

Against the Grain

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Master's Thesis

Against the Grain

Curatorial Activation of Community and Activist Archives
through Feminist, Queer and Decolonial Perspectives

*Kuratorische Aktivierung von Community- und Aktivistischen Archiven
durch feministische, queere und dekoloniale Perspektiven*

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Abstract (German)

Diese Masterthesis untersucht, wie Archive in der zeitgenössischen kuratorischen Praxis aktiviert werden, mit einem Schwerpunkt auf feministischen, queeren und antirassistischen Perspektiven. Sie fragt, wie Kurator:innen mit Archivmaterialien wie Korrespondenz, Erwerbungsunterlagen, Pressemappen, Fotografien und mündlichen Zeugnissen arbeiten, um verborgene Geschichten, alternative Genealogien und Spuren des Aktivismus sichtbar zu machen. Die Untersuchung verbindet qualitative Forschungsmethoden mit feministischen, queeren und antirassistischen Ansätzen und analysiert Ausstellungsgeschichten, Archivmaterialien sowie kuratorische Strategien. Im Mittelpunkt steht die Frage, wie Kurator:innen Archive umdeuten, aktivieren und ausstellen, um institutionelle Normen zu hinterfragen, marginalisierte Stimmen in den Vordergrund zu rücken und Ausstellungen zu schaffen, in denen Geschichte, Erinnerung, Aktivismus und Imagination zusammenfließen. Die Arbeit argumentiert, dass das Archiv keine neutrale Struktur ist, sondern eine situierte und politische, die Geschichte ebenso produziert wie bewahrt.

Abstract (English)

This master's thesis examines how archives are activated in contemporary curatorial practice through feminist, queer and anti-racist perspectives. It investigates how curators work with archival materials — including correspondence, acquisition records, press clippings, photographs and oral histories, to reveal hidden histories, alternative genealogies and traces of activism. Guided by the central question of how archives can be engaged to amplify marginalized perspectives, address temporality and activate in-progress or unfinished materials, the study employs qualitative research methods combining analysis of exhibition histories, archival material and curatorial strategies with feminist, queer and decolonial approaches. It explores how curators reinterpret, reorganize and activate archives to challenge institutional norms, foreground marginalized voices and create exhibitions where history, memory, activism and imagination converge, producing politically engaged and speculative cultural narratives. The thesis argues that the archive is not a neutral repository but a situated and political structure that produces history as much as it preserves it.

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Intro- duction

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Archives have traditionally been understood as institutions separate from the main cultural display sites: places that safeguard documents, preserve evidence and provide the research infrastructure upon which exhibitions draw. In this separation, archival materials function as supporting evidence, contextual and supplementary, frequently relegated to the background while the exhibition itself takes the foreground. However, in contemporary curatorial practice, this separation has become increasingly unstable. Feminist, queer and anti-racist approaches have challenged the hierarchies that govern how documents are valued, interpreted and made visible and the archive has moved from background to constitutive site, instead of just a supplement, it became subject.¹

The thesis investigates how archives are activated in contemporary cultural practice, asking how archival materials can be engaged to reveal hidden histories, construct alternative genealogies and draw attention to overlooked traces of activism that have been marginalized or excluded from dominant institutional narratives. Rather than approaching the archive as a neutral repository of verified facts, this research understands it as a situated and political structure that produces history as much as it preserves it. Archives have been seen for a long time as the best way to access the past without being there. Yet this trust can obscure and legitimate the decisions behind how archival knowledge is created. Choices about what to collect, catalogue and preserve are never entirely neutral.² As curator and archivist Dominique Luster asks:

If your history is not preserved, do you exist?³

The absence of certain bodies, practices and struggles from the museum and archival records points not to a lack of historical significance but to systemic processes of exclusion. Saidiya Hartman, writing of the archive of the Middle Passage, describes it as:

“The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property [...] an asterisk in the grand narrative of history”⁴

1 Cf. Ann Laura STOLER, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton 2009, p. 1-5; Jacques DERRIDA, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago 1996, p. 1-4.

2 Cf. Ann Laura STOLER, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, op. cit., p. 20; Michelle CASWELL, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*, New York 2021, p. 3-8; Jacques DERRIDA, *Archive Fever*, op. cit., p. 10-12.

3 Dominique LUSTER, *Seeing Ourselves: Curatorial Representation and Community Memory*, in: *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 35/4, 2020, p. 353-368, here p. 355.

