

Fabulating Archival Arts: An Exploration of the Complexities of Politics, History, and Memory in a Postmodern Context

Chenyi Wang

School of Sculpture and Public Art, China Academy of Art, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, China

chenyi_wang0924@163.com

Abstract. Archival art, which emerged in the last century, has become a significant influence in the art world, challenging the constraints of traditional historical narratives. It offers viewers a more nuanced and inclusive framework for thinking, providing an alternative engagement with history free from dominant past narratives. This paper undertakes a comprehensive analysis of two significant archival artworks, namely the Atlas Group and Sputnik. Through this analysis, it aims to elucidate the societal impacts engendered by archival art that adopts critical fabulation as a strategy. Combining textual and graphic analyses with perspectives from postmodernism and deconstructionism, the research demonstrates that fictional archival art stimulates profound contemplation of the interconnectedness between the past, present, and future through artistic expression. It also examines the emotional impact of revisiting the past, records, and memory. By navigating the complexities and ambiguities of postmodern society through archival artistic expression, we can foster a more inspiring approach to understanding this art form.

Keywords: Archival Art; Post-modernism; Deconstruction; Critical Fabulation.

1. Introduction

Since Hal Foster introduced the concept of the archival impulse, considering Lev Manovich's insights on new media databases and Jean-Francois Lyotard's discourse on the decline of meta-narratives, the archive has transformed into a dominant symbolic and cultural form. Unlike traditional archives, which emphasise neutrality and are viewed as tools against amnesia and disorder, archival art challenges this paradigm and critiques restrictive frameworks through performance. Archival artists' event reproductions are closely tied to postmodern dynamic pluralism. This is particularly evident in archival art that employs fictions transcending mere fabrications, embracing distinctive narrative techniques and literary identities, thus opening avenues for narrative diversity in the form of "excavation".

This article focuses on "critical fabulation" as a key strategy in archival art, which involves deconstructing meta-narratives and integrating multiple perspectives. This approach plays a distinctive role in political discourse by fostering collective emotional resonance. By examining two archival art projects, Joan Fontcuberta's *Sputnik* and Walid Raad's *The Atlas Group*, we gain insights into the political significance of such artwork, particularly its impact on collective memory and cultural identity.

The central argument suggests that archival art is crucial in shaping cultural identity and sparking political discussions through its reinterpretation of history and challenge to traditional narratives. Through diverse perspectives and creative strategies, archival art expands the horizons of historical interpretation and prompts a profound reconsideration of cultural identity. This analysis highlights the significant impact of archival art in providing different perspectives and promoting a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of our political and cultural landscape. Archival artists use fictional techniques to stimulate public conversation, question established viewpoints, and guide society to reflect on political realities.

2. Archival Art and Postmodern Concepts

In Michel Foucault's work *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, his exploration of the archive aims to expose the construction of knowledge within a specific historical context and its intertwining with power dynamics. He views the archive not merely as a repository but as a realm where knowledge is created, shaping discourses and influencing knowledge production through the concept he refers to as "disciplined memory."

In recent years, a new concept has emerged in the realm of archives - archival art. Hal Foster introduced this concept at the turn of the 21st century. Archival art is an exploration of tasks, places, and activities that have been forgotten, obsolete, or armed in the historical dimension. Archives, ranging from Warburg's photographic archive to Warhol's Time Capsule series, exhibit diverse content and forms of existence. The individuals responsible for managing archives exhibit diverse identities, and their motivations and organisational standards reflect their distinct perspectives. In this diverse landscape, archival art distinguishes itself through its amalgamation of text and object, re-mediation, and quasi-archival logic, engaging with society through a critical and reflective lens.

