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The Archival Multitude

Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme
(in conversation with Tom Holert)

Abstract

Previously ascribed the position of meta-archivist in a culture marked by remembrance and retro-vision, the contemporary artist has been relocated arguably by today's radical distribution of archival activity in and by the practices and technologies of social media. This conversation with Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, two young audiovisual practitioners from Palestine, reveals some of the reasons behind this reconfiguration of the archival in its relation to the arts. Reflecting upon the emergence of an 'archival multitude' in North Africa and the Middle East during the past few years, Abbas and Abou-Rahme discuss the necessity of actively assessing the networked archives of the digital realm, thereby entailing significant shifts of their own artistic methodology.

Keywords

Arab Spring • the archival • contemporary art • Palestine • social media

Contemporary art practices have been marked significantly by the impact of an ever-expanding notion of the archival that tends to favour and prioritize modes of operation such as collecting, curating, compiling, editing, ethnographizing, etc. Most of these practices engage in revisionary, often imaginative, sometimes utopian projects. Interrogating existing archives, investigating their infrastructural tasks and (in)accessibility, proposing alternate usages or constructing new (counter-) archives range among the strategies deployed regularly in exhibitions and performances. Hence, the re-contextualizing, re-arranging, re-organizing, re-enacting, re-evaluating or

re-introducing of documents, the archive's content, and the critical reflection on the archive's ontology, the archival, have proven to be cornerstones of artistic practices in different places of the present.

This general tendency becomes probably even more palpable in the face of a digital culture of search engines and social media whose architecture is imminently structured by archival logics (and the increasingly personalized 'algorithms' of data storage and retrieval). As Jacques Derrida (1995: 17) put it in his 1995 essay 'Archive fever', 'the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future', hence 'archivization produces as much as it records the event'.

Event and archive thus cannot be separated but have to be interrelationally positioned (Roberts, 2009: 296), something that is particularly evident in the current age of new archival monopolies such as Google, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, or Tumblr which, in contradistinction to traditional archives, seem to operate less in a gate-keeping, exclusionary fashion, but exert the 'archival violence' on which Derrida has so much to say, through archiving itself as a default mode. The effects of such always already archived eventfulness on concepts and experiences of the self and subjecthood cannot be underestimated. As one anonymous blogger put it in somewhat broken English: 'Facebook as an archive ... stifles privacy, transports socializing into space from place and time, and changes our notions about conception of the self and others and the relationships between' (The Cunning Linguists, 2012).

While social media conglomerates such as Facebook, the rapidly growing archives undergirding the Google empire or, on the other side of the spectrum, the sharing and pirating practices of peer-to-peer networks are regularly being described in terms of expansion and growth of available information, the pay-walls and other access-blocking devices, often deployed by the internet giants themselves that prevent the public from using large areas of cultural goods (texts, images, music, etc.) appear to be scandalously directed against the communal ethics and politics of sharing. Aaron Swartz's (2008) 'Guerilla Open Access Manifesto', his subsequent massive downloading of the JSTOR digital repository of scholarly journals and books in 2010 and 2011, and his suicide in January 2013 (caused, arguably, by his indictment and prosecution) are the most visible and tragic response to the gatekeeping and commercialization of data and knowledge. 'We need to take information, wherever it is stored, make our copies and share them with the world', Swartz wrote in 2008.

We need to take stuff that's out of copyright and add it to the archive.
 We need to buy secret databases and put them on the Web. We need to
 download scientific journals and upload them to file sharing networks.
 We need to fight for Guerilla Open Access.

Keenly aware of (and concerned by) the realities of an environment saturated by massively distributed and controlled archives, yet at the same time speculating on and with the utopian powers of the instant networked archival activity of social media and mobile phones, two young Palestinian artists, Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, have directed their practice towards an intense reflection on the archival as mode of operation. The events of the Arab uprisings since 2011 in particular have informed Abbas and Abou-Rahme's latest project-in-process *Future Archivist(s)*, turning it into a meditation on the shifting scene of the 'archival impulse' (Foster, 2004) where the assumed role of the artist as archivist 'in the indeterminate zone between event and image, document and monument' (Enwezor, 2008: 47) needs to be reassessed. The following email exchange took place in February and March 2013 and marks the beginning of upcoming collaborations on the questions it raised.

