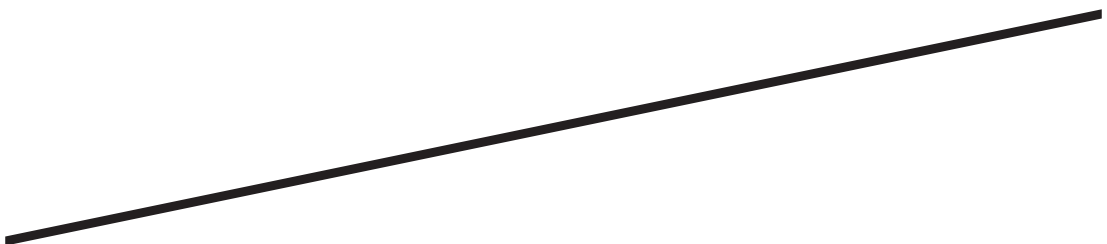




PAST IMPERFECT //
FUTURE PRESENT



Alexander Opper	Karin Preller	Tabita Rezaire
Ayana V. Jackson	Michelle Monareng	Uriel Orlow
Bogosi Sekhukhuni	Minnette Vári	Zanele Muholi
Jo Ractliffe	Santu Mofokeng	





PAST IMPERFECT// FUTURE PRESENT

24 March to 15 May 2015

FADA Gallery
University of Johannesburg

Curated by the Visual Identities
in Art and Design Research Centre



(Front cover)
Minnette Vári
Installation view,
Revenant Study V
2012
Pigment ink on
archival paper
32 x 22cm
Photo by Clive Hassall

(Inside front cover)
Ayana V. Jackson
*Does the Brown Paper
Bag Test Really Exist?/
Will My Father Be Proud?*
2013
Archival pigment print
137 x 108.5cm
Courtesy of the artist
& Gallery MOMO

(Left)
Alexander Opper
Installation view,
*Derrière les Panneaux
Publicitaires
(Behind the Billboards)*
2015
Single channel video
projection onto
billboard-like object
(wood and paint)
2100 x 200 x 100cm
Photo by Clive Hassall

Fiddling fast-forward

By Brenton Maart

Past Imperfect // Future Present features the work of visual practitioners engaging with complexities of, and rethinking possibilities for, contemporary archival practices. Of specific interest are artists who use lens and digital media to wrangle with the thorny filigree of fragments and traces, and who negotiate pathways through camouflaged breaches in these convoluted registers of memory. Reflecting on the fragments, traces and omissions within archives of the past and present, these artists re-imagine and reconstruct new narratives from within their contemporary contexts. In drawing on, re-interpreting, reframing, re-activating, re-appropriating and, as I term these processes in the inconclusive conclusion of this essay, ‘fiddling with’ archival content, they ‘speak with’ existing archives, thereby setting up a conversation that takes place in-between the spaces of interchange.

Lineages of new practices can usually be easily traced. They often originate as special-interest branches or single links, and later advance into defined sub-sets of their predecessors. Throughout, they maintain secure familial associations. Their evolution is typically cautious, decorous, and modest. However, this is not the case for contemporary creative archive practice, stemming as it does from material common to nearly every extant discipline across the Humanities. Archive practice, which emerged in the mid-1990s continuing into the 2000s, did so via parallel processes in different disciplines. Its parents appear to have opted for an open relationship – polygamous and non-discriminatory – and its formative years are characterised by the avaricious, provocative and frenzied attentions of lascivious, free-range swingers. Jacques Derrida’s term “archive fever”, coined in 1995, is an apt biomedical term for describing the ensuing mania.

Artists designed tools to visualise the messy affair and, although these helped clarify the situation, the resulting pictures were neither sweet nor savoury. Clearly there was work to be done. Deep breaths were taken as fervors and fevers abated. Heads cleared and spirits lifted. Remnants of lost faculties were gathered and pooled, and from this primordial amnion emerged a love child; wobbly but with good bones and the long legs required for traversing disciplines, geographies, histories, and temporalities.

