



Sima Ehrentraut
*The dirt between
the folds.
Learning from
the archive*

Over the last two years, the working group After Accumulation – How to Handle the Archive Without Getting Burned has built a temporary platform to engage with the archive and the discourses surrounding it. Troubled by the contradictory features of the archive and its seductive promise of preserving histories by sheltering material traces in more or less institutional spaces, the project grew out of the need to understand the complexities of archival practices. We came together with the intention of educating ourselves on the multiple approaches to the archive that circulate in contemporary fields of theory. To do so, we aimed to entangle ourselves more in the reality of archiving and to get in touch with practitioners, artists and scholars working on the topic.

The reflection on the complicity of the (state) archive in processes of institutionalisation, hegemonic knowledge production and the creation of exclusionary accessibility to resources is a shared point of analysis in most theories dealing with the archive. However, critical discussions on the archive also provide a multitude of perspectives on thinking about the archive as a place for counter- and para-institutional practices of remembering and constructing community through entangled materialities and temporalities. Multiple workshops with Berlin-based community archives and cultural institutions – including events with the Spinnboden Lesbenarchiv, Sinema Transtopia and the Schwules Museum Berlin – created the basis for a more material-based and practically informed understanding of archives. A further part of the project was a reading group dedicated to discussing texts the group considered essential for re-thinking the archive as a place where the dynamics of power, selective

visibility and the desire for preservation intersect. After Accumulation also organised a series of workshops on structural racism, canon critique and critical teaching that took place at the Cluster of Excellence Temporal Communities – the institution that framed and financed the project.

Bringing together people of different academic backgrounds, disciplinary attachments and positionalities, After Accumulation tried to build a bridge between the –on many levels– privileged scholarly interest in the archive and contexts in Berlin where archives are done with a lot of effort and constantly undone under often precarious conditions. The confrontation with the messy materiality of archives, their at times overwhelming structure and their systems of order that are often shaped by makeshift taxonomies, taught us a more situated view of the archive. The project helped us understand the archive as a space dealing with abundance – and often failing to do so as a result of the problematic value placed on accumulation. It also gave us new insights into the archive as a living tool for creating material continuity and richness where it may have been previously absent or distorted and scattered due to the violent suppression of often unwanted, repressed and marginalised stories, lives and communities.

The following text is itself a material trace of the process that was facilitated by After Accumulation. It contains the shared processes of refection and lays open the experience of the archive in its ambivalence of loss and maintenance, as well as in its potential to counter the hegemonic narratives reigning over the archive and to work against the erasure of marginalised histories and futures.

When I look at terms such as ‘institution’ or ‘archive’, it seems as if nothing much has changed since their birth:

instituere, institutus, “to set up, put in place; arrange; establish; appoint, govern, administer; teach, instruct”, from in- “in” + statuere “establish, to cause to stand”, from *sta- “to stand, make or be firm”.

archives (n.)c. 1600, “records or documents preserved as evidence”, from French archiv (16c., Modern French archives), from Late Latin archivum (plural archiva) “written records”, also the place where they are kept, from Greek ta arkheia “public records”, plural of arkheion “town hall, public building”, from arkhē “government”, literally “beginning, origin, first place” (verbal noun of arkhein “to be the first”; see archon). The sense of “place where public records and historical documents are kept” in English is from the 1640s.

It is what institutions were doing yesterday, what they are doing today and unfortunately what they will be doing tomorrow. A continuous putting in place and arranging of subjects, an establishing of norms and a governing of bodies with the unconditional help of categories. And, in the case of the archive, from the assumed position of being *the first*. A position of the Western world, which claims undisputable neutrality and objectivity.

So how can we cause *the archive* to stumble? Besides the works of such brilliant writers as Saidiya Hartman or Ariella Azoulay, this movement is unfolding in places I have visited and worked in, which can be loosely subsumed under the term ‘community-based archives’.

These places take care of resistant knowledge born out of varying political circumstances. The ones I have visited grew out of queer and feminist and workers’ movements.



Kira Dell & Laura Seidel
Of matters and bodies
 – *unboxing community archives.*
Julia Lübbecke's exhibition
 Kleber und Falten
 at Neun Kelche (Berlin)

When thinking about archives, the mind starts wandering through long corridors, filled with shelves and boxes upon boxes—almost building a fortress of memories in our imagination. How many stories are trapped in there? Will they be preserved for a time that feels like an eternity? Who is eligible to enter their protected space and reveal their stories? In reality, ever so often there is no browsing among shelves. It is more likely we are not even allowed in the actual archive, where all the documents are stored. The suspected archival secrets might only cryptically present themselves to us through a library card, an index or an online catalogue. The stories of the archives might reveal themselves to us only partially through a folder or box that we are allowed to take a look at. Or, in the worst case, we might be denied access to their hallowed halls.

The nature of the state archives and other well-funded collections is based on exclusivity. Permission to access them might only be granted following a request that is deemed to be based on a legitimate research interest. And even if they are freely accessible, they still might be hard to navigate without years of academic training. Are all these precautions indeed simply protective measures, aimed purely at safeguarding crucial archival documents? What, then, is our societal consensus on what to preserve and what not to preserve? Whose belongings, writings and thoughts; what documents and evidence of past occurrences are so important that we want to keep them forever? So important we might be denied access altogether?

Community-based archives are the opposite of the described exclusive and subsidised scenario. Often started by a few individuals or a single person, they might be based on an informal collection, are open to a wider public, and visitors might be confronted with a much broader range of materials. Filling in the blanks of what might be a state's notion of memory, community-based archives are a place for stories from the margins and have been the site of Julia Lübbecke's artistic research over the past few years.

Archival operations not only are predicated on allowing immense databases to speak, they also give a textual voice to the silence of a forgotten reality and transform parts of the world that intrude upon it into material for a world yet to be fabricated.

– Wolfgang Ernst, *Stirrings in the Archives.*
Order from Disorder

Julia Lübbecke turns dusty archival matter into sophisticated installations. The artist finds her material in community archives that initially documented the history of the labour and women's movements dating back to the nineteenth century and have existed since the mid-1970s as a result of the New Social Movements. Interestingly, the artist chooses not to narrate the stories she finds in the archive through conventional storytelling via text or image, but instead lets the archival documents speak for themselves. The physicality of every component—the artist, archive material, art objects—plays an important role in her work. It takes a body to imagine another body, to build a body of work. Julia Lübbecke accumulates, describes, preserves and then often chooses to focus on lacunae and fleeting situations. In keeping with this approach, she transferred the archival environment and her own way of working in these precarious settings into the exhibition space Neun Kelche in Berlin-Weißensee, where her site-specific installation *Kleber und Falten* was shown from October 2023 until February 2024.