Tom Holert (TH): The *Future Archivist(s)* project that you are planning to realize in cooperation with Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary (TBA21) in Vienna seems to reflect on and address a significant recomposition of the field of political activism, media practices, socio-technical infrastructures and contemporary art. You're claiming that the distributed, expanded archive of the social media sites is haunted by the absence of a central archivist, whose very absence is compensated for (and overcome) by a becoming-archivist of everyone. To start our conversation I'd be interested to know where you would posit yourself or, more generally speaking, the profession of the contemporary (audiovisual) artist in this situation of an alleged omnipresence of archival activity?

Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme (BA/RA-R): Somehow that is a difficult question, as our position and relation toward the archive has gone through several transformations across the last 10 years. Aaron Swartz's call, like the calls of so many others, has had a deep impact on us realizing that the fight for access to knowledge and information is one of the critical struggles within global capitalism today and that the internet has emerged as a site for this struggle between control and resistance. These realizations turned our gaze toward the online users and activists who were involved in all forms of creative resistance against the logic of capitalism. This was the impetus for our latest project, provisionally titled *Future Archivist(s)*. Perhaps *Future Archivist(s)* is one way in which we are trying to re-think our practice and re-situate ourselves in relation to the omnipresence of archival activity in the internet age.

TH: Maybe you could render a little bit the geopolitical and aesthetic background of the project? What is your basic approach to image-making and the visual, to what extent is it located in a particular political and cultural environment, and how does it connect to your interest in the archival activity you mention?

BA/RA-R: Formally, as audiovisual artists engaged with the idea of malleability and the methodologies of 'sampling', we have always been



Figure 1 Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *Lost Objects of Desire* (2010). © Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme.



Figure 2 Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *Lost Objects of Desire* (2010) installation view as exhibited at S:in/festival of Video Art and Performance, Ramallah. © Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme.

interested in material on the fringe; poor images, mutated copies and re-inscriptions. In the beginning of our collaborative work, over six years ago now, we found ourselves unable to produce new images. Faced with so many representations of Palestine from the media and artists engaged in the ‘Palestine Industry’ we felt that the images coming out of Palestine began to stagnate, to deactivate rather than activate. We also rejected the ghettoization and the constructed singularity of the Palestinian issue. For us the unbearable living conditions in Palestine were always to be seen in relation to precarious living conditions all over the world. That is largely why we chose to work with a wide repertoire of existing material – from found footage, films, ‘archival videos’, music samples – and we sourced this material from different places and periods. In several installations such as *Lost Objects of Desire* (2010) (Figures 1 and 2), and in our performance group Tashweesh, our intention was to make these seemingly disconnected images speak for the absence of images and the present moment. In many ways we have tried to develop a sonic and visual language that makes the connection between different times, spaces and imaginaries visible.

TH: The short video welcoming the visitor on the Tashweesh website, a mash-up ‘take’ on the format of the music video clip introducing your collaboration with MC and composer Boikutt, was made (in 2010) from footage of black and white feature films and documentaries showing images of a secular Arab world of leisure and entertainment presumably of the 1950s

or 1960s, playfully cut onto Boikutt and Basel Abbas' music. The clip and Tashweesh's subsequent live sets (Figure 3)¹ display an archival sensibility that appears to activate quite different, even contradictory emotions and affects, ranging from a slight nostalgic melancholia to a certain joyful fierceness in the capturing and recontextualizing of the material.

BA/RA-R: Increasingly in the last few years we have been engaged with archives to the extent that they can be a way for us to read the potential of the moment, to navigate the unsettling sense of being simultaneously in the midst of not-yet-material and the already determined; a temporal tension between what seems 'permanent' – a repetition of capitalist-colonial present – and what could be 'impermanent' both believing and dis-believing in the *present* possibility of a future of our own making, though not in a retrograde sense but as a way of finding a new imaginary and language. Faced with the onslaught of the neo-liberal regime in Palestine, the violent transformation of the Palestinian liberation movement into a technocratic security apparatus pre any sort of actual liberation and in the midst of an intensifying colonial expansion, the archive has been one means by which we have been looking at the current crisis of the imaginary and the production of new subjectivities, most specifically in our work *The Zone* (2011).

TH: Please elaborate on the particularities of this archive of the Palestinian situation and the position you were trying to inhabit with *The Zone*, reading, regarding and entering the archive.