For archival artists, this approach of archiving resembles more of a creative process than a simple retrospective examination of history. They extract materials from pre-existing images, pictures, and texts, engaging in artistic creation through reinterpretation. This creative process reflects the fervour described by postmodernist Jacques Derrida in "Archive Fever," a compulsive, repetitive, nostalgic, uncontrollable, and relentless inner drive to return to the original starting point. Archival art creation often involves the deconstruction of the original context. In Derrida's concept of "deconstruction", the act of breaking something down is seen as the initial step in reinterpreting it. This reinterpretation serves as both a dissolution of the original archival context and a questioning of the concept of "objective memory." Similar to the later-discussed *Sputnik*, the authenticity of history is doubtful. Various pieces of evidence are combined to construct a narrative that may seem convincing but is ultimately fabricated. Through this process, archival art seeks to strike a balance between reconstruction and deconstruction, structure and non-structure, objectivity and fiction, as well as between public and private and other contradictory relationships. This pursuit of balance makes archival art a practice that challenges traditional archival notions while creating new visual and cultural forms of expression. By recombining and representing elements from the archive, archival artists challenge established historical narratives, guiding the audience to reconsider the intricate relationships between the past, present, and future.

In this context, Derrida's ideas profoundly impact the constructive characteristics of archives. He emphasises the instability inherent in language and symbolic systems, introducing the concepts of "trace" and "différance," illuminating that archives, as linguistic systems, are also full of differences and delays, characterised by incompleteness, discontinuity, and symptomatic qualities. Derrida argues that archives constitute a space wherein numerous symbol signs are gathered, creating the "trace" of history to resist forgetting and submersion. However, the material properties and management methods associated with this "trace" inevitably lead to its coexistence with submersion. This coexistence poses a challenge for archives to authentically represent the entirety of phenomena, often resulting in gaps and deficiencies due to the inherent ambiguity of language and symbols. These ideas suggest that archives do not offer a completely objective or comprehensive representation of the past but are rather subjectively constructed. This subjectivity becomes apparent in certain intertextual archival arts, where the inherent chaotic nature of things allows for the emergence of diverse perspectives.

Therefore, through reprocessing and reworking of archives, archival artists not only challenge traditional historical narratives but also delve into the essence of the differences and delays underscored by Derrida. They use artistic techniques to reveal the "trace" in the archives, exploring how the ambiguity of language and symbols influences our comprehension of history and memory. This creative practice transcends mere archival presentation, becoming a profound contemplation of the intricacies inherent in archives. Faced with this constructive, official, authoritative narrative, how

can the fractured reality be rediscovered and re-examined within the contemporary context? This question explores the complexity of archival art when confronting challenges to authoritative narratives, shedding light on the inherent contradictions of archives as a linguistic system for constructing power. This question also sets the stage for the subsequent discussion on "critical fabulation" in archival art.

3. Strategies and Methods

Critical fabulation, a concept raised by Saidiya Hartman, originally refers to a writing style that disrupts the challenges the prevailing norms by manipulating and reorganising the fundamental components of a narrative. This is achieved by presenting events in unconventional sequences, offering alternative and controversial perspectives, replacing accepted or sanctioned narratives, and imagining potential scenarios, words unspoken, or actions untaken. Fabulation serves as the vehicle for examining multiple perspectives on events or history, with criticism as its ultimate objective.

The operation of various systems relies on grand narratives to justify their existence, and archives, as a discursive system, are no exception. Jean-François Lyotard considers postmodernity as the decline of "metanarratives," and archival art, as he mentions, is a form of "language game," attempting to establish systems in a fragmented manner. Archival artworks sometimes challenge meta-narratives, which typically encompass universal and comprehensive narratives aimed at legitimising specific beliefs or values within society. These narratives interpret the past and shape our values and belief systems. Frequently, these meta-narratives are created and propagated by particular authorities or elite groups to influence public thought and behaviour and to maintain or change power dynamics within society. However, this simplification can result in the exclusion of marginalised groups and alternative viewpoints, which can exacerbate social divisions and injustices.