4 Saidiya HARTMAN, *Venus in Two Acts*, in: *Small Axe: A Journal of Criticism*, 26, 2008, p. 1-14, here p. 2.

The title of this thesis, “Against the Grain”, is an explicit echo to Ann Laura Stoler, American historian and anthropologist of colonialism, in her “Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense” (2009). Stoler’s book proposes a method of reading colonial archives not for what they declare on the surface but for what they reveal about the contradictions and power relations that structure their production. To read along the archival grain, paying attention to the tensions and institutional self-interest in every document, means to question the archive’s claim to neutrality and transparency. This thesis seeks to extend that approach into the domain of contemporary curatorial practice. While Stoler reads colonial archives against their own presentation, this research explores what it might mean to curate against the institutional grain: to work with the resources of the museum and the archive in ways that challenge the frameworks of authority, selection and exclusion upon which those institutions depend. The preposition shift from “along” to “against” does not abandon Stoler’s method but tries to extend it and to move from critique to practice and from reading to activation.

The central concept of this thesis is activation. Activation is the curatorial act of bringing archival materials into relation with living communities, political struggles and present conditions in a way that can go beyond mere display and documentation. Activation means treating the archive as something more than an object to be exhibited. It is about giving the archive presence by placing neighbourhood and diaspora community knowledge alongside official documents, by bringing different archives into conversation across institutional boundaries, by designing public programmes that invite response and by creating new archival forms within the exhibition itself. Activation should not be just an additional curatorial step but a central part of archival practice, it is what turns the archive, in Diana Taylor’s terms, into repertoire, understood as the domain of embodied, performed and living knowledge that exists through practice rather than through documents.⁵ From this understanding, this thesis develops its main analytical contribution in Chapter 2: the four registers of activation: interpretative, communal, structural and aspirational. These registers are not borrowed from existing theoretical source, they grew out of a close reading of the literature discussed in Chapter 1 and represent the attempt to name different dimensions through which curatorial activation can operate.

⁵ Diana TAYLOR, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Durham 2003, p. 19–28.

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The theoretical framework of this research draws on Édouard Glissant’s notion of the archipelago as a model of thinking about archives. Glissant’s archipelago resists totality, privileges instead relation, opacity and multiplicity over coherence.⁶ In the curatorial practice, this model suggests the understanding of archives not as unified wholes but as constellations of interconnected fragments, a network of relations that create meaning through their connections instead of any master narrative.

The research is grounded in a feminist, decolonial and qualitative methodological framework that understands knowledge production as always situated and politically implicated.⁷ This means considering what the archive contains as well as how the archival knowledge is produced, preserved and made accessible, plus the exclusions that structure every archival formation.⁸ It also means acknowledging the position from which this research is conducted: as a researcher working within an academic institutional framework while analyzing practices that challenge institutional authority.

The thesis relies on qualitative analysis of published and documented sources: exhibition catalogues, curatorial statements, institutional documents and scholarly literature. The research does not claim to speak for the communities whose archives are mentioned and examined. It claims to analyze the institutional and curatorial conditions under which those archives are produced, held and activated and to ask what forms of curatorial practice honor their political charge.

⁶ Édouard GLISSANT, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing, Ann Arbor 1997, p. 11–49, here p. 29..

⁷ See e.g. Donna HARAWAY, *Situated Knowledges*, in: *Feminist Studies*, 14/3, 1988, p. 575–599.

⁸ Cf. Ann Laura STOLER, *Along the Archival Grain*, op. cit., p. 20–47.

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**1. The archive
as a critical site:
theoretical
framework**

What does it mean for an archive to *constitute* the past in contrast to record it? Any engagement with the archive as a curatorial object must begin with an acknowledgement of the archive's own theoretical history. The present chapter develops the theoretical framework that supports this thesis across five interconnected trajectories: the Derridean critique of archival authority and its relation to Foucauldian discourse analysis; Ann Laura Stoler's colonial archive theory; the ethics and politics of community archiving as theorized by Michelle Caswell; Édouard Glissant's archipelagic thought and its intersections with queer temporality; the performance and repertoire theories of Diana Taylor and Rebecca Schneider; and Arjun Appadurai's concept of the aspirational archive. These frameworks together propose an understanding of the archive as a discourse apparatus through which power, memory and subjectivity are legitimized and contested.

The different roles of these trajectories within the thesis play different roles in the overall argument and these need to be clarified before proceeding. Three frameworks are primary: Derrida's critique of archival constitutions, which proves the foundational problem; Caswell's liberatory archival ethics, which highlight the political and emotional implications; and Glissant's archipelagic model, providing the structural framework for the comparative analysis. Three further frameworks serve as supplements: Stoler's colonial archive theory provides context to the Derridean critique; Taylor's distinction between archive and repertoire offers key tools to analyze curatorial activation; and Ann Cvetkovich's archive of feeling opens the idea of the archive to emotional and embodied dimensions. Appadurai's theory of the aspirational archive works as an implicit organizing principle throughout the comparative analysis.