Figure 3 Tashweesh live at 'The Cave', Beirut (2011). © Photo by Tanya Traboulsi.

BA/RA-R: By relooking at the visual archive of the PLO (Palestinian Liberation Organization), mostly posters, pamphlets and murals against the current visual archive being produced, advertisements, campaigns and new commercial and housing developments, we were able to chart the birth of new political discourses/desires. We began to critically read the emergence of a consumerist regime out of the debris of an aborted Palestinian struggle seemingly 'beyond' but always brushing up against the occupation, the dystopian outer limit of this newly emerged neo-liberal 'dreamworld'. Presented at the beginning of 2011, this was the first project where we recorded our own images, with a sudden urgency to do so. During this period we became aware that we were in the midst of a new potential not just politically but in our own work. Our act of documentation and then critical 'destabilization' of the material, rendering the everyday visual language of this new regime strange, had in that moment gained a degree of political and aesthetic potency (Figures 4 and 5). The need for a subjective, critical archive of the now, this moment as it unfolds as a defiant gesture, became evident for us and put us in a direct confrontation with the neo-liberal project in the West Bank. This was a period marked by the increasing repression of the Palestinian Authority and the ensuing silence of previously critical voices. Our intention was to create an archive of the moment to challenge the 'archive' being produced by the Palestinian Authority. By the time we finished the first part of the work (the project is still ongoing) the revolts had taken place in Tunisia and Egypt.



Figure 4 Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *The Zone* (2011). © Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme.



Figure 5 Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *The Zone* (2011) installation view as exhibited at New Art Exchange, Nottingham.
© Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme.

TH: How did the media practices of the Arab uprisings inform your notion of the archive and ultimately your own archival practice?

BA/RA-R: Critically for us, a fundamental change in our understanding of the archive solidified when the revolutions began to take place in the Arab world. We experienced and engaged with these movements through the real time material that was being uploaded on such sites as YouTube and Twitter. Living in Palestine,² a place that culturally and geographically is close to the Arab world but, subjected to a colonial regime, is cut off from it and the rest of the world for that matter. The sudden ability to be connected at any moment to a continual stream coming from people involved in the revolution was phenomenal. Through streams and live feeds of people's textual and visual accounts, the distance between here and there was suspended for that period. We woke and slept in Tunisia and then Egypt. This was an electric moment for us. Suddenly the potential of the people to subvert the representations of the state was palpable. We came face to face with a living archive, and it felt precisely as just that when the people in Tahrira³ were bearing witness in real time and uploading their testimonials onto servers to be simultaneously heard, read, watched and experienced by us –there was no mediator between us and them apart from the platforms where the material appeared unfiltered.

TH: The notion of 'living archive' seems crucial here. The concept is currently travelling the art world circuit, ripe with sympathetic resonances with Marx's concept of 'living labour'. But how does an archive attain the kind of vividness or vitality that turns it into something 'living'? What are the biopolitical implications of this discourse of the 'living archive' and what might be problematic about them?

BA/RA-R: What makes an archive 'living' is an important question, because what we are interested in is the possibility of not only questioning the archive but perhaps more importantly transforming it. The archive has for the longest time been central to how power is both productive and repressive of life itself. An archive that is only written through and by power is a closed, static, even a dead archive. For the last 30 years or more, artists (and writers before them) have been engaged in reactivating and questioning the archive; much of our own work involves a process of reactivating forgotten, insignificant material, fragments and traces in order to speak about the here and now. Ultimately these gestures are not enough to create a living archive (perhaps they lay the foundation). For us the vitality that turns the archive into something living is fundamentally connected to a moment of political becoming, when the individual through a subjective gesture or act becomes part of a common moment and articulates the potential of the multitude. Here the very act of producing and sharing subjective, horizontal archives is precisely about the instance on and the fight for a living common archive, from the ground up. These subjective archives, as expression of the new archival multitude and as (part of) common archives have a liberatory potential, they are full of a creative vitality that expresses the desire for an outside of the hegemony of power.

