

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986).
- <sup>2</sup> Christopher J. Prom gave a succinct overview of the volume in a 2013 “Digital Dialogues” presentation at the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities (MITH). See “Documenting Science in the Digital Age: What’s the Same and What’s Different,” Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities, <http://mith.umd.edu/podcasts/chris-prom-documenting-science-digital-age-whats-whats-different>.
- <sup>3</sup> Jackie Dooley, *The Archival Advantage: Integrating Archival Expertise into Management of Born-digital Library Materials* (Dublin, Ohio: OCLC Research, 2015), <http://www.oclc.org/content/dam/research/publications/2015/oclcresearch-archival-advantage-2015.pdf>.
- <sup>4</sup> Maynard Brichford, *Scientific and Technological Documentation: Archival Evaluation and Processing of University Records Relating to Science and Technology* (Urbana: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1969); Joan K. Haas, Helen Willa Samuels, and Barbara Trippel Simmons, *Appraising the Records of Modern Science and Technology* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT, 1985).

## Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East

Edited by Anthony Downey. London: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, 2015. 469 pp. Softcover. \$28.00. Illustrations (some color). ISBN 978-1-78453-411-0.

The late Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz (1911–2006) asserted that you can tell whether a man is clever by his answers and wise by his questions. In *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, academic, writer, and editor Anthony Downey presents the writings, interviews, and original artwork of acclaimed academics, curators, activists, filmmakers, and artists. By turns clever and at all points wise, these practitioners have produced work that not only creatively engages the heterogeneity of archived cultural production across the Arab world, but also astutely posits important questions for archival science. These sage queries oblige archivists to reconsider their professional practices (p. 14). To illustrate, are archivists open to the dissonant revelations about their profession created by artists whose artistic practice produces work imbued with suppositional visions of the future and explores alternative, interrogative, or even fictional forms of the athenaeum? Alternatively, why have contemporary artists developed a dominant aesthetic strategy committed to working with archives? In seventeen thought-provoking essays and two large inserts featuring artwork created by artists who utilized archival materials from Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Syria, Jordan, Turkey, Egypt, Pakistan, and Palestine, Downey endeavors to show how contemporary artists attempt to provide astute answers to the

preceding perceptive questions and, in the process, honor the watchwords of the great Egyptian Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz.

The traditional archival definition of *memory* portrays archives as harmonious halls where the knowledge of events, people, places, and things past is whatever the records and memories agree upon.<sup>1</sup> As axiomatic archival outsiders, Downey contends that artists become archivists who cocreate and curate archives by collating, rearranging, and interpreting forms of archival information. This analytical artistic approach produces alternative, unconventional, dissonant, and yet convincing narratives of near disappearance and reemergence (p. 17). To illustrate, Downey points to artist and theorist John Akomfrah, who elucidates the important role of the archive in recollecting social memory (p. 38). In sifting through and recalling the remains of past events, Akomfrah maintains that artistic interventions honor memory and clarify the past for future generations (p. 38). If Akomfrah's interpretation resides too close to the classical archival conceptualization, Downey presents other artists who advance more pragmatic definitions. In her essay, artist Mariam Ghani, for example, asserts that "the task of the artist in an archive . . . is to understand which of the archive's preserved pasts relate to the present moment of danger, and to translate and narrate that past into the present" (p. 54). Unlike Akomfrah, this duty is to be executed when and where it is most needed and without nostalgia (p. 54).

In her case study analyzing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through the lens of Israel's National Photography Archives, curator and art historian Rona Sela, in turn, investigates how this archive constructs, conserves, and contextualizes photographs to serve Zionist ideals (p. 33). Because the archive's mission is self-evident, Sela maintains it is imperative for the artist to utilize the archive as an ideological tool to excavate its original structure. By revealing and freeing the underlying biased arrangement crafted by the establishment, the Palestinians originate an alternative narrative (p. 80). According to Sela, in this reclaimed photographic history, "the absent become visible, the missing become present, and the forgotten become speakers of memory . . ." (p. 87). Now freed, these active voices of historical memory are able to claim their own authentic Palestinian futures (p. 82). In her essay, curator Ariella Azoulay focuses her analysis on philosopher Jacques Derrida's conception of the archivist as sentry. Like Sela, Azoulay contends that the way state archivists structure, collect, catalog, preserve, and censor materials is not neutral and is driven by national ideological systems (pp. 79, 206). Azoulay argues that intervention, imagination, and transmission are the main practices through which citizen-users, researchers, and artists today exercise their full rights to the archive, the freedom to share and make use of the archive in ways that move it beyond a depository of the past (p. 199).

Art historian, critic, and artist Tom Holert further develops this analytical conception of the archive as both a historical and a future-oriented reality (p. 30). In his essay, "Coming to Terms: Contemporary Art, Civil Society and Knowledge Politics in the 'Middle East'," Holert moves his analytical light away from the archivist as sentinel and shines it directly on the artist as advocate. If contemporary artists are to take on the obligation of artistic activism properly, he asserts that their artistic practice of working with archives as a historical, future-oriented reality must be refined to fully understand the effectiveness of artistic intervention in a world exploding with NGOs, community-based organizations, and social movements, each fighting against authoritarian regimes, battling for social change, or striving toward a more civil society (p. 98). Archived information utilized in the artistic process, Holert maintains, falls into two distinct categories: the first division, "knowledge politics," encompasses those art practices that confront issues of the accessibility, suppression, exploitation, racialization, gendering, or monetization of knowledge (p. 101); the second branch, "cultural knowledge," comprises those artists who generate "new" knowledge about social and cultural issues (pp. 101–2). Although embracing the utility of the "new" knowledge definition, Holert admits that it remains slightly vague (p. 102). Holert, therefore, turns to Anthony Downey for clarity. Downey asserts that culture "encourages the production and exchange of knowledge, some of which will inevitably challenge the partitioning and distribution of meaning (and social relations) in societies through the region" (p. 102). Echoing the vocabulary of archival theorist Jeannette Bastian, Holert contends that Downey's conception of culture "convincingly maps the cross-regional institutional infrastructure that allows knowledge to flourish, often against the grain of authoritarian and fundamentalist cultural policies" (p. 102).<sup>2</sup>

