Call for participation

Recent ‘archival turns’ in the arts and sciences in tandem with the digital revolution have resulted in the emergence of the archive as one of the key concepts and objects of critical cultural heritage study in the 21st century. This symposium will examine how engagement with archives and cultural heritage material, with, through and in relation to art and activism impacts on the formation and articulation of individual and collective identity, memory, cultural values and power relations. Building on innovative engagements at UCL and UGOT, combining scholarly, activist and artistic approaches, a new flexible participatory and collaborative methodology has started to emerge suitable for exploring complex societal challenges in relation to archives.

Making art addresses processes of meaning-making rather than ownership of objects. Following Meskimmon (2011), it can be argued that “art is a vital form of articulation” capable of staying put and keeping alive also in relation to the most complex and painful aspects of human life and history. The capacity of art to enable participation and propel the possibility of change denotes a critical shift from conceiving art as simple representations to agential procedures. Exploring constitutive imagination at the interstices and contact zones between art, activism and archives, the symposium seeks to contribute to methodological development capable of acknowledging polymorphous differences and propel change. From this perspective Foucault’s theory of the inextricable power relations presupposed and constituted by knowledge will be used to explore the potential of the archive of being a place where knowledge is structured around process, a playground for doing and experiencing knowledge in the sense of ‘coming to knowing’.

In Flinn’s (2011) understanding ‘archival activism’ refers to active engagement in radical or counter-hegemonic public history-making activities. While these non-professional initiatives are often allied to a progressive, democratizing, and antidiscrimination political agenda, professional archivists, other heritage workers, and scholars need to be prepared to actively seek out collaborations and form equitable partnerships with these social movements. The prevailing digital abundance as well as digital divides increases the necessity to find new ways of identifying, preserving and making accessible materials which better represent all the diverse aspects of society. Crucially this is not only or not even mostly a technological challenge but also a social and ethical one.

A critical heritage approach employing and deploying art and activist approaches in relation to the archive and global societal challenges can in a Foucauldian understanding be described as the ‘art of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability’. In recognition of this the symposium will focus on the roles of art, activism and archives as full participants in conceiving and reconfiguring the political, ethical and social landscape in a contested and global world. How, why and on what grounds can these approaches transform the way people think about themselves, their communities, their environment, their pasts, their aspirations and their futures?

With the digital and mobile technologies providing now the almost ubiquitous tools and environments through which many of these engagements and interactions happen, this symposium will seek to explore and engage with the intersections between art, archives and activism in relating the past to the present and helping to fashion a new world. We will seek to do this via three explanatory frames: affect, embodiments and narrative and by encouraging prepared contributions in the form of papers, performances/installations/actions as well as spontaneous interventions and group works aiming at creatively exploring these spaces and interactions.