When we extract a piece of information from its constructed narrative within the archives, it becomes detached from its original context, much like the display method commonly employed in most museums. However, the approach of archival artists more closely resembles Claude Lévi-Strauss's concept of "bricolage" as a method: reorganising and recontextualising objects within a comprehensive system of significance to generate new meanings. This method incorporates attached, prioritised, and sedimented meanings onto the used objects. For instance, in the artwork *Sputnik* (fig.1), artist Joan Fontcuberta assumes the role of a journalist to narrate the fictional story of Soviet cosmonaut Ivan Istochnikov. This narrative attempts to unveil the manipulation of Soviet political structures concerning space exploration during the Cold War era. Fontcuberta endeavours to reveal the truth by reconstructing the cosmonaut's life, family, and the spacecraft's journey, recontextualising visual evidence as a form of bricolage. Elements such as the dog in a spacesuit and the fact that the astronaut's name is the Russian translation of Fontcuberta inject a playful element into the work. The artist himself states, "To truly understand the system of truth, one must analyse the nature of fiction." By playfully deconstructing historical images and subsequently reconstructing them, the artist successfully navigates a delicate balance between narration and anti-narration, providing viewers with a contemplative space and opening pathways for questioning political power and historical constructions. This method constructs a stage where elements of various archives are presented in a performative manner, aligning with Sara Callahan's "as-if" strategy: "...both a coping mechanism and a form of resistance; a performative act that endowed the given situation with a different political meaning, while retaining awareness that the restrictive frame remained firmly in place. "

Fiction provides artists with a humorous avenue to address serious and challenging power dynamics, utilizing satirical artistic expressions to prompt more profound reflections. Fontcuberta's upbringing in Spain, influenced by a political atmosphere characterised by suppression, authoritarianism, propaganda, and censorship, significantly influences his politically charged works. While most critics analyse *Sputnik* from the perspective of questioning the authenticity of photography, I interpret it as his attempt to unearth hidden elements within the archives. Through the reconstruction of events, the artist's humour blurs the boundary between reality and fiction, prompting scepticism toward official

discourse construction systems. This unsettling power mechanism reveals that the archives we fully trust have indeed been manipulated and are inherently incomplete. Although the history written by archival artists may be fictional, even absurd, it encourages individuals to contemplate profound questions—primarily, who holds the authority to shape our understanding of history? The inherent authoritative validity of archives is undermined within this context.



Fig 1. Sputnik, Joan Fontcuberta, Madrid, 1997. ©Aguado, José Vicente. (2016). CUALQUIER PARECIDO CON LA REALIDAD... ARTE Y POLÍTICA PROFUNDA TRAS EL 11-S. 10.13140/RG.2.2.27372.77443.



Fig 2.-From the Sputnik series: Ivan and Kloka performing their historical EVA (Extra Vehicular Activity) © Joan Fontcuberta

Sputnik exposes the inadequacy of personal subjective narratives and the supposed reliability of official archives in conveying information. In fictional archival art, criticality is often intertwined with collective memory, especially in contexts marked by extreme societal backgrounds. Most archives are susceptible to political censorship, leading to what is called *archival silence*, which can be understood as a manifestation of forced forgetting. In the context of postmodern thought, there is an emphasis on the demand for multiple perspectives on the complexities of diverse phenomena. This demand suggests the necessity of viewing the same event from different viewpoints and angles, which may conflict but also complement each other. This diversity not only allows for a more comprehensive reconstruction of events but also provides the possibility of a more holistic and vivid recording and preservation. The previous artwork raises concerns about potential omissions and

misinterpretations in the archives. Meanwhile, "The Atlas Group", situated within different political and historical contexts, more prominently employs cross-narrative with multiple perspectives to construct new archival discourses.