In starting to wade through this murky terrain, it is important to identify ways in which the historical or ‘official’ (usually state-sanctioned) archive may be understood in contemporary terms. Charles Merewether (2006:10) designates the archive as “the means by which historical knowledge and forms of remembrance are accumulated, stored and recovered”, noting that it “constitutes a repository or ordered system of documents and records that is the foundation from which history is written”. For Foucault (2006 [1969]:19), the archive is not a “sum of all texts that a culture has kept ... as documents attesting to its own past”, but an “underlying structure governing thought systems and values of any given society, in relation to its own people and others”. According to Foucault, these systems govern what is said and unsaid; recorded or unrecorded, pointing to the integral relationship between popular discourse and power realised through the archive. Foucault’s (2006) notion of the ‘flexible archive’ (which he privileges over the ‘unyielding archive’), is picked up in Carolyn Hamilton’s (2010) invitation to unravel delimitations by addressing the contemporary archive as a contested subject and medium “where the politics of knowledge emerge”, and where inclusion as a reflection of power is “formed as a consequence of recognition and acknowledgement”.

Power and politics are the polygamous bedmates of seduction and desire, and the archive may be considered the material manifestation of their fornication. This procreated archive is given imaginative flight in Ann Laura



no 17
Rustenburg, 1911-1912
Café, 1911-1912



Stoler's (2002:87) concept of the "figurative archive" as a "metaphor for any corpus of selective forgettings and collections". It is this ephemerality that partially bestows to the archive a fluidity that, nearly a decade earlier, might have led Derrida (1995) to interpret the archive as dynamic, shifting, twisting, doubling back; not subject to a stagnant time and space but effected by new technologies spanning from the analogue click to the digital drone.

Currently, new digital technologies enable potentially countless personal and public archives. Created by individuals and collectives, and accessible to, and interacting with, global audiences, digital caches and databases have become new archival forms. Those working in the digital realm push the archive into new territories, exploring the ongoing expansion and diversification it offers. Using social media and digital spaces, archival practitioners blur the lines between the intimate and the public through ongoing performances of identities within, and in response to, constantly transforming and emergent digital terrains.

These contemporary understandings of the archive provide a theoretical backdrop to the curators' work with the artists and their archival practices – a critical delineation which coalesces into forms of engagement with personal, private, public and institutional archives, and the ways in which they collide. As evidenced in the work on the exhibition, these rhizomatic processes are multi-faceted, and differentiated. Further, the nexus between the artists, their concepts and artworks demonstrate how creative theories and practices coalesce at nodes, before diverging further into entanglement.

Key curatorial questions around the exhibition are to explore how the archive can become a site through which subjectivities and identities are formed; expose how contemporary creative practice wrestles the weight of history for its power; and consider ways in which these tacks of war might be applied in the contemporary world. In what follows, I discuss how artworks featured on **Past Imperfect // Future Present** highlight a diversity of practices, thereby, like the curators, bringing a (thin) slither of contemporary archival addresses into view.

Ayana V. Jackson's digital photograph, *Case 33 VI* (2013), provides a keynote to the exhibition. In contemporary visual practice from 'the (post) colonies', the return of the gaze – often through direct eye contact between subject and viewer – serves as an important strategy to counteract the perceived flow of power. However, in Jackson's self-portrait, she turns her back to the viewer in a gesture that negates the viewer's gaze. Jackson thus uses her body to contribute to, and as a marker of, contemporary racial and gender politics, with its field arsenal of direct confrontation and contemptuous disavowal.

Jackson's gesture of denial deftly writes the viewer out of her version of history. The soft-focus sepia of the image belies, ironically, the most violent of its intentions: an enforcement of anti-racist racism. Jackson's use of this strategy – pivotal to Pan Africanism and the Negritude movement – becomes a reflection of the contemporary rise of a near-biblical approach of equitable retribution.