1.1 Archival power and the politics of memory

The most foundational challenge to the idea of the archive as a neutral repository comes from the French philosopher and cultural theorist Jacques Derrida, in "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression" (1995). Derrida argues that the archive does not record the past but actively helps create it. This idea challenges the belief that archival documents offer neutral and objective evidence.⁹ This concerns the structural conditions of archival production itself. The archive, for Derrida, is always characterized by what he calls the archiviolithic drive:

⁹ DERRIDA, *Archive Fever*, op. cit., p. 7 f.

the compulsion to preserve is inseparable from the violence of the selection and consequentially the suppression of what is not considered worthy of preservation.¹⁰ Every archival act is therefore also an act of destruction of the possibility that something excluded might be recovered in a future moment. The archive destroys by organizing it makes certain things recoverable and other permanently inaccessible according to structures that are never neutral.

Derrida's explanation of the archive is psychoanalytic. Drawing on Freud's concept of the death drive (the unconscious impulse toward destruction and dissolution), he argues that the archiviolithic drive, meaning the compulsion to destroy the archive in the very act of constituting it, is not a failure of archival practice but its constitutive condition.¹¹ The archive fever of the title names this dilemma: the desire to archive everything coexists with the structural impossibility of doing so.¹² This insight opens analytical possibilities for the curatorial practice. If the archive is always a site of organized forgetting as much as organized remembering, then the task of the curator involves making visible what has been excluded: following Stoler, this means reading against the grain of institutional memory. More radically, the archive's structural violence pushes us to ask ourselves: What kind of past does the archive create and what kind of future does it make possible?

Michel Foucault, French philosopher and historian of ideas, develops his conception of the archive in "The Archaeology of Knowledge" (1969) with a different analytical approach, but arrives at a complementary and compatible conclusion. For Foucault, the archive is a regime: a set of rules that determines what can be said and remembered at any given historical moment. As he defines it: "The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events."¹³ What an epoch can articulate is therefore not accidental, it is produced by a system that selects, excludes and organizes discourse.¹⁴ This understanding of the archive as productive instead of reflective has a direct consequence: changing what is archived, what counts as worthy of preservation and circulation, is always also a political act that intervenes in the conditions of historical knowledge itself, the conditions that determine what can be remembered and what remains forgotten. Under a

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 10–12.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 14–17.

¹² Ibid., p. 29.

¹³ Michel FOUCAULT, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith, New York 1972 (French original: 1969), p. 129.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 145–147.

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curatorial lens, when curators bring marginalized materials into the museum space, they enrich the collection and more importantly, they intervene in the archival regime that governs what is recognized as legitimate history.

Ann Laura Stoler's anthropological elaboration in "Along the Archival Grain" (2009) extends the Foucauldian ideas into the colonial context by demonstrating how Dutch colonial archive actively shaped racial, civic and moral categories central to colonial rule and epistemology, exploring the colonial archive as both an instrument of governance and a site of knowledge production.¹⁵ In Stoler's analysis the archive was both a bureaucratic instrument and an affective site. While filled with official documents and records, it was charged with anxieties and desires that shaped the colonial project from within.¹⁶ Reading along the archival grain, paying attention not only to what the archive reveals about the anxieties and contradictions of the institutions that produced it, but also to what it disavows,¹⁷ serves as methodological principle and a form of critique.

The importance of Stoler's arguments for this thesis goes beyond its colonial context. By arguing that archives are saturated with affect and institutional interest, she provided a methodological framework for the following case studies. An institutional archive's incompleteness and fragmentation are not necessarily curatorial failures but may be political symptoms, traces of situations in which the documentation itself is contested. Achille Mbembe, Cameroonian philosopher and political theorist, argues in "The Power of the Archive and its Limits" (2002) that the archive does not derive its authority from the events it records, it generates that authority through the act of ordering and naming.¹⁸ This is what makes the archive a mechanism of power rather than simply its product and what connects the colonial archive directly to the contemporary institutional forms examined in this thesis.

Stoler's argument is grounded in specific historical material: her study of the Dutch colonial archive's obsessive documentation of what colonial administrator called native unrest: the cataloguing of racial anxiety, suspicion and desire, shows the actual absence of transparent recording. Mbembe, writing from a South African context, extends this analysis to the apartheid archive, whose bureaucratic ordering of racial classification was one of the primary

¹⁵ STOLER, *Along the Archival Grain*, op. cit., p. 20.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 32–35.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 47.

¹⁸ Cf. Achille MBEMBE, *The Power of the Archive and its Limits*, in: Carolyn HAMILTON et al. (eds), *Refiguring the Archives*, Dordrecht 2002, p. 19–26.

instruments in the system of domination. Both these examples demonstrate how reading against the archival grain is methodologically necessary because the archive's political character is legible in the institutional self-interest encoded in its structure. As the case studies in Chapter 3 will demonstrate, this principle applies to the feminist institutional archive of the VBKÖ (the Vereinigung bildender Künstlerinnen Österreichs, Vienna's oldest feminist artists' association, founded in 1910 and examined in full in section 3.2), whose silences around the Nazi period demand to be read symptomatically; to the colonial documentary holdings that SAVVY Contemporary (a Berlin-based decolonial and anti-racist art space founded in 2009, examined in section 3.1)'s "Colonial Neighbours" places in encounter with the diaspora community memories they were built to exclude; and to the institutional film archives that the Otolith Group activates against the narrative their holding institutions have imposed.