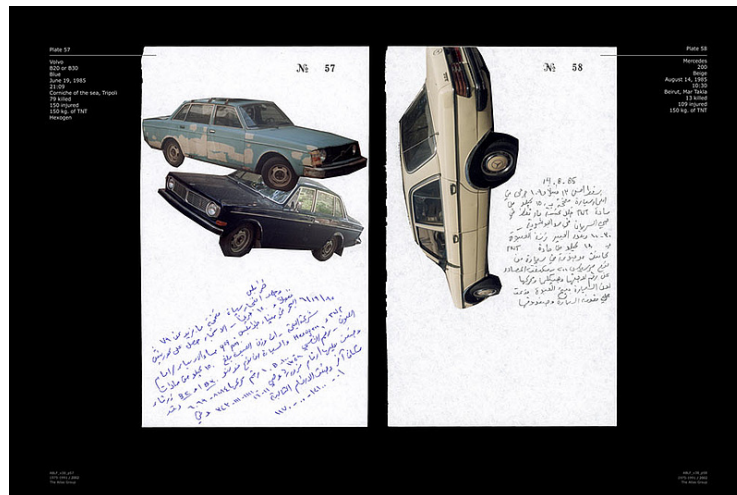


Fig 3. The Atlas Group, Walid Raad Notebook volume 38: Already been in a lake of fire. 1999 © Walid Raad

In the late 1990s, artist Walid Raad founded a fictitious foundation known as "The Atlas Group" with the aim of organising his works documenting the Lebanese Civil War more effectively and seamlessly integrating them into the historical context. Raad's works explore the devastation caused by the war on infrastructure, society, and the human psyche. He re-dates these works and attributes them to a series of fictional characters, individuals who purportedly donated the works directly or through agents to the foundation. The narrative of the foundation is filled with intertextuality and cross-references, employing a nonlinear narrative technique to depict the survival conditions of people during the Lebanese war. The project involves various media forms, such as photography, documentary, literature, and performance, presenting the artist's complex exploration of history and memory. Raad questions who holds the power to create knowledge, what constitutes effective documentation, and how to construct history from original archival documents.



Fig 4. The Atlas Group, civilizationaly, we do not dig holes to bury ourselves_Plate 922, 1958-59/2003. Pigmented inkjet print, 25.4 x 20.3 cm. ©Walid Raad; Courtesy the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

An illustrative example is Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, who allegedly provided the foundation with two notebooks, 24 short films, and 1,990 black-and-white photographs. Among these works, *Civilizationally, We Do not Dig Holes to Bury Ourselves* (1958-1959/2003) (fig.4) features 24 black-and-white self-portrait photographs captured during his visits to Paris and Rome in 1958 and 1959. Taken against iconic backdrops such as the Eiffel Tower and Notre Dame Cathedral, the inherent objectivity of the photographic medium prevents viewers from doubting their authenticity. However, these photos are actually old photographs belonging to Raad's father. This piece challenges the existence of traditional symbolic organisations. It reveals the operation of Raad's project: an authoritative figure is exposed as false and then reintegrated into historical records, triggering a disruptive effect that leads to a new understanding and experience of history. This art project depersonalises a family archive, subtly poses as an autobiography, and injects personal experience into a national experience.

The doctor had left behind manuscripts, photos, and texts that constructed a seemingly authentic archive. However, these documents were collected posthumously, rendering them unverifiable for their authenticity. By employing self-referential elements across multiple media, the audience is encouraged to scrutinize whether what they're seeing is fiction or reality. Using a narrative structure similar to a treasure map, *the Atlas Group* blends fictional characters and narratives with actual historical events. Here, the boundary between fiction and reality frequently blurs again, just like in the first example, revealing the persuasive power of photographic and documentary discourse.

Drawing upon Derrida's concept of difference and trace, Raad's narrative serves as a linguistic system that is skilfully deconstructed and directed towards politically charged critique. This archive possesses the potential for constant reinterpretation, given its recurrent entanglements of meaning and rules. The project critically examines society, politics, and history by employing postmodern narrative techniques. Intertextuality not only permeates the project but also aids the audience in attaining a broader comprehension of cultural and historical contexts, prompting them to re-examine the so-called "truth" and question their memories and experiences. Through "critical fabulation," the artist reveals the limitations and distortions of the media in presenting history, as well as the manipulation of historical narratives by political authorities.

