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To cite this article: Stuart Hall (2001) Constituting an archive, Third Text, 15:54, 89-92, DOI: [10.1080/09528820108576903](https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820108576903)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820108576903>



Published online: 19 Jun 2008.



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*To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it 'the way it really was'.
It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger...*

Walter Benjamin

No archive arises out of thin air. Each archive has a 'pre-history', in the sense of prior conditions of existence. We need to pay particular tribute to all those who have been involved over the years, often in very informal, personally taxing and under-funded ways, to secure in one place slides of the works, catalogues, exhibition notices, reviews and other texts relating to the artistic production of the black and Asian diaspora, without whom this moment of archival retrieval would not exist. Above all, we must acknowledge the role which Eddie Chambers has played in that long history, since without his patience and fierce commitment, against all odds, over several decades, no African and Asian Visual Artists' Archive would now exist.

Constituting an archive represents a significant moment, on which we need to reflect with care. It occurs at that moment when a relatively random collection of works, whose movement appears simply to be propelled from one creative production to the next, is at the point of becoming something more ordered and considered: an object of reflection and debate. The moment of the archive represents the end of a certain kind of creative innocence, and the beginning of a new stage of self-consciousness, of self-reflexivity in an artistic movement. Here the whole apparatus of 'a history' – periods, key figures and works, tendencies, shifts, breaks, ruptures – slips silently into place. It was an especially bold move to bring together at that point a number of key figures, who had both contributed to the body of work and were willing to help secure, nourish, extend and contest the terms of its 'archiving'; for this helped to underline the intention that this should be, not an inert museum of dead works, but a 'living archive', whose construction must be seen as an

on-going, never-completed project. Here, the task begins of bringing to the surface for critical attention what has existed, hitherto, only 'in solution' – as it were, within the flow of the work itself. 'The Living Archive' conference is thus both a kind of ending for one phase of work, and a kind of beginning for another. It was planned as one of a series of events – a continuous sort of 'event' – designed to identify certain key questions and issues which will help us to identify what this archive can be said to represent and how we are to begin to think of and debate the post-war moment out of which it emerged, in a more concerted way.

In the idea of a 'living archive of the diaspora' all three terms need to be considered for the hidden implications they carry. 'Living' means present, on-going, continuing, unfinished, open-ended. The new work which will come to constitute significant additions to the archive will not be the same as that which was produced earlier, but it will be related to that body of work, if only in terms of how it inflects or departs from it. This notion of 'living' is strongly counter-posed to the common meaning accorded to 'tradition', which is seen to function like the prison-house of the past. As the Jamaican critic and anthropologist, David Scott, reminds us: 'a tradition... is a special sort of discursive concept in the sense that it performs a distinctive labour; it seeks to connect, authoritatively, within the structure of its narrative, a relation among past, community and identity. A tradition therefore, is never neutral with respect to the values it embodies. Rather, [it] operates in and through the stakes it constructs.' Scott adds that everything hangs on 'an embodied argument within – and especially between – the generations over... the meaning in the present of our past... Everything hangs on that moment when a new

reading of this signifier offers a doubt and a disagreement about those readings that have gone before, offers a respectful if agonistic challenge, and offers another interpretation. It is this ongoing dispute that is the stuff of a discursive tradition.¹

'Diaspora' is equally complex in its field of reference: and since, like so many similar terms, it is operating 'under erasure', it too cannot be deployed without a certain deconstructive operation being performed. Of course, 'diaspora' recognises the specific place and subject matter involved, but it must also acknowledge the peculiar status of an archive situated, as C L R James once put it, 'in but not of Europe': located in that disjunctive, unsettled space between metropolis and periphery, 'coloniser' and 'colonised'. The closed conception of diaspora rests on a binary conception of difference and identity. It stands in the relation of 'copy' to that 'original' culture from which it is endlessly doomed to be separated. 'It is founded on the construction of an exclusionary frontier and depends on the construction of an "Other" and a fixed opposition between inside and outside. But the syncretised configurations of [diasporas] require Derrida's notion of *différance* – differences that do not work through binaries, veiled boundaries that do not finally separate but double up as *places de passage*, and meanings that are positional and relational, always on the slide along a spectrum without end of beginning. Difference... is essential to meaning. But in a profoundly counter-intuitive move, [post-Saussurean] linguistics insists that meaning cannot be finally fixed. There is always the inevitable slippage in the open semiosis of culture, as that which seems fixed continues to be dialogically re-appropriated. The fantasy of a final meaning remains haunted by "lack" or "excess" but is never graspable in the plenitude of its presence to itself.² How much more true is this of the visual signifier, whose numinous reverberations are broad and deep, but whose power of reference is less precise than the linguistic sign.