1.2 Erasure, community and the ethics of archival practice

Derrida, Foucault, Stoler and Mbembe map the structural logic of how archival power operates. What they leave largely unaddressed is the perspective of those upon whom that power has been exercised. The political dimensions of archival exclusion are mostly theorized for bodies and communities that have been systematically erased from dominant historical records. Michelle Caswell, American archivist and scholar of liberatory archival practice, in "Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work" (2021) argues for what she calls liberatory archival practice: an approach that does not add marginalized material to existing archives but challenges the criteria by which the historical significance has been determined in the first place.¹⁹ Engaging with archives built by and for communities whose stories have been criminalized: South Asian American communities, refugee communities, queer communities of color, Caswell asks what is missing from the archive, why is it missing and in whose interest the absence was produced.

¹⁹ Michelle CASWELL, *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*, New York 2021, p. 3–8.

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²⁰ Ibid., p. 12–15.

²¹ Pierre BOURDIEU, Jean-Claude PASSERON, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* [La Reproduction: Éléments pour une théorie du système d'enseignement], trans. Richard Nice, London 1977 (French original: 1970), p. 4–5. Bourdieu defines symbolic violence as a form of domination exercised through meaning-making and the misrecognition of power relations as natural or inevitable.

²² CASWELL, *Urgent Archives* (op. cit.), p. 47.

²³ Michelle CASWELL, Marika CIFOR, *From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives*, in: *Archivaria*, 81, 2016, p. 23–43, here p. 28.

Caswell's framework is grounded on the concept of representational belonging: the emotional and political dimension of seeing one's community reflected in the historical record, of being acknowledged as a historical subject in contrast to as an absence or an exception.²⁰ Archives are, therefore, epistemic and existential: their contents shape not only what communities know about their past but how they experience themselves as historical subjects in the present. The absence of certain communities from archival collection is an act of symbolic violence and not a neutral omission²¹, this absence has material and physical consequences for how those communities perceive their own stories and will understand their futures.²² This concept of representational belonging names the dimension of archival practice that is usually invisible in institutional contexts: the affective weight of inclusion and exclusion for the communities concerned. By naming this dimension, archival practice can become more ethical and not only inclusive.

Caswell distinguishes between what she calls a salvage paradigm (in which marginalized archives are incorporated into existing institutional structures, preserving their content while domesticating their politics) and meaningfully liberatory practice, which requires not the inclusion of marginalized materials alone, but a transformation of the institutional conditions under which they are made accessible. This distinction structures the case study analyses in Chapter 3, which examines archives at SAVVY Contemporary, the Vereinigung bildender Künstlerinnen Österreichs in Vienna and the Otolith Group in London, asking in each case whether curatorial engagement remains within the salvage paradigm or whether it achieves something more meaningfully transformative.

Caswell's collaborative work with Marika Cifor, feminist archivist and scholar, on radical empathy in archival practice proposes an ethical framework for curators and archivists in which they position themselves not as neutral custodians but as participants in the current struggles of the communities they serve and work with.²³ Radical empathy, as Caswell and Cifor define it, is not

about feeling sorry for the communities whose material are held (or identifying with them from a distance); it means positioning the archivist or curator as accountable to those communities, it means acknowledging that decisions about cataloguing and preservation are not neutral.²⁴ Instead of sticking to the ideology of archival neutrality, this replaces it with an ethics of accountability and care. Accountability means archivists and curators are responsible to the communities whose material they hold, for the political implications of every descriptive and interpretive decision. Care implies ongoing relational responsibilities that are beyond professional competence and encompass solidarity and shared political commitment, as well as sustain the relational responsibilities that holding materials means.²⁵ Punzalan²⁶ and Caswell push this one step further, into a direction that calls for a more justice-oriented archival practice that requires the archivists and curator to change the way they understand their role, as well as their relationship to communities and the political weight of their technical decisions.²⁷

The archives Caswell draws on most, the South Asian American Digital Archive, the Hmong Archives and the ONE Archives for LGBTQ history, share a structural characteristic: they were constituted in response to their communities' systematic exclusion from dominant institutional holdings. The South Asia American community's almost-total absence from major American cultural archives is not a neutral omission but, in Bourdieu's terms, symbolic violence, the institutional confirmation that these communities do not count as historical subjects. The salvage paradigm softens this problem by incorporating marginalized material without transforming the criteria of significance that produced their exclusion. Meaningful liberatory practice requires changing those criteria and the institutional structures that enforce them. This distinction (inclusion vs transformation) is the basis of the comparative analysis of Chapter 3, where SAVVY Contemporary's long-term community co-production model and the VBKÖ's member-driven archival residency represent different and differently limited, institutional responses to the same structural challenge.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 36–38.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 36–40.