Raad's artistic project originates from the Lebanese Civil War spanning from 1975 to 1991, and the brief internal conflict in 1958 between Maronite Christians and Muslims. These conflicts not only shaped Lebanon's national definition locally and internationally but also left a profound impact on contemporary collective memory. They became shared national experiences, contributing to the formation of current collective memory and the construction of a shared communal identity and narrative. However, due to the Historical Committee's inability to produce a war history narrative satisfying different sects, Lebanese schools omit the teaching of Lebanon's modern history after 1946. This reflects the challenges inherent in shaping historical discourse when faced with diverse perspectives, as pointed out by Hayden White: "The best grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another is ultimately aesthetical or moral rather than epistemological."

Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz argue, " Archives, then, are not passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed." By extension, memory is not something discovered or collected in archives but continually reshaped. Confronted with the identity confusion arising from the malleability of historical discourse, critical fabulation of archives poses questions to individuals. Raad's artistic project not only aesthetically constructs new narrative structures but also raises questions about power and historical construction. In this process, the artist creatively disrupts inherent historical frameworks.

4. Achievements and Influence

Fiction serves as a method rather than a goal. In an interview with Raad, John Menick commented, "In other words, Raad's goal is not anti-memory but an investigation into the ways memory is produced; not anti-archives themselves, but questioning the discursive forms constituting any archive,

as archives are assemblies of existing knowledge.” The core of this archival art lies in the exploration of memory, not simply its rejection. It focuses on not only the medium itself but also the discursive forms constituting the archive. This is precisely the effect that archival art aims to achieve – by questioning discourse, revealing the power structures, and challenging authority in official historical narratives. The objective of such archival art is to construct a collective memory and cultural identity distinct from the official narrative.

Fictional archival art, challenging conventional historical narratives, underscores the existence of passive forgetting, offering an unconventional perspective through which to view history and prompting reflection on the intricacies of historical construction. History is often conveyed through written and recorded narratives, yet written archives must continually evolve to capture every unfolding moment. While we strive to preserve memory, a simultaneous process of constant forgetting occurs. This interplay between forgetting and memory mirrors the relationship between absence and presence, with the former giving rise to the latter.

Memory and archives have always been understood to exist in a dynamic relationship, as expressed by Maurice Halbwachs: "No memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections." Archives play a crucial role in constructing social knowledge frameworks and shaping cultural identity. In fictional archival art, the strong link between collective memory and national culture provides a unique creative platform for artists to explore the relationship between the individual and society while providing a framework for individuals to shape their sense of identity within a social context. It challenges authoritative notions of cultural identity, shifting the focus from a single official narrative to a more diverse and complex perspective of cultural identity.

Jacques Rancière's assertion that "Reality must be fictionalised in order to be thought about" underscores the crucial role of fiction in contemplating and understanding history. In this context, fictional archival art plays a guiding role, allowing the viewer to see, through the artist's creative methods of reconstructing historical events, aspects that have been intentionally or unintentionally omitted, as well as truths that have been hidden or distorted. This fictional intervention encourages viewers not to passively accept official narratives but rather to critically examine history. As mentioned earlier, Raad recalls (or reenacts) the past through historical research in archival records, essentially assembling accounts of past events based on shared cultural understandings. This close connection makes critical fabulation in archival art a re-enactment of the past, a profound exploration of collective memory, and an amplification of narratives that may have been suppressed or distorted.

The significance of individual and societal relationships lies in shaping people's identity in their cultural context. Fictional archival art serves not only as a representation of historical events but also as a challenge to authoritative cultural identity concepts. Through individual and innovative approaches, artists attempt to break free from the constraints of a singular official narrative, shifting the focus from official historical storytelling to a more diverse and complex cultural identity perspective. By reconstructing archives, artists blend individual experiences with societal collective memory, presenting a cultural-historical perspective that is both personalised and universal.

Politics frequently emerges as a central theme. For instance, considering the example of *Sputnik* mentioned earlier, this artistic creation scrutinises history and critically reflects on political issues like power dynamics, historical reinterpretations, and social equity. By employing fictional techniques, artists spark the audience's deep engagement with societal concerns, stimulating public discourse and deliberation on political subjects. Fictional archival art thus becomes a significant medium by triggering discussions on political themes and guiding individual to reexamine the political realities of their nations and societies.

