

Conference Report

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VIADUCT 2015 'Archival addresses: photographs, practices, positionalities'

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The Research Centre, Visual Identities in Art and Design (VIAD) in the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture (FADA) at the University of Johannesburg has since its inception convened a number of notable conferences that have invigorated academic debates and stimulated new avenues for research and enquiry. VIADUCT 2015, titled 'Archival addresses: photographs, practices, positionalities' continues in the VIAD trajectory by having presented a platform for significant and substantial explorations of 'the complexities of contemporary archival practices, and how these play out using lens-based and new media technologies' (VIADUCT 2015:1).

With six panels and more than twenty presenters, VIADUCT 2015 provided a platform for a diversity of papers, artist presentations, film screenings and round table discussions that were broadly concerned with:

contemporary possibilities for, and practices of, addressing archives; how these possibilities might impact on how archives are collated, disseminated, accessed and received; and what implications they may have for understanding the functions, meanings and significance of archives in diverse contexts (VIADUCT 2015:1).

Rather than providing a "snapshot" of each panel and thereby running the risk of presenting a condensed and cryptic conference report, I am inspired by the way in which VIADUCT 2015 cultivated a 'dialogic process of exchange' (VIADUCT 2015:3) that encouraged interaction between the various presenters and the conference's participants. As a participant at the conference, I wish to underscore how a selection

of papers intrigued or motivated me to re-evaluate the complex and varied nature of the archive. Thus, this report may be considered to be an account of how the conference's 'dialogic process of exchange' provided an instrumental factor for a personal critical awareness of archival discourses and the identification of a number of questions that can possibly direct future research efforts.

Warren Siebrits's presentation sought to highlight the 'importance and function of collating a paper archive [...] of art invitations, original photographs, exhibition catalogues, ephemera and newspaper clippings' (VIADUCT 2015:24). On the one hand Siebrits's paper reveals that archives are not only state institutions but can also be created by individuals and/or cultural groups who establish a repository of visual and written texts. On the other hand, the presentation made me conscious of a troubling suspicion that the state archives may not contain art records. In this sense, a paper archive of art records may find a home in galleries, art museums, universities and personal archives such as Siebrits's. This revelation may be bluntly obvious to most but does pose a number of significant issues for further enquiry. First, there is no central database that records the paper archives from various sites. Thus, without such a database, a researcher has no real idea of the whereabouts, size and nature of most records pertaining to South African art and artists. Second, do the abovementioned sites even have a policy or mandate to collect a paper archive of art records? If so, how is the mandate realised and are there any limitations in the collection policy?

Paul Weinberg's presentation can be argued to provide a practical and valuable exemplar of collecting and archiving photographs. Weinberg calls for collecting and curating to 'dance' between the 'mainstream photographers and the "forgotten" or "hidden" archives' (VIAD 2015:31). Weinberg's paper may be seen as a call for the researcher and curator to delve into the paper records of art to discover photographs that may have been overlooked by official institutions. For example, Billy Monk's photographs languished in his vacated studio for ten years before coming to the attention of two individuals. Although Monk's entire collection was later purchased by the Iziko South African National Gallery, it remained concealed from the public eye for a period of two decades. Monk's photographs have only recently received a significant degree of public and academic attention (Jamal 2013:64-65).

The presentations by Heidi Grunebaum and Siona O'Connell share an interest with the study of vernacular photographs and memory. Grunebaum makes use of photographs from personal albums for the documentary film, *The village under the forest* (Mark J Kaplan & Heidi Grunebaum 2013). She argues that the photographs offer an account of complicity of non-Israeli Jewish people in the displacement of

Palestinians during the 1980s. The original framing of the photograph being indicative of personal and family memory is transformed to an expression of complicity with an ideological and political bond. Thus, the meaning of the photographs is reconfigured from family memories, of nostalgia and innocence, to totems of political ideals, beliefs and values.

O'Connell examines photographs that do not originate from a state or mainstream archive but from personal collections. A specific focus of her paper pertained to the photographs from personal collections that were taken by the Movie Snaps photographic studio. The studio operated from the 1930s to 1970s in the Cape Town city centre where it photographed people from all walks of life going about their business:

These snapshots show women resplendent in tulle dresses or wearing flared bell-bottoms, sailors boasted their crisp white uniforms while Muslim children celebrated Christmas with their Christian friends. The pictures illustrate moments of ordinary living in extraordinary times. They offer a counterpoint to the now familiar narrative of apartheid's series of carefully composed images of burning tires, mass protests and violence and urge a consideration of the afterlives of apartheid (Movie Snaps 2015).

O'Connell's work can be seen to be intertextually interwoven with Jacob Dlamini's *Native nostalgia* (2009). In this text, Dlamini underscores that township life during apartheid included music, art and games that provide a number of nostalgic reminiscences. Such recollections and memories serve to showcase the complex character of township life beyond the dominant apartheid narrative that consigns them to sites of misery and suffering.

A common concern amongst a number of presentations was the way in which artists, photographers and filmmakers critique and counter archival constructions of subjects and histories. In particular, the presentations engaged with colonial and/or ethnographic images to refigure, reframe, re-appropriate or unsettle histories, archival practices and the construction of identities (VIADUCT 2015:9).

However, it is not just artists and filmmakers who have engaged with colonial and/or ethnographic images. The accessibility of colonial photographic archives to the broader public has initiated the entrance of entrepreneurs who appropriate colonial photographs for their use in fashionable commodities. In her presentation, Annemi Conradie makes explicit reference to the Design Team's 'Cameo range' of fabrics which are:

seen in pillows, handbags and chairs, and has even gone glam on the catwalk, made up into a sumptuous St. Lorient bridal gown. Available in a wide range of colours, the fabric is printed with ornately framed oval portraits of stately and prim women, repurposed from an archive of colonial photographs (Conradie 2013:67).

Conradie's paper may serve as an important benchmark for further investigations into the appropriation of archived images for commercial purposes. The importance thereof will become more pressing owing to the digitisation of archival images and records. To elucidate further, the digitisation of archived images signals the movement of photographs from being an object of socio-cultural meaning to a marketplace commodity. In this new configuration, the aesthetic and formal qualities of the image are seized and recontextualised by leading entrepreneurs and corporations.

While digitisation is most certainly a warranted imperative to make archived collections more accessible, I am curious to review digitisation policies from various institutions to ascertain how they deal with granting permission for the use of the digital image. Are there specific criteria that define how the digital image can be used and in what context? If so, does this mean that the archive is a custodian of the digital image?

A review of digitisation policies may also indicate how archival sites may attempt to counter digital images from being viewed as dematerialised and decontextualised entities. To explore further, can pairing the digital image with information on its original context, creation and circulation be regarded as a significant act to forestall a decontextualised view of the image?

The conference underscored the archive, in its multiple formations, as 'a place of potential, open to new historical frames of references where photographs can interrupt dominant narratives' (Edwards 2001:4). By adopting the tenets of a 'dialogic process of exchange', the conference provided an active space for the engagement and interpretation of archival addresses for both the presenters and audience members. It is certain that the resulting exchanges will contribute to further fascinating and provocative discussions.

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