



## “Archive Fever”: A Metaphor for Curatorial Projects

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*"Archive Fever" is a term/phrase that refers to a disease, or a symptom of a disease, thus leading to the question of what causes the disease or the symptom and what it leads to.*

*The term is also already primarily associated with the work of French philosopher Jacques Derrida. In his 1995 essay titled "Mal d'Archive: Une Impression Freudienne" (translated as "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression").*

*Next comes the series of retakes based on this term that leads to elaboration by Lacan, who was a structural, linguistic Freudian, but in a lot of senses than one, deviant in his processes and his conclusions.*

*In the third scenario comes the role of curation, wherein there are retakes on this reflections made on the basis of the reflections on archive, the name, the implications its shades of valued nuances based on the reflections by the philosopher Jacques Derrida and then the curator Okwui Enwezor, a Nigerian-American curator of fame.*

*The following is a brief take on that processual thought.*

Philosopher Jacques Derrida explores the concept of archives and their relationship to memory, power, authority, and technology. His exploration of archives is philosophical, rather than a straightforward examination of historical records or archiving processes. The term "archive fever" refers to the desire to archive, preserve, and control history, knowledge, and memory, as well as the anxiety and instability that arise from this process. This is expressed in Freud as a game called Fort/ Da.<sup>i</sup>

Freud addressed this game through his three directional pointers: 1. Repetition Compulsion- relates to the mother's absence; 2. Mastery Over Absence- refers to the mother's repeated absence and the child's training him/herself in handling that; and 3. Symbolization - or how to express identifiable symbols, where the mother is identified with the spool that comes and goes.

Archiving and Power relations are one of the major entry points for Derrida. He emphasises that archives are not neutral or passive repositories of information. Instead, they are active instruments of power that shape how history is recorded and remembered. Those who control the archive have the power to determine which narratives are preserved and which are excluded, thereby influencing collective memory and historical understanding. The archive is a site of authority, as it reflects and reinforces the power dynamics of the society that creates it. Derrida refers to 'archontic' power, which is the ability to gather, classify, identify, and consign functions. It allows the holder to collect, assign residence, and shelter, which is a combination of coordination and control. Derrida, in his book literally attributes juridical status to such power.

The book refers to the compulsive desire to preserve records, memories, and documents. This desire stems from a fear of forgetting or losing knowledge, yet it is paradoxical because the very act of archiving introduces the possibility of loss, omission, or distortion. Archiving can never be complete, and there will always be gaps, exclusions, and absences.

Derrida discusses the role of technology in the process of archiving, particularly how advances in recording and communication technologies affect the way information is stored and transmitted. He reflects on the implications of new technologies, such as digital archives, and how they change the nature of memory, making the archive more vulnerable to manipulation, erasure, or overload.

In his "Archive Fever" Derrida engages with the work of Sigmund Freud, particularly his theories of memory and the unconscious. Freud's idea of the psyche as a kind of archive, with repressed memories stored away but never entirely forgotten, provides a framework for Derrida's discussion. Derrida suggests that the compulsion to archive might be seen as analogous to the psychoanalytic process of uncovering repressed memories. He explores the tension between remembering and forgetting, and how the archive both preserves and obscures history.

One of Derrida's central insights is the paradox inherent in the concept of the archive. The archive is created with the intention of preserving history and memory, yet it is always incomplete and subject to decay, destruction, or reinterpretation. This leads to a sense of anxiety or "fever" associated with the archive—the more we try to preserve and protect knowledge, the more we become aware of its fragility and the inevitability of loss.

Derrida's ideas about archive fever have been influential in various fields, including history, media studies, literature, and digital humanities. In the digital age, the proliferation of information and the rise of digital archives have intensified the issues Derrida identified. The internet, social media, and digital databases have created vast, ever-growing archives of data, but they also raise concerns about access, control, surveillance, and the potential for data loss or corruption. The question of who controls digital archives, and what is preserved or erased, remains a pressing issue in today's information age.

Moreover, Derrida's concept of "archive fever" has been applied to discussions about collective memory, cultural heritage, and the politics of historical representation. In postcolonial studies, for example, scholars have used Derrida's ideas to critique how colonial powers have controlled and curated historical archives, often marginalizing or erasing indigenous or subaltern voices.

The essay offers an in-depth reflection on the nature of archives and their significance in shaping collective memory, history, and power structures. His exploration of the desire to archive, the role of technology, and the paradox of preservation speaks to contemporary concerns about information overload, the digital revolution, and the politics of memory. Ultimately, Derrida's work encourages us to think critically about how we engage with archives and to be mindful of the power dynamics that influence what is remembered and what is forgotten.