Of course, 'diasporic' does not prescribe the form of the work. Many different styles can shelter beneath the canopy of the diasporic. The modernisms of the inter-war and immediate post-war years, the documentary impulse, the politicised signifier of the Black Art Movement, the highly constructed image of the 80s and after

– all share in their different ways in the diasporic attitude. What I mean by 'diasporic' is perhaps most succinctly captured by Kobena Mercer in his essay on 'Diaspora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination'.³ He remarks that 'Across a whole range of cultural forms, there is a "syncretic" dynamic which critically appropriates elements from the master code of the dominant culture and "creolises" them, dis-articulating given signs and re-articulating their symbolic meaning otherwise.' He describes this diasporic attitude in terms of an 'interruption', which 'seeks not to impose a language of its own... but to, enter critically into existing configurations to re-open the closed structures into which they have ossified'.⁴

Then there is 'archive'. Foucault, who uses 'archive' in a distinctive way, makes a distinction between the 'language' in which artists practice – its *langue* – and what he calls 'the corpus', which he defines as the relatively inert body of works which happen to be produced and survived. The 'archive' he thinks of as something which is between the two. An 'archive' does have something specific in terms of its boundaries – though what has been said about location and 'diaspora' means that what constitutes its boundaries in any specific case is not a natural 'given' but remains to be critically specified. It is neither unified as a single collection from a single source, nor so amorphous as an inert corpus of work. An archive is a discursive formation; however, since the materials of an archive consist of a heterogeneity of topics and texts, of subjects and themes, what governs it as a 'formation' is not easy to define. The temptation would be to group together only those things which seemed to be 'the same'. And Foucault does succumb for a moment to the idea of, perhaps, some unity of 'style' – 'a certain constant manner of statement'.⁵ But he quickly rejects it. The fields he examined were not tightly-packed, continuous fields, but instead, 'a series full of gaps, intertwined with one another, interplays of differences, distances, substitutions, transformations'. The emphasis there is on how what we might call the field of an archive is marked by rupture, significant breaks, transformations, new and unpredicted departures. The trick seems to be not to try to describe it as if it were the *oeuvre* of a mythical collective subject, but in terms of what sense or regularity we can discover in its very *dispersion*. The critical effort is to discern the regularity in its

heterogeneity – ‘an order in their successive appearances, correlations in their simultaneity, assignable positions in a common space, a reciprocal functioning, linked and hierarchised transformations’.

The application of this perspective of regularity-in-dissemination to a visual archive is hardly begun. But the emphasis on transformations is exemplary. To begin its application here may be one way of avoiding the futile struggle by any one position to hegemonise the whole field in perpetuity.

It is worth remembering how heterogeneous a practice collecting and archiving is. It is partly public, partly private. It includes those inert collections which have emerged, fortuitously, when odd individuals record or purchase works over time – works which may not be exhibited or accessible to anyone who is trying to do an archaeology of a practice. That is the most buried, most inaccessible, most un-recoverable end of the archive. At the other end are the public spaces which have conscious policies of collection and selection, of display and access, where complex, often hidden, criteria of value operate in a closed community of taste and authority beyond the reach of ordinary mortals. The nature of AAVAA’s archive must take its place somewhere along this complicated spectrum.

The activity of archiving touches a range of professional skills and expertises. This includes those who produce the work and those curators who selectively display and situate the work, as well as critics and historians who create the informed climate in which the work is situated and who are involved in discussions and debates which embed the work itself in a network of associative meanings and interpretations. This reminds us of the complex ways in which artistic practice and historical conditions interpenetrate in any archival activity. This is especially the case in relation to work from the Afro-Caribbean and Asian diasporas since, in the absence of any sustained attention or critical dialogue within the dominant institutions of the art world, and given a systematic marginalisation over the years (see, *inter alia* Rasheed Araeen’s *The Other Story*), practitioners themselves have been obliged to act first as curators, and now as archivists. Eddie Chambers, David A Bailey and Rasheed Araeen are three obvious names which, among many others, spring to mind in this context.

This question has been transformed, qualitatively, in recent years by the new technological developments which are transforming the practice of archival collection, in ways which have an impact, not only on what and how much can be preserved, but on how widely it can be disseminated and circulated – on how a wider access to an archive can be instituted. There are brilliant archives which are closed to a wide-ranging critical discourse or to students wishing to familiarise themselves with the productions of former times, and which have, therefore, cut themselves off from the vitality of argument, debate and reinterpretation which make an archive live and change. The question of technology, of access and therefore inevitably of funding are as central to a ‘living archive’ as the aesthetic, artistic and interpretative practices.

