ACU ADS Australian Council of University Art & Design Schools

Untitled Actions: Unsettling Archive Space

Clare Rae, Victorian College of the Arts, University of Melbourne

Abstract

This paper presents research produced through a self-initiated residency in the University of Melbourne's Art Collection storage facility. Situated across archive theory, museum studies, feminist and queer phenomenology, and photographic theory, the work traces an embodied engagement with photographic archives that is materially multi-sensorial, unsettling the institutional conditions that govern archival meaning. Drawing on Sekula, Rose, and Foster, I position the archive as anything but passive: a site whose organisation and accumulation exert power over both its contents and the researcher's body. I argue that the dynamic insertion of my body as researcher/artist/antagonist generates a third space beyond archive and photograph; a space scaffolded by the material and architectural borders of the photographic object itself. This third space is produced through phenomenological feminist misbehaviour, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, Ahmed, and Kristeva to theorise embodiment, orientation, and abjection within patriarchal institutional space. By defying archival protocols, moving barefoot, ungloved, sweating against shelving and collection materials, I enact a creative resistance that de-privileges vision as the primary mode of controlling non-male bodies, proposing instead a sensorial relation to the archive as an active participant in the production of new work.

Keywords: Feminism; Phenomenology; Photography; Performance; Archives.

Introduction

This paper presents research produced as part of a self-initiated residency undertaken in the University of Melbourne's Art Collection storage facility, in outer Melbourne. The work in this presentation (including physical artworks, as well as the written critical reflections, and theoretical positioning) is situated in the fields of archive theory, museum studies more broadly, feminist and queer theories of phenomenology, and photographic theory as it applies to materiality. Through the course of this paper I will step through an embodied engagement with photographic archives in particular, proposing a relation with and through the archive that is materially multi sensorial, in order to unsettle and disturb the conditions of the archive, that govern their meaning. Archives, and in this case the art collection and

the institution, co-constitute the meanings we infer on the materials that are held within their architectures. I argue that the through the dynamic insertion of my body as researcher/artist/antagonist a third space is generated beyond the originary two spaces of archive and photograph; a third space that is also photographic and architectural space, the dynamic space of the artwork, scaffolded by the borders and material form of the photograph in multifarious ways.

This third space is produced through phenomenological feminist misbehaviour to unsettle the patriarchal institutional conditions which govern the works and bodies within. The third space is created by taking up space within the archive, literally pushing my body into and onto the facility to occupy a place in the institution.

The Archival Turn

Much has been written on the affect and implications of archives across a range of disciplines. American writer and photographer Allan Sekula's influential analysis identifies the power implicit within the archive's collection and accumulation, and the "hidden connection between knowledge and power" maintained.[1] His analysis asserts that processes of organisation, categorisation, and accumulation themselves have enormous power over the material within the archival domain. Although in Sekula's view the archive acts as a terminus, it must be regarded as anything but passive. Within my research the archive is interpretated in multiple ways: as a collection of artworks that become valued and canonical for future distribution, but also as an authority over the contents of the collection, within which power inequities are apparent.

On the affect of the archive British philosopher and academic Gillian Rose argues that the disciplinary power of the photographic archive has a bodily effect on the researcher, and thus on the outcomes of their research. In her writing on the remarkable collection of photographs by Lady Clementina Hawarden[2] held in the Victoria and Albert Museum London, Rose examines the way meaning is applied through photographs in differing contexts, by examining her own physical experience of studying this collection. As noted by Elizabeth Edwards in relation to this essay, "the material qualities and the practices of the archive mediate both the photograph and the body of the researcher which animates the space of the archive in potentially disruptive ways".[3] Material affect is crucial in this project; in relation to both the archive and the photographs it contains, and subsequent affect on the researcher/artists body, and also in relation to the lens-based works produced for this PhD project.

Many artists have looked to the archive as a source of production, as critic and writer Hal Foster describes in his oft cited 2004 article published in October, *The Archival Impulse*, in

[1] Allan Sekula, "Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital." In *The Photography Reader*, ed. Liz Wells (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003), 447.
[2] Lady Clementina Hawarden was an amateur photographer in the Victorian era documenting domesticity and creating staged portraits of her 10 children from roughly 1857 until her premature death in 1964, aged 42. https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/lady-clementina-hawarden-an-introduction?srsltid=AfmBOooPD06OcyMCmqk8te3QF44HCZMAd-6m84-kt7nWW1PBgxSIhSkD
[3] Elizabeth Edwards, "Photographs: Material Form and the Dynamic Archive" In *Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History*, (Deutscher Kunstverlag 2011), 53.

which he discusses work by Thomas Hirschhorn, Tacita Dean, and Sam Durant. Their archival impulses generate artworks which draw connections across seemingly disconnected things, countries, and histories, which Foster concludes might be a symptom of our failed cultural memory, but on the flipside perhaps it's a "desire to turn belatedness into becomingness, to recoup failed visions in art, literature, philosophy, and everyday life into possible scenarios of alternative kinds of social relations, to transform the no-place of the archive into the no-place of a utopia."[4] While I don't agree that the archive is a no-place, through its pervasiveness, boundlessness and ability to exceed its architecture, institutional, and physical space I concede it is a very hard place to pin down.