For us the most illuminating moment of this was during the revolutions in the Arab world, although it is significant to note that this liberatory potential is articulated in multiple ways and moments and not just in the moment of revolt (this being the more obvious). Its first expression is in the very possibility of creating horizontal archives. When experiencing the 2011 revolution we saw how every minute people were recording the event and producing a politically radical and unofficial archive of the moment. The archival activity of this insurgency was an integral part of people reclaiming the right to speak, assuming agency over their political lives and future. Amazingly the regime, while narrating the event and producing the archive, had been challenged in the very moment of its production and on a mass scale.

TH: The counter archive of the insurgents may also be seen as a utopian archive of non-expert archivists, as part of a vast project of de-skilled (and de-skilling) archival and documentary work that happens everywhere, thanks to the digital infrastructures of the contemporary mode of production. The largely 'immaterial' labour of capturing sounds and images of the street and placing and sharing them on commercial internet platforms is displacing political action increasingly into the realm of content provision and actualized archiving. Where does the artist or cultural practitioner figure here?

BA/RA-R: As we started to work on the *Future Archivist(s)* project we found ourselves in a radical contradiction. While the intersection between the digital and the virtual opens the possibilities of new democratized forms of bearing witness and spontaneously constituted archives, the excess of information, perpetually being replaced by newer information, produces an amnesia, an incomprehensibility where everything is in danger of being doomed to be lost and forgotten in the black hole of the web. At moments this excess results in a total overflow of online streams rendering them no longer decipherable, as in the case of Twitter where at certain points during the revolution the amount of tweets using a specific hashtag (i.e #Tahrir, #Jan25, #Tunis) produced such an accelerated speed in the stream that made it impossible to read any of the tweets. Online material is constantly shifting in a stream; the trace is unstable and sometimes lost. Even when you can relocate the material, for example in the case of YouTube, it often may have been taken down by the user (especially if it is politically subversive), or, when it is found to 'infringe copyright', taken down by the site. We started to amass another collection, but we began to see it as problematic. Were we not at risk of reproducing the very same problems of traditionally constituted archives? Due to our position as artists we were building a selective collection of this proliferated archive and somehow failed to see that at the heart of these archives were the new archivists. What excited us was how this becoming-an-archivist of anyone challenged the hierarchical archive. (Of course that is not to say that we are not very much engaged in the battle over the internet, and aware of the other aspects of the virtual as a site of surveillance and profiling.) We realized that our reflexive impulse *to archive this archive* was one of the means by which people were already trying to navigate the expansions of the archive into our daily experiences. This became a turning point for us. Suddenly the artist as an archivist did not seem as significant. In fact it had never been more evident to us that everyone was an archivist. That's when we became interested more in the archivists than in the archive, in the sense that we feel that the possibility for everyone to be an archivist is actively reshaping the archives to come. It is also as you mentioned profoundly reshaping concepts of the self. We want to critically reflect on how these transformations, where people find themselves archiving everything from the seminal to the mundane as an event, inform new ways of being. Maybe then for us as artists it is most important to reflect and think through the implications of this omnipresence of archival activity itself. The question is how will these new forms of the archive continue to reshape the 'archivable'? How is our very sense of self, our imaginary impacted and intrinsically connected to this archival activity?

TH: Clearly, the relationship to the archive as a trope within contemporary art's practices has changed (or moved) since the heyday of post-structuralist critiques of the archive as power *archi*-tecture and the discovery of the archival as a particularly artistic mode of operation of contesting the exclusionary and hegemonic functions of archives. From what you're saying about the shift of your own interests away from the archive and the figure

of the artist-as-archivist to the net-based ubiquitous archivists and the 'new forms' of archiving they engender (which should be put in relation to new life-forms and a global reconfiguration of subjectivity), I glean a certain concern about the very 'omnipresence of archival activity', but likewise a sort of enthusiasm in the face of the increased dissemination and immanence of the archival. What is it that seems to make you worry, and where do you expect or hope the archival multitude to go? Could you exemplify your notion of 'new forms for the archive'? And how such new forms shape the political and cultural imaginaries in the Arab world?