However, the question remains: is this knowledge quantifiable? The groundbreaking work of the media theorist and artist Laila Shereen Sakr points to an affirmative answer. Sakr, founder of the media lab R-Shief, describes this knowledge phenomenon as the "archival impulse." In the contemporary world, she maintains, the archival impulse embodies an opportunity to provide a counter-collection, which repudiates the historical narrative of the state (p. 364). Such an impulse, Sakr demonstrates, has established new public archives and created innovative individual projects encompassing digitization of urban histories and the collection of digitally born information (p. 364). Utilizing pioneering computation methods, R-Shief, for example, has designed a knowledge management system for collecting and analyzing content from social networking sites (p. 365). Since 2008, this platform has been able "to analyze the frequency of consumption, production and circulation of social media, as well as the semantics and tropes used on Twitter and Facebook" (p. 365). To illustrate, as "one of the largest repositories of Arab-language tweets," R-Shief was able to predict

the fall of Tripoli (p. 370). Although R-Shief's prognostication received accolades from the U.S. State Department, Sakr believes that R-Shief's strength still lies in its role as a counterarchive that has the ability to bring together alternative voices from across such social media platforms as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram into one digital landscape for research and cultural production (p. 366). In essence, the archive moves beyond the official documents of nations and becomes a transformative site of knowledge production (p. 364).

In her piece, Ariella Azoulay discusses the distinction between the abstract archive advanced by philosophers and the material archive present in the real world (p. 194). This important volume should be read with this distinction in mind by all archivists who enjoy reflecting upon the theoretical, alternative, unconventional, and dissonant archives created by contemporary artists. Through the interpretive mirror of art, these writers take the reader along on a provocative journey, which poses original perspectives about the complex interrelationship between the artist, the archive, and the concepts advanced by such theorists as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Walter Benjamin. Professional responsibilities, however, prevent archivists from completing this philosophical exploration replete with dissonant disclosures about their profession.

As presented in this volume, contemporary artistic realms too often portray professional archivists as sentries, who engage in ideologically based decision-making and purposely withhold information from the public. In his incoming presidential address, delivered at the 1997 annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, William J. Maher declared: "What defines the professional core of archival work is the systematic and theoretically based execution of seven highly interrelated responsibilities—securing clear authority for the program and collection, authenticating the validity of the evidence held, appraising, arranging, describing, preserving, and promoting use."<sup>3</sup> Artists who engage with archival materials must come to appreciate these core responsibilities. They must realize that these obligations foster within archivists a level-headed professionalism, which cultivates a balanced understanding of the confrontational art practices pursued by contemporary artists operating in the supercharged political environment of the Middle East. As repositories of the images and writings of humankind's triumphs and tragedies, archives provide artists with the evidence to support the creative answers to their wise Mahfouzian questions about how to comprehend the past, confront the present, and dream the future of the Arab world.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Richard Pearce-Moses, s.v. "Memory," *A Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 247; Helen Willa Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," *The American Archivist* 49 (Spring 1986): 110, quoting George Orwell, 1984.
- <sup>2</sup> Jeannette Bastian, "Whispers in the Archives: Finding the Voices of the Colonized in the Records of the Colonizer," in *Political Pressure and the Archival Record*, ed. Margaret Procter et al. (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2005), 41, quoted in Michelle Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable: Silence, Memory, and the Photographic Record in Cambodia* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 20.
- <sup>3</sup> William J. Maher, "Archives, Archivists, and Society," *The American Archivist* 61 (Fall 1998): 255.

## Archives in Libraries: What Librarians and Archivists Need to Know to Work Together

By Jeannette A. Bastian, Megan Sniffin-Marinoff, and Donna Webber. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2015. vi, 137 pp. Softcover and PDF. Members \$49.95, nonmembers \$69.95. Softcover ISBN 1-931666-87-3; PDF ISBN 978-1-931666-88-6.

The administrative relationship of archives to libraries in the United States may be atypical of other parts of the world, but few would be surprised that these two cultural entities are often coupled together within the larger institutions that fund them and provide their mandates. The public and our administrative superiors often confuse us and see archivists and librarians as duplicative curators of information artifacts.

Thanks to the distinctively American tradition of the public library, the ubiquity of libraries has placed them in a more visible role than archives. This predominance of libraries has led some to perceive a tension between archives and libraries, especially when looking at the historical differences in the types of content, technological limits, and resultant audiences. Historically, these tensions have played out in competing standards, descriptive practices, and employment credentials, a situation that Robert L. Clark and Lawrence J. McCrank explored in landmark 1976 and 1985 monographs.<sup>1</sup> However, by the early 1990s, the disruptive effects of technology for archives and library management combined with advances in the public's access to digital networks began to break down the information monopolies that characterized both archives and libraries. Thus, the old dualism is long overdue to be revisited.

The Society of American Archivists' publication program has stepped to the fore. Its *Archives in Libraries* is a cleverly designed, concisely written, and eminently readable book that is the current generation's contribution on the