The distinction between place and space here is an important one to make, particularly in the context of the artwork under production. Now I would like to briefly discuss the idea of artistic engagements with archival spaces. As noted above in Foster's essay, while many artists have engaged with archival material in the production of their work, there exists an alternative method of engagement with the archive as a site of artistic production, both in terms of performance and art-making. One such aspect of engagement can come through the reinterpretation of performance and visual art documents, as noted by scholars Anne Marsh[5], Amelia Jones[6] and others[7], working with material remains to generate new outcomes. Rather than a process of re-enactment, this method of engagement posits the archive as an active participant in the generation and production of new work. Instead of relating to the archive as a "carrier of meaning", this methodology encounters it in an act of 'doing' rather than as a static repository. In this way the archive becomes a site of, and context for, a performance engagement, and even performs itself through a set of processes, as artists' use strategies to variously queer the archive; to recontextualise art historical narratives; to remake the self by thinking through encounters between contemporary archival technologies

Figure 1: Clare Rae, *Untitled (Archive Stacks)*, Pigment print on adhesive gamut low tac 73.5 x 100 cm.

[4] Foster, H. (2004). An Archival Impulse. *October*, *110*(110), 3–22. https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379847

[5] Marsh, A. (2014). *Performance ritual document*. Macmillan.

[6] Jones, A. (2011). "The Artist is Present": Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence. *TDR : Drama Review*, *55*(1), 16–45. https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00046

[7] Clarke, P., Jones, S., Kaye, N., & Linsley, J. (2018). *Artists in the Archive: Creative and Curatorial Engagements with Documents of Art and Performance*. Taylor & Francis Group. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rmit/detail.action?docID=5425420

and identity, and to explore the possibilities of knowledge production through multi sensorial archival experiences, as I enact in this project.

To return to the concept of the third space as I deploy it in my research, acknowledging reference to author WH Auden.[8]

> One: The archive, as alluded to above, is the space of the institution, produced under patriarchy, its architecture imposing strict rules and regulations on the artist/researcher which governs her body.
>
> Two: Photographic space, which I haven't outlined in this paper comprehensively save for time, informs and foregrounds much of my research. Photographic space has its own materiality, time, conditions and authority which are unpacked further in my PhD thesis.
>
> Three: A third space is revealed through the phenomenological insertion of my feminist body into the archive, unsettling and disrupting the latent meanings of these first two spaces. It is not a space of resolution, but rather of ongoing encounter, a record of a different kind of relation.

The intersection of archival artistic encounters and phenomenology is of relevance here and is articulated in this project through a discussion of phenomenology and spatial theory, which I've interrogated through a feminist critique of normative behaviours in institutional spaces. In my research I've related an understanding of misbehaviour to British Australian writer and scholar Sara Ahmed's concept of the Feminist Killjoy, drawing on a lineage of feminist performance and photographic practices that work in the space of disruption and subversion of patriarchal norms.

Figure 2: Clare Rae, *Untitled Actions (Hair),* 2025, 51 x 61 pigment print.

[8] The inspiration and idea for the third space has come to me via WH Auden, who published a volume of three lectures in 1950 titled *The Enchafed Flood.* Auden describes a third image between the sea and the desert, which he calls the happy island or garden oasis. For Auden this "is the earthly paradise where there is no conflict between natural desire and moral duty." In my reading of this space as it applies to the archive, natural desire is akin to the sensorial exploration of site and architecture, while the moral duty could be viewed as the rules and regulations of the archive.

Phenomenology and the archive

Phenomenologist Maurice Merelau-Ponty (following others) says that our access to the world is not only through the mind, but through the body. Merelau-Ponty recognises the importance of embodiment in how we experience the world. Elizabeth Grosz and Ahmed align Mereleau-Ponty's approach with feminism, suggesting that his challenge of binary polarisations places him in alliance with a feminist viewpoint, alongside his emphasis on lived experience, perception, and his focus on the body-subject. Bodies, as articulated by Ahmed in her influential book *Queer Phenomenology*, are in relationship with structures, spaces and objects. Ahmed takes up Merelau-Ponty's ideas of embodied perception and orients a viewpoint towards objects. In doing so she carefully critiques Austrian-German philosopher Edmund Husserl's interpretation of the object; his famous consideration of the writing table before him. Ahmed rightly points out the domestic work that took place (by women) to keep the table clear, in order for the writing to be done. Husserl uses the word 'yonder' to describe the children in the home, being cared for by others (wives, nannies) so as not to distract him from his work. Ahmed questions his distancing of the children to the background, as he does to other domestic objects in his view. This argument leads to one of perception: who is relegated to the background, and who faces the writing table? Some things have to be turned away from. So, the turn towards objects in phenomenology for Husserl is not all objects, but only some, and perhaps only for certain people.