Lacan, as away from Freud and in contrast to the archetypal, introduced by Jung, believed in the mind being organised ( structured) like a language.<sup>ii</sup> And , quaintly he dislodged the Saussurian linguistics by insisting on a new use of the concept "the letter" that required a concept of materiality different from anything previously found in linguistics, Lacan argues that the between the signifier and the signified there is a bar 'the signifier over the signified, with the bar separating the two stages'. The signifiers can slide over the top of this bar, with the signified elements beneath. This makes most of the communications uncertain or unstable.

he essay's first section, 'The Meaning of the Letter', introduces the concept of "the letter", which Lacan describes as 'the material support that concrete discourse borrows from language'.<sup>iii</sup>

Thus, by insisting on the materiality and somewhat “condensation” of desire that Okwui finds a grip on the ephemera of the foundational change in the mode of representations in documentary mode graspable.

## **Okwui Enwezor and the Scene of Curation:**

Okwui Enwezor was a transformative curator known for expanding the global reach and scope of art exhibitions, especially through his emphasis on postcolonial and diasporic perspectives. His work was ground-breaking in challenging Eurocentric views and actively promoting voices from the Global South, African diaspora, and other often underrepresented areas in contemporary art. Let's look at some defining aspects of Enwezor's curatorial approach and how it compares to other prominent curators in the art world.

Enwezor's exhibitions often focussed on the non-western perspectives featured artists from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, challenging the dominance of Western art institutions and narratives. This global outlook was especially clear in his landmark role as the first non-European curator of Documenta 11 in 2002, where he organized the exhibition as five "platforms" across four continents, incorporating non-Western voices and discourses into one of the most prestigious art events in the world. This event also can be called a paradigm Shift in Contemporary Art and curation in the sense that it addresses the artworld through the then burgeoning practices of documentary realism.

Documenta XI, held in Kassel, Germany in 2002, marked a significant moment in the history of contemporary art. As the first African curator of this prestigious exhibition, Enwezor's approach was ground-breaking, as he sought not only to redefine the role of Documenta but also to challenge the prevailing Eurocentric narratives in the art world. Traditionally, Documenta emphasized European avant-garde movements. However, by the late 1990s, the globalization of art and the increasing recognition of non-Western artists demanded a reevaluation of this framework. Enwezor's appointment came at a pivotal time, reflecting a growing awareness of the need for diversity and inclusivity in major art exhibitions. He framed it in the context of globalization, post-colonialism, and the evolving discourse around contemporary art.

Woven and structured around the theme of “How to Live Together,” a concept that not only resonated with the socio-political climate of the early 21st century but also drew upon ideas from literature and philosophy. The exhibition addressed the complexities of cultural coexistence in an increasingly interconnected world, emphasizing the need for dialogue across diverse perspectives. One of the most striking aspects of Enwezor's curatorial strategy was his commitment to presenting art as a means of engaging with social and political issues.

Enwezor also employed a multimedia approach, integrating film, photography, and installation art into the exhibition. This not only expanded the boundaries of what constitutes contemporary art but also provided a platform for artists to engage with pressing social issues through diverse mediums. It was an exploration of globalization and its implications for art and culture. Enwezor's curatorial vision acknowledged the complexities of a globalized world, where cultural exchange often occurs within asymmetrical power dynamics. The exhibition encouraged viewers to confront the realities of cultural imperialism and the ways in which globalization can both enrich and threaten local identities.

By framing the exhibition within the context of globalization, He positioned Documenta as a site for critical reflection and dialogue. The exhibition did not shy away from difficult topics, instead embracing the potential of art to provoke conversation and inspire change.

This exhibition had a profound impact on the art world, reshaping the discourse around contemporary art and curatorial practices. His commitment to inclusivity and diversity challenged the traditional hierarchies within



the art establishment, helping to legitimize the voices of artists from the Global South, adding to the broader narrative of contemporary art and the inclusion of various mediums.

## Okwui Enwezor's "Archive Fever": Exploring Memory, History, and Identity<sup>iv</sup>

Okwui Enwezor's "Archive Fever," an exhibition held at the Haus der Kunst in Munich in 2010, is a compelling exploration of the intersection between memory, history, and contemporary art. Curated by Enwezor, the exhibition sought to address the role of archives in shaping our understanding of the past and how these narratives influence present identities. This essay delves into the key themes and artworks featured in "Archive Fever," examining its significance within the broader context of contemporary art and the politics of memory.