In *Does the Brown Paper Bag Test Really Exist? / Will my Father be Proud?* (2013), Jackson adopts the positions of six late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century black women from Spelman College in Georgia, USA. In *Diorama* (2012), she draws on tropes of early modern black exoticism, her naked body posed seductively against a lush, green wilderness. These works point to a spectrum of representations in colonial archives, wherein signifiers of desire mark the black female body. Her re-insertion of her black female body into Southern African and American colonial photographic frames becomes a means by which the artist engages with gendered and racist subjectivities present in the original archives.

(Previous spread)
Michelle Monareng
Installation view,
Removal to Radium
2013
Mixed media 2 channel video
Installation with sound
Continuous cycle 1:15 mins
Photo by Clive Hassall

(Right)
Zanele Muholi
Left - Right:
Ayanda Radebe, Vosloorus,
Johannesburg, 2011

Bongiwe 'Twana' Kunene,
Kwanele South, Katlehong,
Johannesburg, 2012

Debora Dlamini, KwaThema
Community Hall, Springs,
Johannesburg, 2011

Millicent Gaika, Gugulethu,
Cape Town, 2011

Namhla Kele, NY147 Gugulethu,
Cape Town, 2011

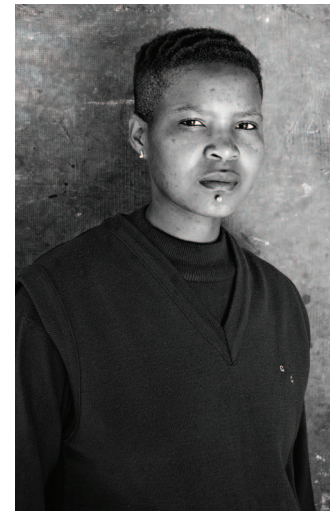
Noluthando Tebhasi Sibisi,
Pietermaritzburg,
KwaZulu Natal, 2012

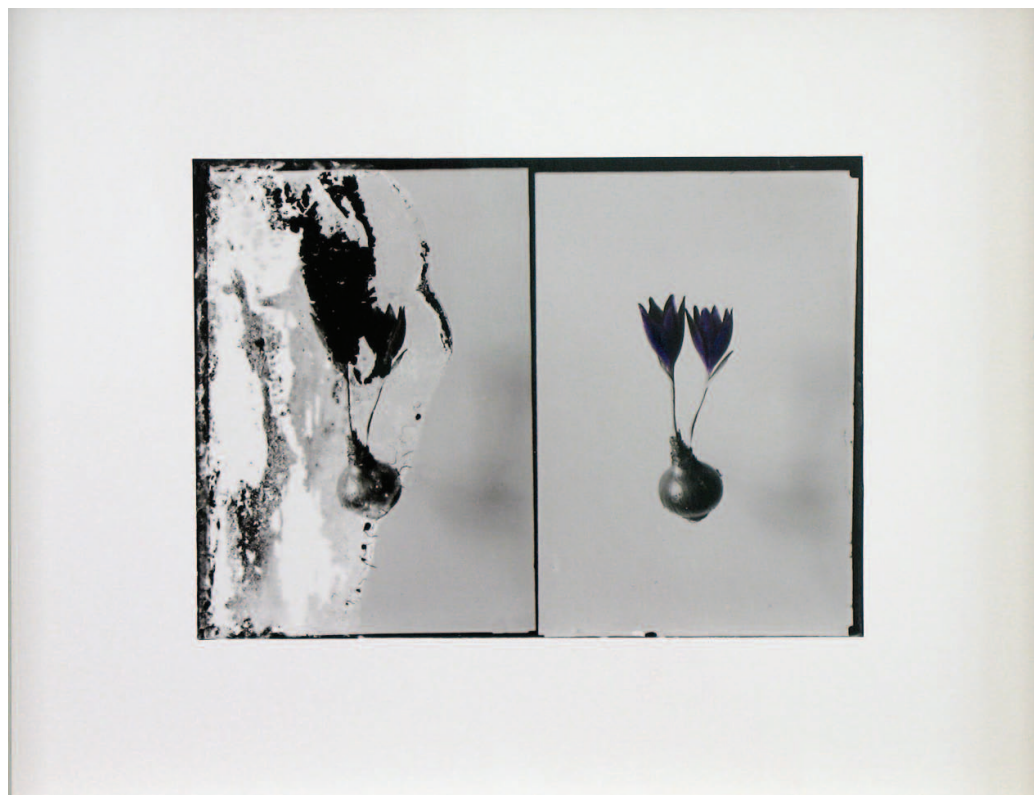
Nondi Vokwana, NY147
Gugulethu Cape Town, 2011

