Archive, Photography and the Language of Administration

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Jane Birkin

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Introduction

Some years ago—I think it was in 2005—I was browsing through one of the printed catalogues in the Archives at the University of Southampton where I had recently started to work, trying to trace a particular photograph for a researcher. I was unexpectedly struck by the words on the page in front of me, which included such phrases as: 'a very large number of people (none of who is identified)' and 'brass band instruments (distant and indistinct)'. I was trying to find an image and these descriptions were there as finding aids, but the language used, simple and descriptive, yet guarded and non-committal—and with a particular emphasis on objects—has stayed with me. I copied the words down there and then, together with the manuscript numbers, thinking I would at some later point go and look for these photographs. At this time I was working as an artist with text and photographic images in a speculative and largely intuitive way, and I was extremely curious as to how these words related to the images they described. I imagined the photographs to be faded out wide shots, perhaps slightly soft and blurry, echoing the words on the page. In fact, I never did try to find these particular photographs and now I really do not want to see them. The words by themselves have become extremely significant to me, because they are so utterly representative of the affective nature of archival description. This affect does not only materialize through questions of how they might relate to—and afford imaginings of—the images they describe, but also in terms of the curious style of the administrative language itself. My own art practice is now firmly situated in the archive, and the questions and arguments put forward in this practice are explored through film, performance and print, always with language included. The linguistic element comes out of a conceptualization of the same institutional techniques of description that I was so taken by years ago. It is from this unusual position—as an artist, with an archive-related practice, also working in archives—that the breaking open of the language, systems and procedures of the institution is possible. It brings with it a consideration of what description does for the image, how it represents it and how it situates it within the archive system, and an appreciation of description in its own right, as a restricted and poetic writing form.

Hence, the title of this book has a duality of meaning, emphasizing both administrative language *per se*—at first glance, somewhat grey and formal but with inherent and systemic poetic worth—and the language of administration in a more operative way, as it draws us deep in to the systems and techniques of institutional spaces and into the image itself. The cataloguing process transports photographic objects into managed text-based spaces where they can be examined and understood alongside other objects, photographic or otherwise. Whilst institutional image description—predominantly visual content-based and operating at the level of the single object—does not engage with the image in a way that we are familiar with, it certainly does engage, as does the whole process of bringing photographs into the archive. The language of administration infiltrates the language of the image.

The process of image description is not thought of as a conceptual activity within archives (although the transfer from image to text involves quite a conceptual leap in itself) but, in the manner of the readymade, it is conceptualized as it is taken outside of its intended space. Conceptual writers, including the language-based conceptual artists of the 1960s and 70s and today's conceptual writers and poets, are discussed in this book in relation to the archive in terms of their performative (instructional) methodologies, their restricted writing techniques, and their engagement with what can broadly be termed recordkeeping. Photographers—and artists working with photography—are discussed for the just same reasons, except that we would need to use the words 'restricted imaging' instead of 'restricted writing' to describe their practices. Thus, a connection between 'archival' text and 'archival' image is forged in terms of their common methodological roots, and this is at the core of many arguments around the equivalence of the photograph and its description that are set out here.

In his correspondence with fellow artist Ruth McLennan,[1] Uriel Orlow argues that when one is not involved in specific archival research, it is possible to focus on the procedural aspects of archives, 'the sheer materiality of the collections, beyond the specific information its documents contain'.

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1   From October 2001 to July 2002, McLennan herself worked as artist in residence in the Archives of the British Library of Political and Economic Science, London School of Economics; this was the first time that an artist had been a resident in a UK academic archive. McLennan was treated as a member of the staff and enjoyed unlimited access to all archives. See a report on her residency, Tate Papers no.9: 'Art in the Archives: An Artist's Residency in the Archives of the London School of Economics' by LSE archivist Sue Donnelly. Available online at http://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/09/art-in-the-archives-an-artists-residency-in-the-archives-of-the-london-school-of-economics

