



Royal College of Art

**Turn to the Archive!
Ethics and the Making, Encountering,
Imagining and Missing of the Archive**

A symposium on archives, ethics and artists' film and video

Thursday 23 April 2015
Gorvy Lecture Theatre
Dyson Building
Battersea SW11 4AS

In conjunction with the RCA Research Biennial, *Why Would I Lie?* (18–25 April 2015), exploring ethics and aesthetics in contemporary research practices connected to art and design

Programme

10.00–10.30 Coffee, registration and welcome

10.30–12.30 **The Making of Archives: Institutional, Artists' and Digital Archives** chaired by **Prof. Juan Cruz**, Dean of School of Fine Arts, RCA

Prof. Sean Cubitt, Professor of Film and Television, Department of Media and Communications, Goldsmith University
Archive Aesthetics

We are challenged by the conference title with an ethical enquiry. It requires some sense of the field of ethics: perhaps not a definition, but a placing of ethics in relation to politics and, given the terrain of the archive, to aesthetics. Working on the Rewind archive of video art makes clear the responsibility of the archivist. If on the one hand we must argue the value of archives to the present and future, we also undertake the work in full recognition of a duty owed to the past. The pastness of archived materials is legible in their fragility. It is easy to see how pastness and fragility are aesthetic qualities. In this paper I want to ask whether, and if so how, they may also be political in a sense made all too clear by the destruction of antiquities and ancient sites by impoverished militia and wealthy collectors. What might an archive mean to the *polis*? And what might it mean to engage ethically with technical archives in the Anthropocene?

Mercedes Vicente, Curator, writer and PhD Candidate, RCA

The Darcy Lange archive was consolidated upon the artist death at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Zealand and has been temporarily loaned to the Royal College of Art's Special Collections. An alumnus of the RCA, Lange (New Zealand, 1946–2005) developed during the 1970s a socially engaged video practice in Britain, with remarkable studies of people at work that draw from documentary traditions as well as conceptual and structuralist videomaking. Drawing from her experience of building this archive, Vicente will reflect on some of the pressing questions regarding the making and public access of an artist's archive: from the initially more affirmatively preservationist impulse of rescuing the remnants of an artist who had received little scholarship to critically examine the contents of this archive, its use and value. Vicente will raise some of the ethical questions in acknowledging her complicit position as the engineer of the formation and dissemination of Lange's archive, and ultimately the revival of his work.

Etienne Sandrin, Curator New Media, Centre Pompidou

In focus: Chris Marker's Zapping Zone (Proposal for an Imaginary Television) 1990–94

Chris Marker's *Zapping Zone (Proposal for an Imaginary Television)* is the first and one of the artist's most remarkable multi-media installations, described by the film critic Louis-José Lestocart as "a series of videos of people he knew and loved, a *Mnemosyne* divided up into zones that were like islands, archipelagos, deserts, overpopulated lands, continents and terra incognita." Produced by the Centre Pompidou in 1990, *Zapping Zone* is also a key referent of pioneering computer technology. Sandrin, in conversation with Mercedes Vicente, will discuss his involvement, working alongside a group of experts, in the retrieving and preservation Marker's work and archive at Centre Pompidou since the artist death in 2012.

12.30–13.30 Lunch break

13.30–15.30 **The Encountering of Archives: Contest, Retrace, Reconstruct, Undo and Imagine the Archive** chaired by **Antony Hudek**, Curator and Deputy Director, Raven Row

Jeremy Millar, Artist and Tutor, Critical Writing in Art and Design, RCA

Archives and collections, real and imagined, have been central to Jeremy Millar's practice for over twenty years. In 1994 he established the fictitious 'Institute of Cultural Anxiety' from which he then supposedly borrowed works for display at the ICA, London; in 2015 he will begin making a film on John Dee for the Royal College of Physicians, drawing upon their large collection of the Elizabethan polymath's own books. In this presentation, Millar will reflect upon his work with such archives and collections, and will screen his short film *Human Form in Art* (2008), which was shot at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, an important point of reference for much of his work.