Ntandokazi Magaga, Makhaza,
Khayelitsha, Cape Town, 2011

Sizile Rongo-Nkosi, Glenwood,
Durban, 2012

From the series
Faces and Phases, 2006 -
Silver gelatin prints
86.5 x 60.5cm
Courtesy of the artist &
STEVENSON, Johannesburg





Uriel Orlow
Double Vision (Native Plants)
2013
Hand-tinted black and white silver
gelatin fiber-based prints
24 x 29cm
Courtesy of the artist

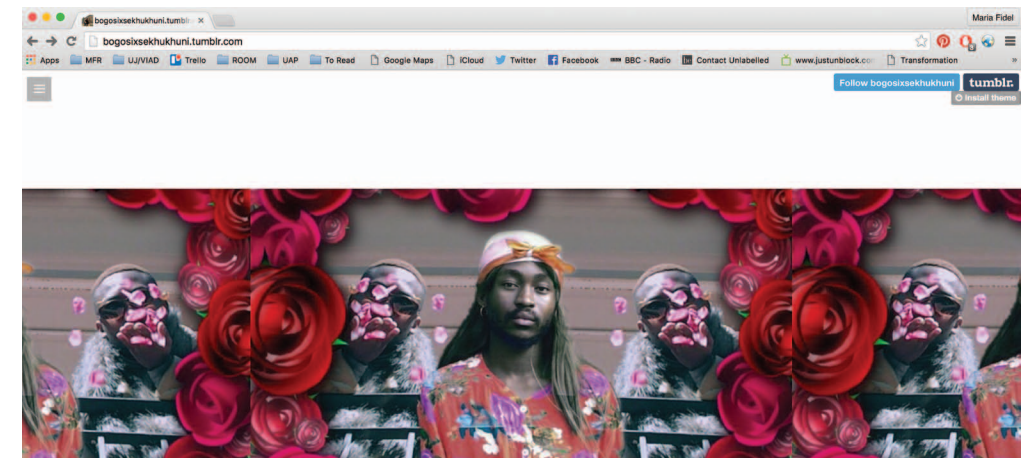
As a counterpoint to Jackson's focus on the refigured archival fragment, in her ongoing photographic project *Faces and Phases* (2006-), Zanele Muholi addresses omissions in historical or official archives. Using a strategy of 'visual activism', Muholi has developed the project in ways that inscribe a new archive – one that documents and gives visibility to primarily black lesbian existence and experience – into the prevailing canon. As with Jackson's work, Muholi's series is grounded in her experience of a perceived otherness; in it, she reflects on this disjuncture, as well as its prevalence and effect.

The selected portraits show lesbians from the South African informal settlements of Khayeltisha, Vosloorus, Gugulethu, Katlehong, Sibisi and Glenwood. In each photograph, the subject looks directly at the camera, returning the viewer's gaze with a defiant sense of self-assertion. This is the first step in the process of self-representation: counter-exertion of power through the gaze. Muholi's dynamic process of archive production not only records and makes visible black lesbians' presences in the face of stigmatisation and persecution, but does so in terms that empower individuals to assert a sense of personal agency in their provocative confrontation with the camera/viewer. In a similar way to Jackson's application of anti-racist racism as a tool of synthesis and as a strategy to subvert colonial alienation, Muholi applies her anti-homophobic 'visual activism' in a country that continues to negate, and seems unable to digest anything but hetero-normative sexuality.

This heated turf of human rights abuses prompts one to look at the archive from another angle: that of complicity. What of archives that show views of the despot and by the despot? And, in La-la-land, are the ignorant Associate Despots? Is ignorance a form of complicity or is it mitigation?