He goes on to ask how we can comprehend 'the meaning and status of the archive as a whole, operating as it does like a memorial behind closed doors'. (p. 79) I aim to communicate the meaning of the archive through its operations, which I have observed on a day-to-day basis. At the same time, I want to reveal archive objects as more than memorials, as objects that remain with us in our contemporary milieu, ready and waiting to be put to use. My own practice—although it has informed large parts of this book and continues to prompt my writing—is only revealed here on a few occasions. In Chapter 4 there is a short extract from my 1300-word set-piece description *Patrons–watch–an–activist–004.jpg*, included in order to show how description connects us to the moment of capture. In the same chapter there are stills from my image-text films, series title *El Rastro*, which help interrogate the notion of the still image inside the film. In Chapter 5, I have provided more stills, this time from the film *Island*, entirely text-based and forming part of a discussion on the significance and the reading of grey literature, prompted by a passage from Fuller and Goffey's *Evil Media* (2012).

The experience of working behind the scenes in a large university archive has not only brought an understanding of the importance of the catalogue and the hidden objects and storage systems that it parallels and describes, it has also led me to recognize the vast amount of hidden labour that is involved in the keeping of archives. I am constantly struck by how something so physically static as an archive has so much human activity based around it. The researcher only sees the tip of the iceberg in terms of the space and the objects, and the many different people involved in maintaining both. With all this in mind, this book emphasizes the material aspects of the archive: the physical space made up of shelves, boxes and files, and the situating of the single object within this controlled space, together with the systematic, performative, human practices of cataloguing and description that record and uphold both. The labour of the archive, or the office, factory, shop, building site—or any other workplace for that matter—is often perceived as quite distinct from work that is designated as art. Yet we might get a sense that the work that is carried out in the archive, for example, is not all that different to that carried out by the artists, writers and photographers encountered in this book, in terms of predetermined structures and controlled methodologies that function in combination with human industry. We see artists and poets transcribing, copying, recordkeeping, alphabetizing, cataloguing, and following instruction. Thus, the lines between workplace labour and artistic labour become less distinct.

Inevitably, economics come into play here: description inside the archive institution is a costly and labour-intensive affair and object-level description

itself is a form of labour that is fast becoming too time consuming for some institutions to employ. A description of the length and detail of my *Patrons* description (mentioned above) could certainly never be carried out inside the archive, but art production is expected to be time intensive and it frequently comes up for criticism when it is not. Yet artists and writers experience the same difficulties that we see in the workplace with regard to time and money—they work in the real world after all and almost all artists carry out paid labour in order to support their practice, performing a delicate balancing act between the two kinds of labour. In my case—and I am very lucky in this respect—it is perhaps less of a balancing act, as I view my paid work as practice-based research.

Since I came across those image descriptions in 2005, and probably for a good ten years before that, the archive has been the focus of much academic study and art practice and has at the same time garnered broad public interest, particularly with reference to photographic material in each case. This could be in order to explore the visual histories of places, people and cultures; to give new value to old images through remix or re-contextualization; or for the increasingly popular activity of researching family history. This book does not attempt to further any ethnographic, cultural or historical discourse through archive photographs; indeed, there is not a great deal of debate around individual photographic objects at all, let alone what they might mean within a particular social or historical narrative. Instead of the 'what' they might mean, I focus here on 'how' they might mean; in particular, how the archive catalogue, with its hierarchical system of ordered and juxtaposed descriptions that mirror the physical storage systems, might advance the understanding of the archive and the photographs within it. The catalogue is presented not as a simple finding aid, but as a compact tool for deep thinking around single images, image sets and the temporalities inherent to both. The cataloguing, listing and enumeration of images, although produced to certain predetermined standards and using restricted and therefore distinctive language, is considered and valued as a form of knowledge production in its own right. I identify image description as an enduring technique that is best carried out directly by humans, rather than through the filter of a metadata schema or other computer algorithm.