²⁶ Ricardo L. Punzalan is a Filipino-American archivist and scholar at the University of Michigan whose work focuses on colonial archives, diaspora archiving and social justice.

²⁷ Cf. Ricardo L. PUNZALAN, Michelle CASWELL, *Critical Directions for Archival Approaches to Social Justice*, in: *Library Quarterly*, 86/1, 2016, p. 25–42.

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1.3 Archipelagic thought, opacity and the relational archive

The theoretical trajectories developed in the preceding sections address how archival power operates and what its ethical consequences are for communities whose histories it has suppressed. The third trajectory developed here is the one that provided the structural model for the thesis's comparative analysis, is the concept of the archipelago as elaborated by the Martinican writer and philosopher Édouard Glissant. Across "Poetics of Relation" (1990) and "Caribbean Discourse" (1981), Glissant proposes the archipelago as an alternative to continental models of identity, history and knowledge.²⁸ The Caribbean, as Glissant affirms, is a geography that is constituted by rupture. The forced displacement of millions across the Atlantic produced a cultural formation that could not be organized around any singular origin, because that origin had been violently destroyed. What emerges as a consequence of these facts is a geography of relation: meaning generated through the connections between islands rather than through the appeal to a common root. Continental thought (organized around notions of rootedness, totality and main transparent source) cannot account to this formation. Archipelagic thought, defined by relation rather than essence and by opacity of each island to the others, can.

Opacity is the key term. To demand transparency, insisting that others make themselves fully knowable and available for comprehension, is, for Glissant, a form of violence: the epistemological correspondence of colonial domination, which requires reducing the Other to an object of knowledge.²⁹ The right to opacity is a right to resist the reduction, to remain partially unknowable, to maintain particularities that are not reducible or absorbable. Opacity applied to archival practice, challenges the archival logic that seeks to classify and make everything it holds fully accessible, instead it legitimates incompleteness and fragmentation as valid archival conditions, not failures, but positions.³⁰

²⁸ Édouard GLISSANT, *Poetics of Relation* [Poétique de la Relation], trans. Betsy Wing, Ann Arbor 1997 (French original: 1990), p. 11.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 62.

- 31 Édouard GLISSANT, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* [Le Discours antillais], trans. J. Michael Dash, Charlottesville 1989 (French original: 1981), p. 64–67. See also: GLISSANT, *Poetics of Relation* (op. cit.), p. 11–14, where Glissant elaborates the distinction between rooted identity and rhizomatic identity in relation to the Caribbean as a geography constituted by dispossession and diaspora rather than by any singular territorial origin.
- 32 Cf. Édouard GLISSANT, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* [Le Discours antillais], trans. J. Michael Dash, Charlottesville 1989 (French original: 1981), p. 64–67.

Glissant’s distinction between rooted and rhizomatic identity comes from the same logic.³¹ Rooted identity derives its authority from a single origin, whereas rhizomatic identity extends in all trajectories without returning to any fixed point.³² Under these terms, the archive can be understood as a participation in a network of relations that generates meaning through connection rather than through isolation, through the relations between fragments across languages, institutions and geographies that share no single common origin. The diaspora archive that emerges from the Caribbean’s specific history works this way, generating meaning through the relation between fragments, across languages, geographies and institutional contexts that share no common center. SAVVY Contemporary (a Berlin-based decolonial and anti-racist art space founded in 2009, examined in section 3.1)’s “Colonial Neighbours”(built from fragmented material traces of Germany’s colonial subjects and their descendants) and the Otolith Group (a London-based artistic research collective founded in 2002, examined in section 3.3)’s transnational constellation of archival sources, drawing on postcolonial feminist organizing in India, Ghanaian independence-era documentation and diasporic cultural memory in London, both enact this logic, treating incompleteness and opacity as conditions that generate rather than foreclose meaning.

The archipelagic model will be applied in Chapter 3 as a structure that works because it is imperfect: it asks, of each archive, whether the curatorial logic tends toward the continental model of totality and origin or toward a logic of relation and opacity. The question is whether the institutional drive to acquire, classify and preserve imposes a continental logic of authenticity, treating materials as evidence of a recoverable origin or unified tradition, onto archives whose political character lies precisely in their fragmentation and opacity.