BA/RA-R: What worries us most is the possibility that the radical potential of the moment will be lost, in the sense that our initial interest in the surge of archival activity online is directly connected to the surge in people's political activity on the ground. For us the potential for archival activity, or the 'archival multitude' to produce subversive discourses, in terms of both content and form, is only one current that is shaping the field of possibilities for the archives to come. Another current is in many ways connected to the logic of contemporary capital, the speed of the feed as we have mentioned creates an incomprehensible overflow at points. Significantly it re-produces contemporary capitalism's obsession with the 'now', the immediate, producing a vast amount of material only to render it obsolete the very next moment in a continuous stream of information. As you indicated, many of the platforms or social media sites that open the possibility for anyone and everyone to publicly bear witness to their lives are now owned by or have ballooned into mega companies. We can clearly see how in an information economy these archival activities, the radical potential of these forms are instrumentalized by capital. Maybe we should give a clearer sense of what we mean by these new forms. They are not just a matter of 'poor images' (see Steyerl, 2009), i.e. images that are small in size, malleable and able to travel quickly such as a lo-fi video that by the time it reaches you has been uploaded, downloaded and re-uploaded several times. They are also comments on and re-contextualizations of these videos through other video responses, through the stream of tweets, re-tweets, memes, not to mention the endless blog sites. An event on the ground, once it is documented, uploaded and shared online is able to trigger a series of ephemeral streams of responses and articulations through these various different forms. Consider a recent hash tag we came across on twitter: #LoveInTimeOfApartheid was connected to a staged protest, a performance of a mock wedding highlighting that Palestinians with West Bank IDs (67' Palestinians) are not able to 'legally' move in the same parts of the territory as Palestinians with Israeli IDs (48' Palestinians). It started with a physical act, a staging of a wedding for a 'couple' with those different IDs at one of the many checkpoints. Inevitably, the action resulted in a physical confrontation with the Israeli military as the protestors from either side of the checkpoint tried to cross over to the other end. While this was happening, people reported from the site, tweeting, uploading pictures and videos, others in turn were re-tweeting, commenting and adding their own interventions either through commenting or taking a photo from the event and adding a certain text

on the photo and then re-uploading it and tweeting it, this then again gets re-tweeted and so forth. What interests us here are the multiple inscriptions, performed by various different individuals, to the archive-in-the-making of that event. In many ways ephemeral political actions of this kind are staged precisely to be reproduced in all these forms. We could even read these forms as informing new kinds of activism.

TH: But don't these new forms of political performativity have to be considered in terms of their entrenchment in digital networks and therefore as subject to all sorts of capture?

BA/RA-R: Of course, the malleability and speed of information are also very much on a par with neo-liberal globalization. What's even more, the very site of open exchange is also a site of surveillance, tracking and profiling. Our lives are documented like never before and turned against us in case of any dissidence. Facebook posts, shares and even 'likes', tweets, videos are used as evidence against political agitators, dissidents and 'security threats'. There is a decisive struggle being waged over the future of these archives: over the future of these very forms. After all the culture and politics of publicly sharing information, texts, images, films, music, the very possibility for people's uses of the digital/virtual to subvert capital's insistence on the production of knowledge as commodity is under persistent threat and pressure. There are intensifying struggles over legislation that is trying to control the flows of information and exchanges between people. By that same logic, anything can be removed, erased not only for infringing copyright but also for simply being dissonant. It is this struggle that will be decisive in shaping what is archivable.

Perhaps much of this clarifies where we hope the archival multitude will go. Ultimately, we are engaged in this struggle. Most of all we are invested in the archival multitude in the sense that it is at times constitutive of a heterogeneous political body that calls for and performs various forms of daily and small resistances. We hope these acts, the likes of which we mentioned earlier with #LoveintheTimeofApartheid, continue to be viable and able to open the possibility for a different political imaginary by discerning, using and fighting to maintain the radical potential of these new forms.

If we return to the Arab world, and to the moment of revolution, it is evident that people's archival activity, their bearing witness to the moment on the ground and the possibility of sharing this testimony *en masse* was a critical means of destabilizing power. Not only were insurgent citizens⁴ shaping the event on the ground, they were at the same moment producing and circulating counter-narratives through images, videos, sound and text. In one video from the period when protesters are leaving Tahrir Square someone tellingly reminds them: 'Don't forget to upload online everything you filmed before you sleep, before you sleep – so we can wake up to a new Egypt without Hosni Mubarak.'⁵ In a highly palpable way this dynamic archive-of-the-moment ruptured the symbolic power of the state, 'the very control of appearances – so central to the state's edifice of symbolic power

in the age of Spectacle – was fatally jeopardized’ (Abou-Rahme and Jayyusi, 2011: 627).

