 1. large numbers of disability activists who are unable to attend in-person protests are excluded, 2. online activism is dismissed as inferior ‘armchair activism’, and 3. the direct action blueprint leads to the obscuring and even exclusion of less visible and less spectacular disability activist initiatives. A focus on ‘classic’ conceptualisations of activism leaves disability activism at risk of being perceived as inferior or less effective. This in turn may lead to disability activism being perceived as less archivable, leading to a lack of interest in the history of disability activism on the part both of archivists and of disability activists.

The three case studies we presented suggest that the digital offers opportunities as well as challenges when it comes to archiving Dutch disability activism. Digital and online tools impact both archiving practices and disability activism. In terms of opportunities, these tools offer new venues to make possible partnerships and collaborations between disability activists and others, especially when they are faced with health constraints. Furthermore, digital and online tools facilitate the collection of existing disability activism materials and stories, but also their presentation to the public. These tools also present disability activists with opportunities to produce new archival materials and (re)connect across backgrounds and generations. The three case studies illustrated three potential roles digital culture can play with regard to archiving disability activism: 1. *facilitating* activist and self-archiving activities; 2. providing an active *interface* that connects archival materials to broader audiences; and 3. constituting a *generative hub* that actively stimulates the creation of new archival materials and activist networks.

In terms of obstacles, the three case studies made clear that digital culture is not a ‘quick fix’ for archival disinterest in disability activism and vice versa. Setting up structured and consistent archives takes time, resources, and knowledge that may not be readily available or a priority to disability activists. Additionally, collecting and sharing archival materials in such a way that is accessible and available in both the short and the long term, requires significant resources which may not always be readily available. An important requirement for advancing the collection and archiving of disability activist histories is thus an equitable collaboration between archivists and activists, in order to alert one another to potential oversights and shortcomings and to strengthen the impact of each other’s work.

In conclusion, we think it is undeniable that digital culture has the potential to archive disability activism in a way that leads to new insights into past and present. Formal archives continue to exclude disability history from their collections, especially in the Netherlands. Digital and online platforms offer grassroot activists tools to collect and share their private collections with other (disability) activists and the public, thereby connecting stories and insights which remained fragmented earlier. This may also lead to the production of new archival stories, collections, and materials. However, disability activists must have resources at their disposal to actually be able to develop and sustain their own archives in an accessible way. Taking care of one’s communities is a form of participatory heritage activism; archiving

can be an act of activism in itself. Both private and formal archival institutions can and should profit from this development, especially when it comes to the acknowledgement of disability activism as an integral part of social movements and history. A critical rethinking of and (re)connection to archiving disability activism is needed for the integration of digital archival activist projects into formal archives. Together we must design ways for heritage institutions to learn from the working methods of disabled (archival) activists and from the way they design access. Otherwise, disabled people and their histories will continue to be shut out of traditional archives as both subjects and researchers.

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## 09. AFTERWORD: COROLLARY RECORDS, PRECARITY AND CARE

MICHELLE CASWELL

The essays in this volume serve as a powerful reminder that archives are not only about the past; they are about the work that needs to be done in the present to enact a future conducive to our mutual survival. Global in scope, the chapters demonstrate how organizers are finding creative ways to document their own activism, to steward the records they generate, and to activate these records for new works of art and resistance. From Afghan women's Instagram posts to posters left behind by occupiers of People's Parks, the records described in this volume assert 'We Were Here'. With careful archival intervention, these records assert 'We Will Always Be Here'. Taken together, the chapters reveal how art, activism, and archives are mutually constituted; records get created as a form of protest, protest is an art in that generates its own records, records get activated for new forms of art and resistance. With thoughtful stewardship and outreach, the cycle continues *ad infinitum* in a Möbius strip of creation, consumption, and care, forming the basis of liberatory memory work.

Liberatory memory work, in the words of the Co-Directors of UCLA's Community Archives Lab:

empowers vulnerable communities to enact their own temporalities, to represent themselves autonomously, and to activate records to redistribute material resources more equitably. Liberatory memory work recognizes and leverages the power of emotion to challenge and transform existing knowledge systems; such memory work simultaneously dismantles oppressive archives and imagines and strives toward liberatory practices. What is at stake, ultimately, is not just how we remember the past, but how we distribute power in the present.<sup>1</sup>

These chapters give us case studies of liberatory memory work across context and cultures, involving a diverse assemblage of actors, archival praxes, and information architectures. Community archives reflect the ontologies and epistemologies of the communities they serve and represent and as such, no two are exactly alike. Yet despite these disparate contexts, commonalities emerge around three major themes: corollary records, precarity, and care.