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1.4 Queer temporality and the archive of feelings

Glissant’s refusal of linear origin finds a counterpart in queer theory’s reckoning with time, sexuality and what counts as historical knowledge at all. Ann Cvetkovich, American feminist scholar of affect and queer culture, in her “An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures” (2003) is the most sustained attempt to think through what an archive can look like when the material that conventional archives would not consider, are taken into account.³³

Her starting point is: the cultural life of queer and lesbian communities, the ephemera of bars and community organizations, the paper trails of activist campaigns, the letter and diaries of people whose lives were not considered worth preserving, has been systematically excluded from institutional archives. This is partly a story of homophobia, the deeper issue is that archives are structured by standards of historical significance that already assume certain lives matter and other do not. Queerness gets filtered out not just because it is unwelcome but because the filter was never designed to add it.

What Cvetkovich calls an “archive of feelings” is not an alternative collection of documents. It is a different archival logic that treats trauma, affect and ephemeral as genuine forms of historical knowledge that should not be cleared away. The methodological consequences for curators and archivists is that the material that conventional archives do not keep — oral testimony, performance, embodied knowledge, affective response³⁴ — must be treated as evidence in their own right, not merely as support for the “real” record.³⁵

This reorientation is directly connected to the activist archives examined in Chapter 3. The anger, grief and solidarity in the images those archives collect constitute their archival value. If read as historical documentation, there would be a loss in the understanding of their emotional charge. This would reproduce the epistemic violence that produced and sustained the conditions of exclusion in which they were made.

33 Ann CVETKOVICH, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Durham 2003, p. 7–9.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 241–244.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 14.

The American queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman's concept of *temporal drag* explores this further. Freeman argues that queer bodies and practices carry traces of anachronistic desires and non-normative temporalities: that queerness involves a particular relationship to time.³⁶ This is not the linear time of progress, in which the past is something to be overcome and the future is a destination you arrive at in due course. It is haunted, discontinuous time, in which past desires and unrealized futures coexist in the present without resolving into a coherent sequence.³⁷ The resonance with Glissant here is not casual: both resist the teleological pull that would turn history into a story with a fixed direction of travel. Freeman's temporal logic, in archival practice, challenges any historicism that tries to purify its sources and proposes instead that archival materials are always multi-temporal: carrying the traces of multiple pasts, opening onto multiple futures that have not been yet revealed.

The Cuban-American performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz's concept of *queer futurity* extends the argument in a different direction. For Muñoz, queerness is less an identity than an orientation toward what has not yet been made possible: a relation to futurity that refuses to accept the present as the limit of what can be imagined.³⁸ This connects with Appadurai's concept of the aspirational archive, which is developed in the following section. Taken together, Cvetkovich, Freeman and Muñoz suggest an understanding of activist archive that has nothing to do with repositories of the past. These archives are generators of political possibility, in the sense that they produce the conditions for imagining what communities can yet become.

It is important to specify what archival formation Cvetkovich has in mind, since their political precarity is inseparable from their theoretical significance. The Lesbian Herstory Archives, founded in New York in 1974, is her primary example: a grassroots collection built around the conviction that activist and queer community ephemera (flyers, photographs, personal correspondence, recordings of performances and campaigns) carry emotional residues of political struggle that institutional archives consistently discard. Freeman's temporal drag, similarly, emerges from the engagement with specific queer cultural practices: reenactment, performance, the deliberate use of anachronistic form, all understood as modes of historical knowledge that refuse the clean separation between past and present.

36 Elizabeth FREEMAN, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities*, *Queer Histories*, Durham 2010, p. 62–65.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 62–65.

38 Cf. José Esteban MUÑOZ, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York 2009, p. 27–32.

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In Chapter 3, these frameworks find their concrete expression in the Otolith Group's activation of suppressed archives through temporal layering and speculative narration, and in the VBKÖ's reading of its own governance documents as carriers of care and communal labour. Both practices enact, at the level of curatorial form, what Cvetkovich and Freeman are arguing at the level of theory.

1.5 Performance, embodiment, repertoire and aspiration

Diana Taylor, Argentine-American performance theorist and scholar of cultural memory, in "The Archive and the Repertoire" (2003) gives the theoretical frameworks that have been developed in the previous sections: archival power, liberatory practice, relational form, queer temporality, a new axis of tension. Taylor distinguishes between two modes of cultural memory that are different in kind and differently valued. The archive names the domain of supposedly permanent materials (texts, documents, buildings, objects) that resist change and outlast the circumstances of their production. The repertoire names the domain of embodied, performed and transmitted knowledge: dance, ritual, gesture, oral testimony, community practice. Where the archive is defined by its apparent permanence and transferability, the repertoire is defined by the opposite: it is ephemeral and it depends entirely on the bodies that carry it.³⁹ Taylor's argument is that the archive and the repertoire are not simply different kinds of memory but are implicated in a hierarchy that is political: the archive has historically been privileged over the repertoire as the proper domain of historical knowledge, while the repertoire has been devalued as insufficiently stable to constitute evidence.⁴⁰ This is not a neutral epistemological judgment; it embraces a colonial logic that privileges the literate over the oral, the documented over the performed, the institutional over the communal.⁴¹ Decolonial and activist archival practice, on Taylor's account, cannot turn the repertoire into archive, trying to capture it and make it legible within archival terms. That would reproduce the hierarchy it tries to challenge: what is actually needed is insistence on the epistemic validity of the repertoire on

39 Diana TAYLOR, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Durham 2003, p. 19.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

its own terms. For curatorial practice, this creates a genuine problem: how do you develop forms of exhibition and public programme that can do justice to embodied and performed knowledge without domesticating it into the archival logic it resists?