Although I have enjoyed 'behind the scenes' visits to many archives in the course of my research and gained valuable insights as to the ways that they function on a physical level, with variations in space and scale producing operational differences, I inevitably and unapologetically draw on my experience of the large university archive where I work, which I have found to be a model of institutional archival practice. I make reference

to one photographic collection at Southampton in particular, that of the Mountbatten family, and the fragments of description that I mention at the beginning of this introduction refer to photographs from that collection. There are some 50,000 photographs in the Mountbatten Archive, with many of these described in detail. Examples of descriptions are used to support particular arguments, but at the same time they serve to acquaint the reader with what might be an unfamiliar form. All the descriptions from the Mountbatten Archive that are reproduced here are copyright of the University of Southampton.[2]

Another photographic collection from which I provide catalogue entries is the Harry Price Collection at the Senate House Library, University of London. Price was an amateur but well connected 'psychic detective' who specialized in investigating spiritualism and other psychical phenomena. He toggled alliances between populist organizations, such as the Magic Circle, and the National Laboratory of Psychical Research, which he formed in 1925, and which was to morph into the University of London Council for Psychical Investigation in 1934. Although this organization took the University's name, there were no official ties; the academic connection was constructed in order to add authority to Price's somewhat eccentric endeavours. But Price's investigations were rigorous in terms of organization and photographic documentation. They often took the form of self-contained, theatrical events, such as experiments with fire walking, with being buried alive, and with blindfolded reading, to give some examples. He also conducted controlled investigations into the fraudulent practices of well-known psychics in his 'laboratory'. Together with related material, the Harry Price Collection represents the archetypal personal archive, comprising many different media forms and with clear and traceable connections between the different parts. Likewise, the Mountbatten photographs are just one part of an extensive body of organized and well-catalogued records.

The efficacy of description as an enabler of theoretical and practical understanding of images is extended into a conversation around other places where image and language meet, from oral practices of talking around family photographs through to personal and social tagging (involving both paid and unpaid labour) and institutional metadata systems that are systematically applied to networked archive images. Many different types of image sets,

or 'archives', are considered in this book—public and private, formal and informal, physical and digital—but these are ultimately measured and tested against the rule-based ordering systems and performative cataloguing practices that are found within a traditional archive setting.

Recordkeeping and the power it affords is considered from the perspective of the cataloguing and description of materials in a direct and future-proof way—and of course through the work of the conservator, which is briefly touched on but is worthy of much more detailed scrutiny than I have room for here. All these activities make things available to researchers, and in their original context. The responsibility to keep archives open and accessible is a consideration here as much as it is in any discussion on recordkeeping, in government and anywhere that data is kept. In our networked world this is of great concern, as we cannot always trace, access or even *know* the scope of what is recorded. The visibility of archive material is dependent on available and workable technologies; in *Archive Fever*, Derrida asks, 'in what way has the whole of this field [of psychoanalysis] been determined by a state of the technology of communication and of archivization?' (1998, p. 16) And as Marlene Manoff argues, with reference to Derrida, 'If the archive cannot or does not accommodate a particular kind of information or mode of scholarship, then it is effectively excluded from the historical record.' She adds, and this is a critical consideration throughout this book, 'Electronic archives have very different implications for the historical record than do paper archives.' (p. 12) Wolfgang Ernst's writing is key to the understanding of the complexity—both the positives and the negatives—of the archive's transition into the digital milieu. To give an example—one that also relates to issues of archival visibility—in his essay 'Archive in Transition', Ernst reflects on the conflicts between the infinite possibilities of the machine-based search and the closed nature of standardization (2002, p. 479). Ernst's media-archaeological viewpoint is most valuable, combined as it is with a comprehensive understanding of the structures of the physical archive.