5. Conclusion

After analysing the previous discussions, it is evident that archive art, employing critical fabulation as a key strategy in the postmodern era, profoundly shapes and influences individuals' understanding of intricate political history and memory. This artistic form prompts individuals to rethink their societal roles and consider the constraints and vulnerabilities of official narratives. Through the artist's crafting of archival art, the representation and reconstruction of archives transcend traditional narrative frameworks, delving deeply into fundamental issues such as cultural identity, power dynamics, and societal values, thus showcasing the outstanding transformative nature of archival art.

By employing fiction, archive artists place historical events in new contexts, and re-contextualisation provides new meaning frameworks for symbols within collective memory. These works engage viewers in critical reflections on history and culture. This profound re-evaluation is a reconsideration of historical events and an exploration of social structures and cultural identity. Therefore, fictional archive art transcends being merely a medium; it becomes a profound expression of cultural criticism and societal engagement.

In the face of the complexity and ambiguity of postmodern society, archive art challenges the limitations of traditional historical narratives, offering viewers a more comprehensive and diverse mode of thinking. This approach inspires active reflection on events, prompting individuals to engage more sensitively in discussions on contemporary societal issues while critically examining the past. Therefore, fictional archival art provides a unique and insightful platform for developing culture and society, guiding people to deeply contemplate the relationships between the past, present, and future through artistic expression.

References

- [1] Alphen, Ernst Van. *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in the Age of New Media*, Reaktion Books, London England, 2018, pp. 7.
- [2] Archival term for a gap in the historical record caused by the accidental or deliberate omission or distortion of documents in an archive. --"Archival Silence." SAA Dictionary: archival silence. Accessed January 6, 2024. <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/archival-silence.html>.
- [3] Artpress. "Joan Fontcuberta, Le Bénéfice Du Doute." artpress, September 18, 2017. <https://www.artpress.com/2017/02/23/joan-fontcuberta-le-benefice-du-doute/>.
- [4] Davis, Natalie Zemon. *Fiction in the archives: Pardon tales and their tellers in sixteenth-century France*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- [5] DERRIDA, JACQUES. *Archive fever: A Freudian impression*. UNIV OF CHICAGO Press, 2017.
- [6] Richards, K.M. and Chen, si (2016) in *De Li da Yan Zhong de Yi Shu = Derrida*. Chong qing: Chong qing da xue chu ban she, p. 19.
- [7] Foster, Hal. *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency*, Verso, New York, 2017.
- [8] Foucault, M. "A Priori Knowledge of History and Archives." Essay. In *The Archeology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 2002.
- [9] Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1>.
- [10] John Menick, "Imagined Testimonies: An Interview with Walid Raad" →. Originally published at bbs.thing.net, March 25, 2002.
- [11] Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The savage mind*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018.
- [12] Lyotard, Jean Francois. *The postmodern condition*. Minnesota, Minn: University of Minnesota, 1997.
- [13] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, Lewis A. Coser (ed. and trans.), (Chicago, 1941, 1992), ch. 2, "Language and Memory", p. 43.
- [14] Narusevicius, Vytas. "Walid Raad's Double Bind: The Atlas Group Project, 1989-2004." *RACAR: Revue d'art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, vol. 39, no. 2, 2014, pp. 43–53. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43202467>. Accessed 19 Dec. 2023.
- [15] Rancière, Jacques. "Is History a Form of Fiction?" Essay. In *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, 38–38. London, UK: Continuum Intl Pub Group, 2004.

- [16] Sara Callahan, *Art + Archive Understanding the Archival Turn in Contemporary Art*, Manchester University Press, 2022. Chapter 6.
- [17] Schwartz, Joan M., and Terry Cook. "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory." *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (2002): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1007/bf02435628>.
- [18] Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, and Jacques Derrida. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.
- [19] White, Hayden V., and Michael S. Roth. *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014.