The records created, archived, and activated in these chapters are what I have termed 'corollary records', that is, records that document a parallel, preceded moment in the past that speaks directly to the present.<sup>2</sup> Corollary records constitute a blueprint for activists, providing crucial information on the success (and failure) of strategies and tactics from the past, so that organizers do not have to reinvent the wheel with each intervention. But records can

1 Michelle Caswell, Thuy Vo Dang and Tonia Sutherland, 'Community Archives Lab', Community Archives Lab UCLA. Uplifting liberatory memory work, n.d., <https://communityarchiveslab.ucla.edu/>

2 Michelle Caswell, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*, London-New York: Routledge, 2021.

only do this if they have been preserved, described, and made accessible. Rebecka Taves Sheffield's important distinction between record making and record keeping, cited by Ann-Katrine Schmidt Nielsen in chapter five of this volume, is key here.<sup>3</sup> Activists *make* records, but those records must be actively stewarded if they are to constitute archives. Archives (always with an 's' from an archival studies perspective) are collections of records, preserved and described, rather than metaphors (as they are often characterized in the humanities). The tension between these two perspectives on archive(s) surface here, as authors work through the very material concerns of how to preserve *stuff* over time. It is abundantly clear on these pages that digital records are simply material *stuff* in different form, requiring material infrastructure with its own practical and ethical challenges.

As in all discussions from critical archival studies, power forms the backdrop through which we interpret these cases and their attendant challenges. Who has the power to create records? Who has the power to preserve them? What resources (financial and temporal) are required to care for them? What forms of expertise? And who gets to access them and why? And conversely, who *cannot* access them and why? The authors in this edited volume show how marginalized subjects can reclaim their power through record creation and, to a lesser extent, through archival interventions that steward these records, once created, across space and time.

Intimately tied to power, precarity surfaces as a looming threat across several chapters in this volume. First and foremost, the people whose activism is documented are driven by a sense of the precarity of their own lives due to oppression and marginalization. The continual state of precarity brought about by late-stage capitalism, white supremacy, hetero-patriarchy, and ableism propels these archival interventions. Yet, from a critical archival studies perspective, crucial questions remain: How can we ensure that records documenting activism do not further jeopardize already-precarious record creators and record subjects by exposing them to additional state surveillance and its attendant regimes of policing, incarceration, and violence? How can we ensure that we are not placing these records in corporate-owned content silos that monetize records of suffering, rendering them commodities that will only be preserved for as long as they generate revenue? How can we ensure that we are not placing digital records as data in servers that soak up fossil fuels, contributing to the climate crisis? In other words, how can we build our own autonomous archival infrastructures that simultaneously allow for both representation and refusal? For answers to these questions, we should turn away from the dominant practices and politics of academic and government repositories and towards the possibilities presented by marginalized identity-based community archives, which have been balancing visibility with protection since time immemorial. These independent grassroots memory organizations make plain that the right to be remembered and the right to be forgotten are two sides of the same coin, both hinging on the right to make autonomous archival decisions. Practices developed by minoritized identity-based community archives remind us that the impulse to be remembered is dangerous and risky for many.

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3 Rebecka Taves Sheffield, 'Facebook Live as a Recordmaking Technology', *Archivaria* 85 (2018): 96–120.

From the vantage of critical archival studies, it naturally follows that a precarious record creator produces a precarious record. The very affordances of born-digital technologies amplify the precarity of the records they engender; as more people have the means to create records and share them on social media, fewer have the means or expertise to steward those records over time. Records decay by default. It takes active intervention to preserve them over time. Social media platforms purposefully obfuscate these facts, leading users to conflate immediate access and audience with long-term stewardship. The essays in this volume show that this work of stewardship takes many different forms, some carried out by professionally trained archivists, and some, notably, not. In fact, many of the essays in this volume challenge dominant Western professional archival practices that are themselves rooted in oppressive systems.

Dominant Western archival practice focuses on the meticulous details of how best to preserve records rather than catalyzing their activation. Professional archivists in the dominant tradition, now waking up to the worlds of record making and record keeping outside of bureaucracies, are asking, 'We have stewarded these records, now what? How do we activate them?' The authors in this volume flip this dilemma, instead asking: 'We have created and activated the records, now how do we steward them?' It is in a meeting in the middle, the coming together of activists and archivists and the blurring of the lines between the two roles, that liberatory memory work can be forged.

In the face of precarity, care surfaces as a potent antidote. For example, the careful ways that Eline Pollaert and Paul Van Trigt describe the affordances of born-digital records documenting Dutch disability rights activism (chapter seven) demonstrate a deep commitment to including *all* community members both in the historic record and in activist interventions. Likewise, the ways that Daniel Villar-Onrubia describes the conceptualization of an archives honoring the legacy of artist-activist Miguel Benloch (chapter six) shows how emotions like grief can motivate archival creation and reuse. Care—for those who came before but also those who will come in the future—is also at the heart of Rosemary Grennan's work crafting the MayDay Rooms (chapter three) for activist use. These collections of records catalyze relationships of care between creators, archivists, users, communities. They remind us that care hinges on accountability—we are accountable to those people in our care. In the face of state failure, relationships of mutual care between people and communities are what is left. In the end, as always, it is not about the stuff (however much technical challenge the stuff poses), but the people.

The records and archival practices described herein are, in the words of Kera Lovell in this volume 'not reflections but recipes'. They help us imagine the necessary steps to forge liberatory memory work. But like all good cooks, we must tweak the recipe to reflect our own influences, ingredients and equipment. Here is where this book ends, and your work as readers begins.

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