Ruth Maclennan, Artist and PhD Candidate in Photography, RCA
The Enchanted Archive

The archive is an idea, a place, an institution, a resource, a material, a performance, a promise. Archives have the capacity to change the narrative, to correct history, to stop you in your tracks... that is the archive ideal. You will find the truth in the archive, eventually, and enjoy the journey that takes you to it. Drawing on my experiences of archives and examples of my work I will reflect on the power of the archive to enchant and seduce, and the dangers and uses of this enchantment. I shall take the archive outside and consider what happens to the archival principle of outside a temperature-controlled environment: thinking of the changing matter of archives and what we might do with the archives of lost ecosystems. I shall use the material, linguistic, performative, associative and imaginative potential of the archival principle to unsettle dualities such as nature/culture and consider how the idea of the archive contributes to an ecological ethics.

George Clark, Assistant Curator Film, Tate Modern
Ben Caldwell and L.A. Rebellion: Ethnography and the Archive

Reflecting on a recent turn to the archive in artists practice and in particular the legacy of ethnographic collections this presentation will reflect on the role of the film archive in two distinct ways. Firstly the talk will focus on the recent and ongoing archival research and restoration project L.A.

Rebellion: Creating a New Black Cinema developed by UCLA Film and Television Archive, and launched as part of Pacific Standard Time: Art in LA 1945–1980 in October 2011. This ongoing project, currently subject of film season at Tate Modern, explores the history of African American and African filmmakers who studied at UCLA between 1960–1990. Initially entering the school through the Ethno-communications department and building on the ethnographic film unit at UCLA, these filmmakers forged a unique body of work responding to the legacy of ethnographic film, third cinema and the social political climate of their period. As well as reflecting on the origins of this group of filmmakers and the recent archival project to retrieve and represent these films, the talk will focus on the experimental work produced by artist and media educator Ben Caldwell during this period. Caldwell's work with film and video archives, including material drawn from the ethnographic film archive at UCLA, seeks to address questions of history, media representation and memory.

15.30–16.00 Coffee break

16.00–17.30 **Roundtable and final conclusions**

Following the symposium:

18.00–20.00 **Screenings of artists' film and video – Re-imaginings of the Future (see [programme](#))**

This symposium seeks to explore how and in what ways ethics may be used to question the archive and reciprocally the archive to question ethics, in the making of and the encountering with institutional, artists', digital and other types of archives in moving image. It aims also to interrogate their function, institutionalisation, legitimacy, custody, and authority as well as the myriad ways artists contest, retrace, borrow, reconstruct, undo and imagine the archive to reveal ethical dimensions.

In the current digital age, the overload of information lures even amateur archivists to build their own archives. Raqs Media Collective reminds us that the “enhanced ‘visibility’ of the crises, particularly as a result of the intensification of the extensive presence of media networks, threatens to overwhelm all repositories of significant representations. [...] [I]n order to apprehend reality as it is, in all its disarray, it has to permit the entry of the document as a ‘stable’ referent of the chaotic world it inhabits.” Yet, too, the archive as mnemonic device is fragmentary and selective. In what way might still and moving images, documents and material remnants represent or conceal history by virtue of what has survived from the past? Are fictive reconstructions of the archive more representative of the real? Is the archive a repository or a testimony? What is the archive’s authority in relation to its subject? Does the archive play an ethical function or serve to raise ethical questions? Does it shape or reveal our relationship to the past? How does the archive engage with multiple temporal zones: past, present and future? What do institutions/artists accumulate, (re)store, preserve and how is this changing in our digital age?

This symposium is convened by Mercedes Vicente, a curator and writer undertaking an AHRC-funded doctorate at the Royal College of Art. Vicente is contributing editor of *Darcy Lange: Study of an Artist at Work* (Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Zealand and Ikon Gallery, 2008) published in conjunction with the exhibition *Darcy Lange Work Studies in Schools* (Ikon Gallery, 2008).

The Darcy Lange Archive has been generously loaned to the RCA by Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and is held at RCA Special Collections.