Husserl determines that apprehending the object as an unfamiliar thing means we can attend to the flow of perception. By inhabiting the familiar, "things" become backgrounds for action. As I sit typing at my desk, the desk is there but not there, I don't even see it. This idea of the background coming to the fore is an interesting one for this project wherein I am utilising objects in ways in which they were not intended.[9] The stage and setting become the subject. Questions arise about the purpose of an object, and that purpose being altered or reinterpreted; What does it mean for archive shelving to hold a body? How does an artwork packing crate respond to skin? What about toes being pushed through wire picture racks? This is a kind of 'reorientation' according to Ahmed, which can lead to a queering of the object.[10]

The sensorial experience of the archive space has implications for the body, but I want to pause for a moment and think of the implications for the objects within the space. As Rose points out, the artist/researcher is subjected to the rules of the archive which often stipulate gloved hands, no eating or drinking, temperature controls, designated seating areas, pencils only. The rules of the archive relegate the researcher to the status of the

[9] In the history of feminist artmaking, the "things" in the background (the domestic objects, children, rituals of home life etc) are regularly brought to the fore as important subjects for scrutiny, and as representations of the lives of women artists. These *things* are just as critical for analysis and observation as the monuments of culture; the architectural phallus, the statue, the sweeping landscape awaiting domination.

[10] Ahmed uses queer in two senses: As a way of describing what is ''oblique'' or ''offline'' and also to describe specific sexual practices. I cannot claim to understand the lived experience of being sexually queer, however the intersections between queer theory and feminist theory have been mutually beneficial. Ahmed, S (2006) *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Duke University Press, https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388074, 161.

monstrous, dirty, and transgressive. Philosopher Julia Kristeva's account of abjection[11] is relevant here and I want to draw a connection to the ways in which women's abjection is frequently positioned; as leaking (blood, milk), exceeding its own boundaries (childbirth), uncontrollable (hysteria), and irrational (hormonal).

Figure 3. Clare Rae, Untitled Actions (Art Collection) 2025, Video still

In the case of my residency within the Art Collection I deliberately (in careful consultation with the collections co-ordinator) defied these rules by dragging my sweaty body across shelving, barefoot through the facility, ungloved, connecting my skin with the material content and infrastructure of the archive. Although moving carefully, I undoubtedly left cellular biological material in that sterile space, intermingling with the photographs, pictures and objects in the collection of the University. Inevitably my cells are now dust, however the point remains; the affect of the body of the artist/researcher on the objects in question, whether they be collection items, facility infrastructure, archival materials, or lifting equipment, must be considered.

By employing a gestural, multi-sensorial performative approach to artmaking, this work simultaneously de-privileges and reveals vision to be the primary mode of control of non-male bodies within a patriarchal system. Through the act of feminist embodied practice within the archive, a creative resistance is enacted.

[11] Kristeva, J., & Roudiez, L. S. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection*. Columbia University Press.

References

Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke University Press, 2006. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822388074.

Ahmed, Sara. *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook: The Radical Potential of Getting in the Way*. First edition. Seal Press, Hachette Book Group, 2023.

Clarke, Paul, Simon Jones, Nick Kaye, and Johanna Linsley. *Artists in the Archive : Creative and Curatorial Engagements with Documents of Art and Performance*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2018. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rmit/detail.action?docID=5425420.

Edwards, Elizabeth. "Photographs: Material Form and the Dynamic Archive." In *Photo Archives and the Photographic Memory of Art History*. Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2011.

Foster, Hal. "The Archive without Museums." *October* (Cambridge, Mass.) 77 (1996): 97.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies : Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Theories of Representation and Difference. Indiana University Press, 1994.

Jones, Amelia. "'The Artist Is Present': Artistic Re-Enactments and the Impossibility of Presence." *The Drama Review* (55 Hayward St., Cambridge, MA 02142-1315, USA) 55, no. 1 (2011): 16–45. https://doi.org/10.1162/DRAM_a_00046.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror : An Essay on Abjection*. 1st ed. European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism. Columbia University Press, 2024. https://doi.org/10.7312/kris21457.

Marsh, Anne. *Performance Ritual Document*. Macmillan, 2014.

Sekula, Allan. "Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital." In *The Photography Reader*. Routledge, 2003.

Sekula, Allan. "The Body and the Archive." *October* 39 (1986): 3–64. JSTOR. https://doi.org/10.2307/778312.

Victoria and Albert Museum. "The Pioneering Photography of Lady Clementina Hawarden." June 17, 2026. https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/lady-clementina-hawarden-an-introduction?srsltid=AfmBOoq2lbPFBzWV2cefdGlNfCjaMPtRWH2jARTMe-By29HM2cltflF4.

Acknowledgments:

This research was supported by the Commonwealth through an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship [DOI: https://doi.org/10.82133/C42F-K220]

Author Biographies:

Clare Rae is an artist, educator and early career researcher whose artwork and research explores the feminist body in architectural space, through a lens-based media practice. Clare has made and exhibited photographic and video work for over 20 years in a variety of institutions, galleries and contexts in Australia and abroad. She recently submitted her PhD