Some gaps in archives come down to obvious and sinister cover-ups by governments and corporations and many of these are well documented. Perhaps the most well-known is the attempt to destroy the records of GDR's intelligence agency (the Stasi), just before the reunification of Germany. Other cases will undoubtedly continue to be brought to light, although they may become increasingly difficult to uncover in the digital age. However, in *The Silence of the Archive*, Simon Fowler argues that 'the difficulty of using online finding aids is perhaps the greatest silence that users now meet'. He cites poor interface design, the use of archival jargon, and the absence of any clear description of how the records are arranged, as factors that make it

difficult not only for users to find material, but to be sure that it even exists. These factors are exacerbated by the fact that the user is normally working remotely, with no archivist on hand to help. This, Fowler argues, impacts most on 'the elderly, the less educated and those from ethnic minorities'. (p. 59) And Ernst argues that distributed digital archives bring with them a new kind of archival secrecy, even if the old institutional archive is 'deprived of its traditional power' when it becomes accessible online (2016, pp. 14-15). There are also many practical reasons why documents cannot be made available: some are suppressed by data protection regulations because they are connected with people who are still living; and there objects that may be deemed 'unfit for production' due to their degraded physical state.

All this has to be taken into account when trying to make sense of archives. Manoff describes how postcolonial scholars, for example, have needed to adopt strategies of reinterpretation of information in order to 'call into question the colonial version of events' (p. 16). In other words, they turn the focus on the subjects of colonialism instead of the administrators and examine the gaps in the records as much as the records themselves. Likewise, Allan Sekula in his essay 'Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital' concludes: 'The archive has to be read from below, from a position of solidarity with those displaced, deformed, silenced or made invisible by the machineries of profit and progress.' (2003, p. 451) The disordered and incomplete nature of archives, their position in our contemporary milieu, and the possibilities for their reconfiguration are always already present, and these aspects are emphasized in this book. It must at the same time be noted that researchers have their own agendas and may use archives to strengthen existing power structures.

The ordered and material view of the archive that I offer in this book differs to that revealed by Derrida in *Archive Fever*, where 'Archive' is perceived as 'only a *notion*' (1998, p. 25 [original italics]) and becomes a metaphor for complex dialogue on past and future, on memory and death, through Freud's theories of psychoanalysis. In an interview with Geert Lovink, Ernst cites his research year at the German Historical Institute in Rome as the first time that he recognized the materiality of 'real archives'. This was to be a factor in Ernst connecting his own past involvement with French poststructuralism with his theoretical interest in archives. He remarks:

> I then discovered that no place can be more deconstructive than archives themselves, with their relational but not coherent topology of documents that wait to be reconfigured, again and again. The archival subject is thus a way out of the postmodern aesthetics of arbitrary anything goes—without

having to return to authoritarian hermeneutics [...] The simple fact is that archives exist not only in metaphorical ways, as described by Foucault and Derrida, but as part of a very real, very material network of power over memory. (2013, p. 194)

It must be noted, however, that in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault correctly defines the archive—without metaphor—as 'that which determines that all these things do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity' (2002, p. 145).

Foucault's comments on archival accumulation are tied to the notion of original order, the preservation of the order of material as it enters the archive, whether from an individual, company or organization. This is a developmental or diachronic order, often confusingly non-chronological and with no apparent narrative. Time and complex temporal anomalies are therefore part and parcel of the archive and are fundamental to its reading and its understanding; Guiliana Bruno (n.p.) calls for a working through of 'the dynamics and tensions expressed by the aggregates of disparate mnemonic materials'. The diachronic nature of the archive, the building up of objects over time, is apposite to Foucault's ideas on the research model of archaeology. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he argues that objects may sometimes be 'temporally neutral' and may at other times imply a 'particular temporal direction'. He explains how archaeology 'tries to show the intersection between necessarily successive relations and others that are not so. [...] Far from being indifferent to succession, archaeology maps the *temporal vectors of deviation*.' (2002, p. 186 [original italics]) It is the temporal mapping of discrete yet interconnected relations that the archive catalogue does so effectively, as it presents a clear, hierarchical, list-based consolidation of particular units of description.