TH: What happened in this moment of the collective re-appropriation of the image of the people? How did the availability of an uncensored and post-spectacular representation of the events change the power relations?

BA/RA-R: The dispersed ‘public’ of the Arab world – at least those not aligned with the regime – experienced in *that* moment through *that* archival activity the electric pulse of people’s will for change: the not-yet-imaginable was becoming the-not-yet-material. Having spent decades under a repressive weight of fear and control (something felt across the Arab world), unable to speak publicly against the abuse of power, there was great difficulty in imagining or projecting the moment of such a regime’s collapse, let alone a collapse brought on by the political actions and insurgency of ordinary citizens. There can be no doubt that the moment where the un-imaginable almost miraculously materialized has profoundly impacted the political and cultural imaginary in the Arab world. Fundamentally, it began to thaw out the crisis of the imaginary that we have felt for a very long time. For our ability to even imagine a different political horizon, a different way of being politically, culturally and socially is what has been at stake for so long. A feeling that we could take hold of our political lives and realize the not-yet-material will towards social justice was palpable even if not entirely sustainable.

TH: The instant archivalization of the major and minor events of the struggle, the protest, the resistance of the newly discovered agents of change in the Arab world (who discovered themselves in action) has different dimensions and is addressed at various publics, as the archive of the moment was used as a tool of mobilization among the insurgent citizens and as a medium of (counter-) information for a local and a global audience following the events on the screens of computers and smartphones. At the same time the activity of constant archivalization and distribution of scenes from the lives of those lingering in a state of exception, between the excitement of suddenly attained political agency and the utter risk of bodily harm or death, doesn’t necessarily close the gap between the non-representational and non-mediated impulse of refusing to obey, emphasized by Nasser Abourahme and May Jayyusi (2011: 627), and the moment of recording, uploading and further dissemination of images, sounds and texts. Or would you contend that the archival operations facilitated by digital media and the internet are not only imminent to the rupture of the symbolic hegemony of the regime but also constitutive of the protest and dissidence themselves, nurturing the people’s will to realize the not-yet-material?

BA/RA-R: Much of what we have discussed expresses a certain excitement and hesitation towards this very question. In many ways, we would argue that yes the archival activity of insurgent citizens is in itself constitutive of protest and dissidence, in so far as it is an ‘act by’ protestors and a ‘performing of’ protest. To explain, the very act of producing dissonant proliferated archives was understood by the insurgent citizens to be a fundamental way of rupturing the spectacle of power, not of simply sharing

information – this is what is critical for us. In that moment it becomes a conscious act of doing, constitutive of a dissident political force in itself. For it is not only that they defy power through splintering the archive. It is equally through the very archival act that this defiance is being performed. Still we tread carefully here, because this archival activity is constitutive of the protest only as one of the iterations of a material, bodily insurgence. But if we keep this interrelatedness in mind, we can simultaneously affirm that this archival activity is one of the articulations of a politically radical imaginary – an expression of the will toward a new political becoming and in that way a concrete gesture toward the not-yet-material.

TH: Since subcultural and subaltern politics have become more and more centered on questions of the conditions of historical and theoretical accounts, the necessity of elaborated and nuanced theories of archive and archiving has been widely acknowledged in the past two decades. For example, the authority of the disinterested archivist has become deconstructed in the field of queer studies and queer activism where ‘the terms by which the archive is constrained’ are interrogated ‘in order to open up possibilities for new modes of archives and archival relations’ (Danbolt, 2009: 34). Judith Halberstam, a leading queer cultural theorist, claims the ‘archive is not only a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity’ (in Danbolt, 2009: 35). Wresting away, de-colonizing and re-distributing archival power thus can result in an empowerment of infringed groups, reframing archivalism as activism (and vice versa; see Danbolt, 2010). I’d be curious to know how you experience and analyze these intersections of archival activity and political/counter/subcultural activism. What would be your definition of a militant archive?