Tabita Rezaire
Installation view,
ASS 4 SALE
2015
Mixed media installation
Photo by Clive Hassall



Bogosi Sekhukhuni
[O]. Available: <http://bogosisekhukhuni.tumblr.com>

Furthermore, where and how do artists from this demographic, and who work with its material, place themselves in terms of Stuart Hall's 1996 framing of the term 'positionality'?

Karin Preller approaches this contemporary conundrum by dealing with her lived experience of privileged whiteness while growing up under apartheid in the 1960s, as imaged in family photographs. Her suburban childhood is remembered through questions of personal memory and nostalgia, set against broader South African narratives of absence and presence, collective memory and whiteness. The surfaces of what appear initially as photorealist paintings, chronicling personal archives of family photograph albums and home video stills, reveal their potential as signifiers of uncomfortable complicities and a 'charmed life'. Caught disquietly between the painted and photographic, Preller uses the canvas as a 'laboured surface' to articulate private and personal archives of affect. Steeped in foggy layers of translucent veneers, the paintings, as with their source material, traverse time: they speak, in bittersweet tones, of nostalgia, desire, longing and loss.

Should I now return to the notion of complicity or perhaps venture into the entangled association of nostalgia with ruin? Neither route seems productive because, actually, Preller's paintings are documents of documents; what Preller depicts is the nostalgia that already exists in the family photos. The source materials, themselves, are images of nostalgia. In other words (and this is heady stuff) the images were taken by, and of, those implicated in a regime that carried the seeds of its own inevitable demise. The images show the organism of apartheid mourning its own death whilst still alive, having identified within its foundation the proverbial seeds of its own destruction.

Minnette Vári's video installation *The Revenant* (2012), straddles the divide between Preller and Jackson's conceptual practices. Vári writes herself into an historical archive of complicity – where ghosts, re-animated and dwelling amongst the living - populate the Victorian domestic interior of a Johannesburg Randlord's home. By unifying the tradition of 1800s death photography with the nuances of literature, Vári creates a 'magic time' based upon 'ostensible fact' – a meld of documentary and fiction – in which the past populates the present whilst the present populates the past.

Vári fashions an alphabet of the features of time and place, role and identity, human and ghoulish; their multiple expressions form words and phrases which combine into a narrative given dynamic cadence by the switching vectors between alleged dichotomies.



Jo Ractliffe
*Mined forest outside Menongue
on the road to Cuito Cuanavale*
2009
Triptych
Hand printed silver gelatin prints
45 x 168cm
Courtesy Wits Art Museum

Operatic moments occur when, intermittently, fragments come crashing down into instances of co-occurrence. Vári's language of slippages offsets an uncanny 'out-of-sorts', which emerges as an encroaching sense of horror in the recognition that although one is being haunted, one is, oneself, a ghost, and as such, can potentially haunt ones'-self, in recurrent nightmares of complicity.

In Jo Ractliffe's *Mined forest outside Menongue on the road to Cuito Cuanavale* (2009), the veld conceals the graves of South African soldiers massacred during the South African Border War in Angola (1966-1989). Although the stark monochrome photographs appear dense and detailed, the human subjects themselves elude the viewer. Time, through nature, has erased all evidence of trauma; its physical traces have all but disappeared and an attempt at remembering, in this case, can only be realised in an act of memorialisation.

The artist denotes memory and forgetting as dynamic forces – vectors with the ability to move from one site to another via the capillary action of association – that infuse the battle scene of the landscape. For Ractliffe, trauma is visible; it is tangible in grassy fields, rocky outcrops or wooded copses; the landscape translates as an archive of a narrative that refuses to be erased. The power of embodiment intensifies through the grammar of symbols, signs and iconographies: the specific becomes general; loss is recognised in instances that transcend linearities and boundaries; nature is used as a language of melancholia, horror and ruin; and, ultimately, the land becomes synecdoche for narratives of infinite loss that – like magnetic liquid metal splatters – expands outward and conjoins systematically, pooling into confluence.