Although the book starts with historical encounters with image archivization and ends with a discussion of the post-digital archive, this is not a strictly chronological journey. The temporal structure of the book mirrors the temporality of the archive itself, as different time zones are dipped in and out of in a media-archaeological manner. There is consideration throughout of traditional archival systems and technologies and how they might connect with, or have influence on, today's models of the digital archive and the image within it. Media archaeology offers an understanding of digital cultures through physical examination and critique of past media forms and therefore has clear connections to this study of the archive, which is overtly material in its base but extendable to less material concepts and values. In their article 'Zombie Media: Circuit Bending Media Archaeology

into an Art Method', Garnet Hertz and Jussi Parikka argue that archives, just like consumer electronics in this respect, present themselves as boxes waiting to be 'cracked open, bent and modified' (p. 429). This idea is critical to the understanding of the wider sense of the archive as seen through a media archaeological lens—opening up, digging out, and repurposing are embedded in media-archaeological methodologies, as well as in archival research methods. It is also central to the view—which runs all through this book—that although an archive may be static, boxed and compartmental-ized, its stasis safeguarded by institutional cataloguing and storage methods, it is an overtly dynamic system.

The word 'archive' is itself now incorporated into our digital vocabu-lary and the structure of the archive has firm ties to the organization of digital media of all kinds. In addition to the word 'archive' itself, various linguistic terms—such as 'file' and 'document'—have migrated in a very metaphorical way from the workings of the physical archive to that of the network, echoing media-archaeological thought and in turn being analysed by it. Cornelia Vismann emphasizes the reality of these ties, as she explains how 'files and their techniques organize the very architecture of digital machines' (p. 164). Conversely, as Bruno (n.p.) points out, the apparent immateriality of networks has provoked a deep fascination for the materiality of the archive, and this has become a media-archaeological focus in its own right. In terms of a material and media theoretical view of documents and the practices of documentation, Lisa Gitelman's *Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of the Document* (2014), and Cornelia Vismann's *Files: Law and Media Technology* (2008), are books that enable an understanding of the archive and its techno-administrative reach, through their respective studies of the status of the document and the mechanics of the file; and in both cases with an emphasis on the materiality of the objects.

In his book *What is Media Archaeology*, Jussi Parikka argues it to be key that media archaeology thinks through its ties with archival institu-tions, just as philosophy and cultural theory have done in the past, and he recognizes the importance of the archive to the study of media itself (2012, pp. 5-6). He positions the archive as a storage space that gives rise to a media-archaeological examination that follows on from 'Foucault's expansion of the concept from the concrete physical places of storage of cultural data to the discourses that govern modes of thinking, acting, and expression' (ibid., p. 113). Parikka also perceives the storage and preservation of cultural heritage as 'an index to understand time, to rethink time, that is at the core of the wider media-archaeological process' (2013, p. 12).

The embedded time of the photograph and the temporality of the image set are approached in this study through an analysis of archival practices of ordering, cataloguing and describing, with hierarchies of description—from *fonds*,[3] to series, to file, to single item—indicating the progress from general to specific time. Furthermore, the photograph is positioned as paralleling the static nature of the archive environment as a whole: the camera freezes and indexes time in a way that parallels archival notions of stasis, and the photograph itself represents the preservation of discrete yet interconnected units of information for future use. It is a material reality that, like the archive itself, preserves the past, is ever situated in the present, and is there for the future. At the same time, and exactly because of the operational and time-critical qualities inherent in the dry language of archival administration, the poetic nature of the 'writing' of the image prevails, and this aspect of description sits entirely outside of time.