BA/RA-R: We feel the idea of common archives that we have been discussing is a very militant idea in itself. If we see ‘the archive’ as intrinsically connected to regimes of power and its control over the production of truth and knowledge, then the very notion that anyone can be an archivist is incredibly militant. Perhaps what a militant third cinema strived to realize is only coming to fruition now through this radical reconfiguring of the archive (Steyerl, 2009: 7). We would agree that the contemporary moment is defined by the intersection between archivalism and activism since people’s reclamation of power is partially articulated through reclaiming the archive as a site for their own, self-determined testimony to their lives and the lives of others. The politics and power of the record as testimony, whether as image, sound or text, has perhaps never been as publicly grasped or contested. Only a few days ago we watched multiple videos of a physical confrontation between Palestinian residents of Jerusalem and the Israeli military in the Dome of the Rock. Large numbers of the Palestinians protesting were running towards the Israeli soldiers with their smart phones and flip cameras in hand. It was an intrinsic part of the protest. Precisely because archiving in the sense that we have spoken about is not simply an act of *recording* but also an act of *performing*. And for these reasons the intersection between archival activity and political activity has perhaps never been as endowed with the ability to demystify the productive discourse of

power as in the case of Egypt, where the people's archive was producing images of the uprising not outside of but in direct opposition to spectacle. It was through these images that the symbolic order of power was unhinged.

Equally, the archival activism, in making available and accessible knowledge that otherwise is privatized, is a struggle for the very notion of a common archive, for the possibility of different ways of being and relating in disjuncture with the culture of capitalism that captures every aspect of life through the logic of valorization.⁶ For us these are all militant archives in the making to the extent that they are fundamentally connected to the awakening of a dissonant imaginary – particularly when political imaginary has been in crisis for so long. It is evident through all the recent legislation to control and monitor the flows of information and exchange between people (whether under the pretence of security or copyright) that the central nodes of power recognize this only too well.⁷

TH: Reflecting on the eminent role that practices of archiving have played in the work of contemporary artists from the Middle East such as Walid Raad or Akram Zaatari, often through deploying strategies of fictionalization and historical speculation, your turn towards the issue of the archival and the performance of the archivists in times of revolutionary change entails the question: to what extent do these recent archival activisms become the object of an (your) artistic gaze, a gaze that is quite likely informed by such 'parafictional' (Lambert-Beatty, 2009) archivist practices? In what way do the smartphone-carrying activist-archivists from Tahrir Square and elsewhere necessitate a reconfiguration of the 'archival impulse' still beating so strongly within contemporary artistic practices?

BA/RA-R: Our position and practice have been profoundly impacted by the work of contemporary artists that came before us. Without the immense work Walid Raad, Akram Zaatari and others did in questioning the very notion and authenticity of the archive and the 'document' we would not be liberated to engage with archives as we do. Clearly their 'parafictional' archivist practices have informed our interest in the relation between the 'actual' and the 'imagined', the spoken and the unsaid, the visualized and the non-visualized. At the same time we have been influenced by music pioneers who sampled and remixed anything and everything in the world of sound and music, by the early video artists such as Nam June Paik and Dara Birnbaum, and by jockeys who re-activated everything from found footage to infomercials – breathing a second life into otherwise forgotten material and influencing sound and video artists to come. And of course there is the influence of political and experimental filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard and Adam Curtis who in their later work sampled, re-cut and spliced archive material to question the production of discourse and image. The intersections between these various practices led us to where we find ourselves now, turning our gaze toward this new archival multitude, rethinking our position as artists. *Future Archivist(s)* directly reflects on this becoming-archivist of everyone, and its still unfolding affects.



Figure 6 Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *The Incidental Insurgents* (2012), video still. © Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme.



Figure 7 Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme, *The Incidental Insurgents* (2012), installation view as exhibited at Al Maamal Foundation for Contemporary Art, Jerusalem. © Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme.

Our last finished work, *The Incidental Insurgents* (2012), is precisely about the political becoming that expresses our own and the common search for a language of the moment. In it we explore the figure of the bandit, delving into the possibilities and inadequacies of the anarchist, the artist and the rebel as bandit (Figure 6). Culminating in what seems to be an obsessive

search for what we cannot yet see but that we feel is possible – a coming insurrection with a new political imaginary and language. So our looking back does not indicate an archival impulse in the sense of questioning or even reactivating suppressed archives but about tracing the not-yet-material potential of our moment and the one to come. One part of the installation is a heightened version of our own studio (Figure 7), probably our most personal work to date, where through turning the work inside out we express the intersections between the subjective/actual/material and the common/imagined/not-yet-material.