This is where the concept of activation is needed. Activation is the curatorial act that turns archive into repertoire: it brings documentary materials into contact with the embodied knowledge of living communities, generating new forms of historical understanding that neither the archive nor the repertoire could produce alone. It is what happens when conversation evenings, public programmes or community co-curation introduce the lived knowledge of affected communities into contact with documentary materials. The archive does not get read for what it contains and presents, it gets activated and inhabited.

Rebecca Schneider, American performance theorist, in “Performing Remains” (2011) extends Taylor’s framework by arguing that performance and reenactment constitute a form of historical knowledge irreducible to the documentary.⁴² Schneider is interested in reenactment as a mode of historical thinking that challenges the archival assumption that the past is accessible only through its material remains.⁴³ For Schneider, reenactment insists on the presence of the past in the present, refusing the clean separation between historical documentation and contemporary life that the archive depends on.⁴⁴ In this way the archive is something that we are already doing.

Arjun Appadurai, Indian-American anthropologist and cultural theorist, in his essay “Archive and Aspiration” provides the widest theoretical horizon for this chapter. Appadurai proposes an understanding of community archives as aspirational rather than retrospective: instead of reflecting pre-existing communities, such archives generate collectivity through the act of archiving itself.⁴⁵ Memories and identities are produced through the relations that archival practice enables, not inherited as stable pre-archival givens.⁴⁶ This applies with particular force to diaspora archives, which cannot draw on a shared

42 Rebecca SCHNEIDER, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, London / New York 2011, p. 6–9.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 30–35.

45 Arjun APPADURAI, *Archive and Aspiration*, in: Joke BROUWER, Arjen MULDER (eds.), *Information Is Alive: Art and Theory on Archiving and Retrieving Data*, Rotterdam 2003, p. 14–25, here p. 17.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

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physical territory or uninterrupted community tradition: they are constituted through acts of connection and solidarity that produce the community they appear merely to represent.⁴⁷

Hal Foster’s concept of the archival impulse in contemporary art — the widespread artistic tendency to treat historical information, often lost or displaced, as a primary creative resource⁴⁸ — bridges the archival theory developed above and the curatorial practices examined in the case studies. Foster speculates that archival art seeks to transform the no-place of the archive into the no-place of a utopia.⁴⁹ Okwui Enwezor’s curatorial elaboration in “Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art” (2008) extends this framework by attending to the specifically political and ethical dimensions of archival art: the ways in which artistic and curatorial engagements with archival documents constitute critical transactions against the pretended objectivity of the photographic trace.⁵⁰

Nora Sternfeld’s concept of the para-museum, developed in “Das radikal-demokratische Museum” (2018) offers a further framework for thinking about the relationship between archival practice and institutional transformation.⁵¹ The para-museum is a conflict-attuned structure that operates both within and beyond the museum space, appropriating its resources while refusing its organizing frameworks. Applied to archival practice, this concept suggests a mode of curatorial engagement that neither simply preserves the archive nor simply critiques it from outside but inhabits its contradictions, using the archive’s own logics against themselves in order to generate new forms of knowledge and political possibility. Maura Reilly’s framework of curatorial activism similarly proposes an ethics of curatorial intervention oriented toward the exposure and transformation of systemic exclusions within cultural institutions.⁵²

47 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

48 Hal FOSTER, *An Archival Impulse*, in: *October*, 110, 2004, p. 3–22, here p. 4.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

50 Okwui ENWEZOR, *Archive Fever: Photography Between History and the Monument*, in: *idem* (ed.), *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, New York / Göttingen 2008, p. 10–51, here p. 23.

51 Nora STERNFELD, *Das radikaldemokratische Museum*, in: *ecm* (Hg.), *Curating. Ausstellungstheorie & Praxis*, Bd. 3, Wien 2018 (Edition Angewandte), S. 64.

52 Maura REILLY, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*, London 2018, p. 17–20.

What emerges from these frameworks collectively is a conception of the archive that resists any comfortable notion of neutral preservation. Archives are not repositories of verifiable fact but contested, politically saturated fields, sites where power and memory are organised simultaneously, where certain histories achieve legibility while others are driven underground, where the impulse to preserve is always already entangled with the violence of what gets left out. The embodied, performed and affective dimensions of historical experience are not incidental casualties of this process; they are its systematic target. The implications for curatorial practice are not modest: archives must be read against the grain; absence and silence demand as much attention as presence and speech; the repertoire must be granted epistemic standing in its own right, not as a supplement to the documentary record; and archival activation must be understood as an ethical and political act rather than a technical one. To follow Appadurai is to insist that the archive faces forward as much as backward, that it generates aspiration and futurity rather than simply tending the past.