The title "Archive Fever" alludes to Jacques Derrida's concept of "archive fever," which refers to the obsessive relationship humans have with archives and the desire to preserve and understand history. In a world inundated with information, the archive becomes a crucial site for negotiation between past and present. Enwezor's exhibition interrogated how archives not only serve as repositories of knowledge but also as tools of power that can construct and contest narratives.

By showcasing a diverse range of artists and works, Enwezor highlighted how contemporary art can engage with and reinterpret historical archives. The exhibition featured various media, including photography, video, installation, and performance, allowing artists to explore different aspects of the archive, from documentation to representation.

One of the prominent themes in "Archive Fever" is the relationship between memory and identity. The exhibition examined how personal and collective memories are shaped by the archives we create and access. Artists like Wangechi Mutu and Yael Bartana explored these themes through their works, addressing issues of displacement, diaspora, and cultural heritage.

Mutu's collages, for instance, challenge conventional representations of African identity and femininity. By combining imagery from various sources—ranging from fashion magazines to historical photographs—she creates new narratives that reflect the complexities of contemporary identity. Her work embodies the idea of the archive as a dynamic site where histories are continuously reinterpreted.

Yael Bartana's video installations also engaged with memory and identity, particularly in relation to Jewish diaspora and the history of Israel. Her work often incorporates archival footage, blurring the lines between historical representation and artistic interpretation. By invoking the archive, Bartana prompts viewers to consider how personal and collective histories are intertwined.

Another significant aspect of the exhibition was its focus on political histories and the ways in which archives can both reveal and obscure truths. Enwezor included works that addressed issues of colonialism, war, and social justice. For instance, the inclusion of artists like Hito Steyerl and Walid Raad challenged viewers to confront the politics of representation and the ethics of historical documentation.

Steyerl's video essays, which often incorporate found footage and documentary styles, interrogate the impact of globalization and technology on memory. Her work raises questions about the reliability of images and how they shape our understanding of history. Similarly, Raad's "The Atlas Group" offers a critical examination of the Lebanese civil war, using fictionalized archives to highlight the complexities of historical narratives.

"Archive Fever" also delves into the politics surrounding the creation and preservation of archives. Enwezor's curation invites reflection on who has the authority to document history and how power dynamics influence what is remembered and forgotten. This theme is particularly relevant in the context of post-colonial discourse, where the histories of marginalized communities often remain underrepresented.

The exhibition encourages viewers to consider the implications of archival practices in the context of social justice and activism. Enwezor positioned "Archive Fever" as a platform for dialogue about the politics of memory in contemporary society by foregrounding artists who engage with these issues.

### A Restitution Scenario:

Enwezor was caught in the dilemma of difference. He initiated the project of addressing the emergent documentary realism that is the new consciousness about media and its derivative simulacrum and other circumstances. But Okwui is not convinced by the poststructuralist projects of unpacking the world ascertained by some axiomatics. He still was induced, during Documenta 11 and after that until the "Archive Fever" exhibition. Archive fever, if interpreted by Lacan, would be much more conducive to conducting it in more of a structuralist way, in a way that would involve the fixity of a signified before the signification process begins. Not the way Freud would have envisaged it but much closer to how Lacan could have envisaged it.

So, the project of Enwezor turns out to be about the insistence on the signified over process of becoming, to curb the post-structural/ post-modern impulses (an idea-pressure, many of the West Coast Marxists were taken up by).

The project of the "Archive Fever" exhibition pans out to be a restitution or a return gift to the old-world axiomatic socialism that lingered on with him as with many others in the peer group.

Okwui's attempt was, therefore, to bring back Lacan via a mild critical analysis of Freud by invoking him and not Lacan. Lacanian insistence on 'letter in the unconscious' thus turns out to be the absent signifier in this game of restitution or return.

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<sup>i</sup> Desire is addressed by two alternating terms *Fort/ Da* by both Freud and post Freudian Lacan. In both Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, the concept of *fort/da* is significant for understanding how we deal with loss, absence, and the formation of desire. The term comes from a game Sigmund Freud observed his grandson play, which he described in his 1920 work, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Later, Jacques Lacan integrated *fort/da* into his theories, interpreting it as a foundational process in the development of the subject and desire.

<sup>ii</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection* (London 1997) p. 147

<sup>iii</sup> The Instance of Letter in the Unconscious, *Ecrits*, ibid, p. 147

<sup>iv</sup> Archive Fever: Uses of the Documents in Contemporary Art, International Centre of Photography, NY, 2008