For us the activist–archivists certainly demanded a reconfiguration of our own archival practice, they illuminated something that we had somehow failed to see. We felt strongly that we were in the midst of a new becoming for the archives. The position that the artist as archivist used to occupy is now being taken up by the activist as archivist, and not only the activist but also all the individuals who are amassing and uploading records of their daily life, the mundane and the everyday. Such archival ambitions are everywhere; they are proliferating, and wittingly or unwittingly producing a living archive. The interrogation of the archive that artists and writers had been dedicated to, through counter-narratives and images, is now coming alive through the practices of this new archival multitude. We read the artist as archivist as a precursor for this moment. Now that we have arrived here it has meant a shift in our gaze beyond ourselves as artist–archivists and towards the possibilities of this overwhelming archival activity. That is certainly why we have undertaken this project, *Future Archivist(s)*, and while we are clearly involved in our own inscriptions/readings of and on this archival activity, what is compelling us are the inscriptions of the expanded archivists. Perhaps what we feel now is that we are one small part of this immense archival multitude.

Notes

1. See for instance ‘Live in Beirut’, recorded in ‘The Cave’, Beirut, 5 October 2011 (<https://vimeo.com/30768897>) and ‘Live in Ramallah’, recorded at ‘Beit Aneeseh’, Ramallah, 21 May 2012 (<https://vimeo.com/44609871>).
2. Here we are speaking of the experience of Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza under Israeli military rule and inside Israel ‘proper’, in Jerusalem, Haifa and Nazareth for example, areas that fall under direct Israeli jurisdiction.
3. Tahrir Square in Cairo was the focal point of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution.
4. Such a broad term is used here because the revolution was incredibly decentralized, heterogeneous and at times anonymous, resulting in us not knowing the details of individual users’ political affiliations apart from their insurgence against the current regime.
5. The video is titled ‘Egyptian Revolution: “See you tomorrow!”’ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2Akb1V4oMI>.
6. Clearly, thinking about these aspects, we are indebted to the writings of Antonio Negri, Paolo Virno and other post-operaist thinkers stressing the potential of resistance and insurgency constituted by the role of the ‘general

intellect' and linguistic capabilities play in the formation and existence of post-Fordism and cognitive capitalism.

7. Here we are thinking of the failed SOPA (Stop Online Piracy Act), which attempted to grant copyright holders rights to shutdown entire websites (as opposed to only removing the material that was allegedly infringing copyrights) without even allowing the alleged infringer a right of defence. The act was brought to a halt by a huge mobilization against it, most prominently the SOPA blackout that included sites such as Wikipedia shutting down for a day. Then of course there is its international variation of sorts, ACTA (The Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement), an agreement that was rejected by the European Union, again due to a huge mobilization, but that has been passed by Japan and the United States, who drafted the treaty, along with Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea and Mexico. We have yet to feel the full impact of ACTA, as it is not clear if it will move forward despite the EU rejection. Now there is a new bill in the American Congress CISPA (the Cyber Intelligence Sharing and Protection Act) which if passed would allow companies to look at your private information in order to 'identify' threats, effectively allowing all people's online activities to be used against them without a warrant. Of course already in some court cases in the United States, Facebook 'likes' and posts have been used as evidence, setting a legal precedent. As for parts of the Arab world, apart from the countries that have clear state/monarchy censorship like Saudi Arabia, while there is little by way of legislation, things function in an arbitrary fashion. To give only a few examples: numerous people have been arrested in Palestine over Facebook posts, comments and 'likes' that are deemed to be critical of the Palestinian Authority, and recently two Tunisian rappers were arrested for an anti-police music video posted on YouTube.

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Basel Abbas and **Ruanne Abou-Rahme** work together across a range of sound, text, image, installation and performance practices. Their work explores issues to do with the politics of desire and disaster, spatial politics, subjectivity and the absurdities of contemporary practices of power, often finding themselves investigating spatio-temporal resonances in the relation between the actual, imagined and remembered. Increasingly their practice examines the immersive, experiential possibilities of sound, image and site, taking on the form of interdisciplinary installations and live audio-visual performances. They have exhibited and performed internationally and most recently founded the sound and image performance collective Tashweesh. They are fellows at Akademie der Künste der Welt in Cologne for 2013.

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