Chapter structure

The first chapter of this book takes a historical view of the archivization of the image, always with one eye on technology, as Derrida's use of the term suggests (1998, p. 16). Positioned as precursors to early photographic documentation, seventeenth-century publications in the natural sciences are explored for their differing descriptive styles as well as their images. There follows an examination of the classificatory powers of the camera and the ways in which the image has been incorporated into the archival system, from early scientific imaging, through to the work of photographers such as Alphonse Bertillon and August Sander, via Sekula's seminal essay on the photograph as a tool of archival administration, 'The Body and the Archive' (1986). There is detailed discussion in this chapter on the position of August Sander's *People of the Twentieth Century*, a project begun in 1892 and running through to the mid-twentieth century, with an enquiry as to whether it should be classed as a scientific venture, or if the science (physiognomy in this case) is used to validate the art. Alphonse Bertillon's work for the Paris Police Archive in the late 1800s is clearer in its intent, with physiognomy at the forefront of his bleak photographic work and

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3   A *fonds* is an archive group that sits at the top of the description hierarchy. All the material in a *fonds* comes from the same organization or individual, and the order in which the organization or individual has kept it is preserved in the archive. The term *respect des fonds* denotes the maintenance of original order,

written documentation. The chapter ends with an analysis of the work of contemporary artist-photographers who uphold these classificatory practices, and who in some way refer back to early works of classification. For example, Sander's opus is echoed and referenced in Adam Broomberg and Oliver Chanarin's 2013 project *Spirit is a Bone*, as are issues of state surveillance that link back to Bertillon. A constant theme in this chapter is the rub between photography as art and its authority as document, from early attempts to position portrait photography as a fine art, to the present day where *the* document and *to* document are accepted parts of fine art practice.

Chapter 2 examines the concept of 'archive' in the social sphere. Popular photography and the language that accompanies it are scrutinized here firstly through an examination of the family album, whose viewing requires an unscripted narration that is liable to change with each presentation. Next, the slideshow—it too requires a voice-over—is examined as a mechanical technology that bridges the gap between album and home movie, and the slide carousel itself is framed as a device for archiving. Whereas the photograph album, like the home movie, has a beginning and an end that are fixed, the slideshow is a more nebulous form: the order of slides, and therefore the stories they tell, are subject to change when necessary. Vilèm Flusser fears the effects of the commercialization of photography, the de-skilling and the condition that he calls 'photo-mania', all of which he connects to the new availability and the automation of the snapshot camera (2000 [1983], pp. 57-58). Flusser's anxieties around the addiction to photography are taken forward to the social media milieu: an age of unprecedented access to the making and the receiving of photographs; an age where Parikka argues that 'we are miniarchivists ourselves' (2013, p. 2), as we organize and store our own material. In a social media context, the language around photographs takes the form of comment and tag. The motivations for tagging and the consequences for the image are examined in the final part of this chapter.

The third chapter takes us inside the archive and deals with the management of objects through institutional cataloguing systems. The notion of original order is scrutinized; its roots and its inherent discontinuities, and particularly the implications for photographic sets. Michel Foucault calls for discontinuity to become 'both an instrument and an object of research' (2002, p. 10) and discontinuity is reflected upon within a discussion of enumeration and of non-narrative forms: the catalogue list is considered as a highly visual form that allows relationships between objects to be understood and plots to build. The catalogue presents archive collections—their scope and their significance—in a succinct and graspable way, and I therefore

term it 'a machine for thinking' (after Vestberg, 2013). The description of the single image is also considered in terms of Erwin Panofsky's text on iconography, where it is firmly placed at a pre-iconographic level, as a very literal rendition of the visual content of the image, using language that must be understood within our shared systems of knowledge (pp. 3-17). This leads us to the *reading* of the image: archive image description is a form of recordkeeping, it is dry yet participatory, written for a specific audience but with no specific future use in mind. Lastly, there is a critique of the use of metadata schema in archives, which is framed here as a time-saving strategy that does well in terms of networking and interoperability, yet is relatively poor in terms of accuracy of description, and therefore in its primary role as a finding aid.

