



The Holocaust, European Values and Local History



Local Archives in the European Historical and Cultural Mosaic

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Remembrance Culture and the Emancipation of Archivists

Dr. Olga Manojlović Pintar

The “archival fever” that crossed the theoretical and artistic boundaries was intertwined with the gradual and slow, but constant process of the emancipation of the archival professionals as the bearers and holders of social responsibility.

Archival Fever

At the beginning of 2008, the International Center of Photography in New York hosted the late Nigerian curator, art critic and writer Okwui Enwezor’s exhibition “Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art”. Enwezor presented “works of the leading contemporary artists who used archival documents to rethink the meaning of identity, history, memory, and loss.” The exhibition presented “physical archives arranged by peculiar cataloguing methods, imagined biographies of fictitious persons, collections of found and anonymous photographs, film versions of photographic albums, and photomontages composed of historical photographs.”¹

By 2008, when it was opened, the archive phenomenon had already been in the center of public discussions for some time. Art historian Hal Foster even defined the term archival art “as a genre that make[s] historical information, which were often lost or displaced, physically present.”² The attempt to provide proofs from the past, to

strengthen the argument, and to highlight once hidden truths, and question existing truths, represented the reasons for the archival search which produced new forms of documentary art, photography and theatre and the renaissance of docuseries and films.³

However, Okwui Enwezor’s exhibition stands out from other artistic projects which employed archival documents, because it directly borrowed its (cynical) title from Jacques Derrida’s book “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression” published thirteen years earlier. Enwezor was obviously provoked by Derrida’s understanding of the archival paradox based on Freud’s pondering of the archive-law-power relations. Derrida questioned the archive as a concept, which could not avoid its peculiar crux of being an institution that stores documents related to various institutions and individuals, organizes them in accordance to the principle of provenance, but at the same time “buries” them while constructing completely new power relations in the society. Once accumulated and saved, information is simultaneously hidden among reams of other sources. This interpretation provoked numerous questions, such as: who is defining the scope

1 Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art (www.icp.org) available at: <https://bit.ly/3g7rrWw> (last access, 22. January 2021)

2 Cited from the Artspace editors, How the Art World Art Caught Archive Fever (www.artspace.com) available at: <https://bit.ly/3iSQsGD>

3 “Whether this happens in the form of projects dealing with real archival material or artworks in which artists use the archive as a theme (sometimes even inventing material), the idea of the archive continues to be an undeniable force and organizing structure in exhibitions today. Here we break down the basics of this complicated yet intensely contemporary genre, which easily elides from the hyper-researched to the totally surreal.”

of the documents' availability? Who are their guardians? To what extent does the one who defines the degree of public access, control the (power) relations in society?

Both philosophical doubts and the artistic reflections regarding the archives, represented the reactions to the raised interest in history, to the pluralization of different historical approaches and the occurrence of the endless number of the practitioners and researchers of the past. The multiplicity of perspectives nuanced the image of the past, "dethroned" the canonized official interpretations and the dogmatic ideological postulates. Furthermore, the "archival fever" represented a search for the reevaluation of the belief in the power of argument, fact, and the material evidence of the truth as the basic humanistic ideal.

Emancipation of the archivist

The transformed position of the archival professionals in the public space speaks loudly about this change. For decades engaged in safeguarding the archive as a state shrine and sanctuary, archivists were perceived by theorists, artists, academicians and the wider public, but much more importantly, self-perceived, as the custodians of the humanistic ideal of truth and valuable agents in its revealing process.

The crucial reasons for this shift were the global change of contemporary history and memory politics and the constitution of the new humanistic discipline defined as Remembrance, or Memory Culture. It was based on the interdisciplinary methodology which opened new perspectives on the past and accepted new researchers. Most importantly, the change was induced by the specific topics which were in the center of the public interest. The Holocaust, Samudaripen, and genocide, as well as the post-socialist revision of history in the former "Eastern Europe", were questioned from various disciplinary perspectives, which were all interconnected by the need for a new type of



archival research capable of providing answers to the newly raised questions.

The events, phenomena and the individuals from the past, got much clearer contours when new generations of researchers illuminated them from the local archives' perspective. The documents buried in the files, folders and funds of the numerous local archives, forgotten for decades, represented a priceless treasure for historians and other researchers of the past. They were, finally, able to present the untold stories of the Holocaust victims and to personalize them, to uncover the forgotten individuals who, as perpetrators, took part in the crimes, or who, being bystanders of the crimes, silenced the memory of the past events after the end of the wars. The documents from the local archives provided a powerful weapon in the battles against historical falsification and revisionism.

Specific documents, necessary for this kind of research, became accessible to the wider public only through the mediation and with the help of the local archival workers. The citizens gathered in various types of civil organizations initiated numerous grassroots initiatives with enormous assistance and help from the local archivists all over Europe. The result of their dedicated work was disclosure of the hidden and forgotten documents which highlighted the dynamics of the Holocaust and exposed the whole process of the top-down initiatives reception on the local levels. This joint work was presented in the public field through numerous open-air and indoor

exhibitions, as well as through the network of the valuable archival publications and journals.

The activities of the archivists provide the tools necessary for the successful work of all those dealing with academic, scholarly, public, or applied history and taking the important steps forward, not only in understanding the past, but also in transforming the present we live in.

The "archival fever" that crossed the theoretical and artistic boundaries was intertwined with the gradual and slow, but constant process of the emancipation of the archival professionals as the bearers and holders of social responsibility. The position of the archival workers and records managers as the guardians of the truth and evidence appears to be among the important and intriguing social tasks. They represent a link in a chain of professionals and engaged activists who are in a position to find, critically evaluate, process, and finally to present the materials bearing the undeniable arguments which appear to be crucial in resolving the most delicate issues and controversies.

The archivists' ethics and their willingness to take serious initiatives in the domain of their profession, represent the key for the transformation of the corrupt and numb institutions and societies as a whole. Their "emancipation" is a result of their politically neutral, but value biased norms and activities, which enable the crucial democratization of the society.

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