In his video titled *Derrière les panneaux publicitaires / Behind the billboards* (2015), Alexander Oppen also grapples with the impossibility of erasure. Oppen juxtaposes images of the removal of informal settlements in Abidjan by the Côte d'Ivoire government with billboard images depicting upmarket consumer products and lifestyles. Politically and intellectually, the work is an archive that testifies to the dynamics of the state's removal policies and its links to neocolonialism, and demonstrates how archival material is enmeshed with matrixial systems of control. In the work, Oppen condenses all archival remnants, regardless of their source, using them as building materials for constructing new shelters, homes, thoughts and processes. Psychologically, it is this gathering and rebuilding that becomes a direct attempt at sparring with the violence of erasure.

Uriel Orlow's *Double Vision (Native Plants)* (2012-2014) presents another instance of archival power and control. Showing stereoscopic prints of specimens of a single plant species photographed in territories now divided into Palestine and Israel, the images depict their different classifications caused by the division of state archives between territories. The plant becomes semi-mythological, whilst coddled in the ideological narratives of the conflicting states.

Santu Mofokeng's *Black Photo Album / Look at Me* (1997) is a slide projection of studio portraits commissioned by urban black families from the early twentieth-century. The work disrupts colonial modes of representing black identity by challenging the strategy of rendering black subjects as nameless and powerless. Further, as with Muholi's work, the subjects challenge viewers in the way they look directly at the viewer. The questions that accompany the slides are simple but sufficient to disrupt history: Who is it that looks out directly, and how may this language of honesty be used as a constructive tool?

Two artists featured on the exhibition explore the future of archival databases through seditious methods. Tabita Rezaire uses digital media as a platform to offer counterpoints for creative ownership and agency, while

Karin Preller
The Neighbours,
Montgomery Park,
1960s IV
2014
Oil on canvas
60 x 70cm
Courtesy of the artist



Bogosi Sekhukhuni's blog is a deliberately Sisyphean attempt at creating an 'official record' absurdly foiled by its open source technology that allows, and even invites, interactions with the digital.

As Ulrich Baer and Shelley Rice (2011) note, whilst the archive is traditionally considered as a solid foundation for scholarly work, embedded within its structure is the potential for 'countering' the underpinning ideologies or subjective positions that it represents. Rezaire and Sekhukhuni find a theoretical parallel in Brett Kashmere's (2010) concept of the 'counter-archive' which he applies to the digital realm:

an incomplete and unstable repository, an entity to be contested and expanded through clandestine acts, a space of impermanence and play [which] entails mischief and imagination, challenging the record of official history ... and emboldening anarchivism.

Sekhukhuni's blog and Rezaire's installation evidence Kashmere's assertion that "to counter-archive is to counter-act, to rewrite, to animate over ... a take-and-give thing ... that point of negotiation".

Finally, it is Michelle Monareng's video installation *Removal to Radium* (2013) that – in its depiction of the artist's grandfather digging into the soil of his farm as if unearthing an historical site – exemplifies the curators' views of contemporary creative archival practice. Like contemporary archival practice, the act of digging is uncertain, exploratory; a task founded in adventure and discovery as each finding adds to the trove. Digging creates instability; its route is alterable and malleable; chance becomes serendipity, as it does not choose what to unearth. Both digging and archival practice are therefore exemplars of *fiddling* which, although not strictly a methodological practice, enables a range of ways in which to tackle the archive. To fiddle is to tinker with; to meddle, tamper, interfere, mess with and mess up; to wriggle the archive from its petrified state; to upset its content, structure and outcome. Fiddling – a flippant but generous word for serious and effective play – embraces an abundance of viable techniques with which to champion the philosophy of the open-ended conclusion.



Look at me.

Santu Mofokeng
The Black Photo
Album / *Look at Me*
1997
Slides 2 & 25, 35mm
80 slides, projection
©Santu Mofokeng
Courtesy Lunetta Bartz,
MAKER, Johannesburg



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