Foucault does suggest that an archive is inevitably heterogeneous: but it cannot simply be open-ended. It does not consist of simply opening the flood-gates to any kind of production in any context, without any ordering or internal regularity of principle. He does, however, argue that it is not possible wholly to define an archive from within its rules. Partly because – especially in AAVAA’s case – the very practice of putting the collection together is informed by practitioners who are themselves active participants in defining the archive. They may have contributed to it. They may have collected some of it. They have appreciated and helped to interpret it. They have learned from the work in their own practice: and this new work will, in turn, become candidates for inclusion. An archive of this kind is a continuous production. The archivist cannot bring to it principles from some abstract and disinterested aesthetic out there, from which a template of universal practice can be winnowed out and against which some criteria of inclusion and exclusion can be confidently applied. As David Scott reminded us, a tradition is an embodied discourse, which operates in and through the stakes – the investments – which it creates. Archiving in this context is a practice which both has its limits and its disciplines yet has no definitive sense of origin, boundary or termination.

It is impossible to describe an archive in its totality. The very idea of a ‘living archive’ contradicts this fantasy of completeness. As work is produced, one is, as it were, contributing to and

extending the limits of that to which one is contributing. It cannot be complete because our present practice immediately adds to it, and our new interpretations inflect it differently. An archive may be largely about 'the past' but it is always 're-read' in the light of the present and the future: and in that reprise, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, it always flashes up before us as *a moment of danger*. Thus it is extremely important that archives are committed to inclusiveness, since it is impossible to foretell what future practitioners, critics and historians will want to make of it. The archive has to insist on a certain *heterodoxy*. It cannot afford to become the prisoner of a single 'line', aesthetic principle or style, no matter how powerful and apparently universally valid. To do that is immediately to exclude, to cut out, to cut off the possibility of returning to the archive in the spirit of the genealogist who will map the relation of past configurations as part of 'the history of the present' in radically different, unpredictable ways. Archives are not inert historical collections. They always stand in an active, dialogic, relation to the questions which the present puts to the past; and the present always puts its questions differently from one generation to another. The archive has to be rich, varied and in a sense 'eclectic' enough to bear the weight of different contested interpretations and to allow them to battle out their differences in relation to the different texts and inter-texts which the archive itself makes available.

Consequently, heterogeneity, the multiplicity of discourses, not only of practice but of criticism, history and theory, of personal story, anecdote and biography, are the 'texts' which make the archive live. Of course, as critic, practitioner, artist, historian, it is imperative to drive through the particular line of interpretation which animates one's work. But as *archivist*, it requires a certain withdrawal of investment, a certain disinterestedness, a certain respect for the work itself, for the practice of artists who have worked in contexts and paradigms different from one's own. It requires attention – even, humility – for the real discontinuities and contingency of history, since each archive must produce not only the continuities, the discursive links, between the practices of different artists operating at any one time, but also chart the paradigm shifts, the moments when the pattern or 'period' breaks, when there is rupture, and new paradigms very

different from earlier prescriptions come into place. The most important things an archive can do is to ask or allow us to interrogate those moments of transition, because they are often also the moments of high creativity and we cannot see from our privileged position where those ruptures are most likely to occur or in what direction they are likely to lead. There is a major rupture of this kind in photography, painting and the visual arts, between the 'modernist' and 'difference' protagonists, between the embattled and politicised 70s and early 80s and what followed, or between 'the black arts movement' and the 'cultural politics' of succeeding decades. Perhaps it is time some of these fortified barricades were dismantled or at least lowered and the 'struggle' conducted more profitably 'in the light of the archive'.

'The Living Archive' conference was hosted by the Tate Gallery (we must now say 'Tate Britain', which contains its own bleak ironies); and its success owed much to the hospitality which Tate Britain offered. The Tate, in that sense, related in a supportive way to AAVAA's rebirth in a new form: but it is not churlish to remember that it also belongs to, indeed, was (until recently) *the* jewel in the crown of a British visual archival tradition of its own, which has never been conspicuously hospitable or open to diasporic work. Inevitably, the AAVAA archive must have an interrogatory relation to those dominant lines of continuity that the existing archival institutions put in place and sustain despite repeated challenge. The activity of 'archiving' is thus always a critical one, always a historically located one, always a contestatory one, since archives are in part constituted within the lines of force of cultural power and authority; always one open to the futurity and contingency – the relative autonomy – of artistic practice; always, as we tried to define it earlier, an engagement, *an interruption* in a settled field, which is to enter critically into existing configurations to re-open the closed structures into which they have ossified.

- 1 David Scott, *Refashioning Futures*, Princeton UP, 1999, p 125, 123.
- 2 Stuart Hall, 'Thinking the Diaspora', in *Small Axe*, no 6, September, 1999.
- 3 *Blackframes: Critical Perspectives On Black Independent Cinema*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1988.
- 4 Quoted by Mercer from David Silverman and Brian Torode, *The Material Word*, Routledge, London, 1980.
- 5 *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Tavistock, London, 1972.