In Chapter 4, and following on from ideas posited in the first chapter, I argue the camera's persistence and growth as a tool for archivization; how camera technology continues to facilitate investigation, for example, in terms of surveillance techniques. Underpinning this, the chapter focuses on the idea of photographic registration, the discrete image time that is determined and recorded by the shutter of the apparatus involved. This moment (and the exact duration of the moment varies) is subsequently preserved in the archive catalogue directly and clearly through the language of visual content-based image description. Photography is thus presented as a form of spatial and temporal recordkeeping and Laura Mulvey's concept of 'inscription' and her analysis of the source of the still image's place in time within a film (pp. 116-117) is examined alongside D.P Fowler's notion of 'narrative pause' in description (p. 25). Building on the notion of the pause in the narrative, a set of descriptions of a series of images, a catalogue list from the Harry Price Archive, is examined through a filmic gaze, as the disorder of original order presents textual flashbacks, jump cuts and close shots. There is a discussion of the developmental temporalities and non-narrative juxtapositions in Chris Marker's 1962 film *La Jetée*, and comparisons are drawn to the Harry Price list. Liam Cole Young posits the list itself as 'a paradigmatic form of non-narrative inscription'. (2014, n.p.) This designation fits completely with regard to the Price example. Image time is further considered through notions of 'tense' and 'aspect' in both single images and image sequences such as this, and through the lens of descriptive practices. Finally, the importance of the camera as it is used inside the archive is considered. The temporal status of the archive copy is examined, with digitization of photographic images framed as a second moment of registration, as a form of documentation, and as having major implications for the status and even the survival of the original object.

Chapter 5 considers some of the ideas behind archive-related art. The aesthetics of degradation is posited as a way in which artists and photographers have visualized time, memory and loss, in a broadly anthropological way, through archival media. Yet, it is argued, archival degradation is a something of a popular myth, and is tied up with the routine use of photo filters and apps that now permeate social media. Dust is largely 'the stuff of fairy tales' (Parikka, 2015, p. 85), as state-of-the-art environmental management systems and conservation techniques keep dust and decay at bay in today's archive. The chapter turns its focus from the largely anthropological and nostalgic notions of the degraded image to the system-driven performative practices that are shared by archivists and art practitioners alike. Performativity is defined here by Margaret Iversen in her 2010 essay 'Auto-maticity: Ruscha and Performative Photography', where she frames it as a 'putting into play repetition and the inherently iterative character of the instruction'. (p. 15) This definition has clear confluence with archival practices, which are, as detailed in Chapter 3, carried out to predetermined standards and therefore result in the human-system hybridity that Iversen argues is crucial to performative photography. The discussion includes not only photographers, but extends to artists who work purely with text, including conceptual writers and poets. Archival description is identified a type of 'grey literature'; as a poetic and rhythmic form; and as part of the wider poetics of administration. There is a plea to raise the status of the much-maligned description, giving it true freedom and autonomy (D. P. Fowler, pp. 26-27). The poetic nature of description is indeed intensified when it is freed from the archive and brought into the wider world, where it becomes a radical form of writing.

Chapter 6 is a final and somewhat shorter chapter than the rest, and it also acts as an afterword. It revisits certain themes and arguments, but from the distinct viewpoint of our position in what is known as the post-digital milieu; we are now in a place where we can offer some critique on the digital, at least in part through an examination of physical systems of storage, preservation, search and retrieval. Many issues that have long been prioritized in archival circles: preservation, security, privacy and context, for example, are now also at the forefront of network discourse and are deliberated in this final chapter. Borrowing a metaphor from screen-based technologies—and also from Alessandro Ludovico (p. 7) and Jaques Derrida (2005, pp. 62-63) in relation to the book as object—the chapter frames the archive as an enduring 'interface' that has stood the test of time. Conversely, the metaphorical uses of archival and administrative terms in discussions of the network are commonplace, including the word 'archive' itself, and various metaphors are questioned as to their viability; the term 'memory' is given special attention.

The chapter presents the physical archive—with its catalogue running in parallel—as a stable and static back-up for the digital, and not the other way around as is widely perceived in arguments around the digitization of archives. The enduring efficacy of object-level description is emphasized, even in the digital milieu, as an effective and practical tool for unlocking archives, for making them visible, as well as existing independently as an idiosyncratic and poetic way of writing the image.

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