The concrete formations each of these theorists draws on are worth holding onto. Taylor's account of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo shows what the repertoire can do that the documentary record cannot and was never built to: sustain a form of political memory that authoritarian archival violence could not erase. Appadurai's example of Palestinian diaspora organisations, namely community groups producing archival materials not around a physical territory but around a shared political claim to return, grounds his notion of the aspirational archive in a practice oriented not toward maintaining a fixed collection but toward generating collective political agency in the present tense. Sternfeld's reference points, among them the Freies Museum Berlin, illustrate curatorial practice that occupies the museum's contradictions rather than resolving them from outside, working with the institution's own logics in order to turn them. These are not merely illustrative examples. Each anticipates the curatorial logic that Chapter 3 examines directly: SAVVY Contemporary's FRAGMENTS series activates archival documents as repertoire through performance and community encounter; the VBKÖ's⁵³ "Who Brings the Cake?" turns administrative minutes into a site of embodied collective reading; and the Otolith Group's essay films enact precisely the multi-temporal, speculative mode of historical knowledge that Taylor's framework makes theoretically available.

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⁵³ The Madres de Plaza de Mayo were Argentine mothers and grandmothers who, during the military dictatorship (1976–1983), gathered weekly in Buenos Aires' Plaza de Mayo carrying photographs of their children who had been forcibly disappeared by the regime. Their embodied, repeated act of public mourning became one of the most significant instances of political memory through performance rather than documentation.

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**2. Method-
ology**

54 CASWELL, Urgent Archives, op. cit., p. 21.

55 Cf. Sandra HARDING, Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?, in: idem (ed.), *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*, Bloomington 1987, p. 1-14.

56 Donna HARAWAY, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, in: *Feminist Studies*, 14/3, 1988, p. 575-599.

57 Cf. Sandra HARDING, Introduction: Is There a Feminist Method?, in: idem (ed.), *Feminism and Methodology: Social Science Issues*, Bloomington 1987, p. 1-14.

58 Donna HARAWAY, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, in: *Feminist Studies*, 14/3, 1988, p. 575-599, here p. 583.

The methodological approach of this thesis is grounded in qualitative research traditions. Given the thesis's focus on marginalized histories, activist archives and counter-institutional curatorial practices, the research is explicitly aligned with feminist, queer and decolonial methodological principles — principles that interrogate not solely what is studied but how knowledge about that object of study is produced, by whom and in whose interests.⁵⁴ They reflect a deeper conviction: that the distinction between researcher and researched is never as clean as positivist methodologies assume and that rigorous research is research that makes its own situatedness explicit rather than pretending it does not have one.^{55, 56}

2.1 Qualitative and feminist research principles

Curatorial practice, in this thesis, is understood as a form of knowledge production, epistemological and political, not reducible to questions of aesthetics or technique. This means treating curatorial decisions about what materials to include, how to frame them, what narratives they are asked to support, as epistemological and political acts.⁵⁷ Exhibitions are not illustrations of pre-existing historical truths but are themselves arguments, proposals and interventions in ongoing historical and political debates. The feminist epistemological tradition provides the foundational framework for this approach. The American feminist philosopher of science Donna Haraway, through her concept of *situated knowledge*, the argument that all knowledge is produced from a specific location, embodied in a specific perspective and therefore partial as opposed to universal⁵⁸, challenges the view that objectivity requires the elimination of the researcher's perspective. For Haraway, genuine rigor

consists not in the illusion of a view from nowhere but in the explicit acknowledgment of the view from somewhere: in making one's location explicit rather than disavowing it.⁵⁹

The American sociologist and Black feminist theorist Patricia Hill Collins and her concept of the *matrix of domination*, the interlocking systems of race, class, gender and sexuality that structure both the production and suppression of knowledge⁶⁰, provides a further methodological resource. Collins's framework insists that knowledge production is not innocent: the questions asked, the sources consulted and the conclusions drawn are all shaped by the researcher's position within systems of power. For this thesis, this means asking what archives contain as much as to the context in which archival knowledge is produced: who has access to archives? who can speak authoritatively about them? Whose knowledge is recognized as legitimate within institutional frameworks? The primary method employed in this thesis is qualitative analysis of exhibition histories, archival materials, institutional documentation and curatorial statements, drawing on a combination of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include exhibition catalogues, curatorial essays, institutional archives and documentary photography.

2.2 Defining activation: a conceptual clarification

Two clarifications are necessary before the methodological framework can be set out: what activation means as used in this thesis and where the four registers framework comes from. Activation, as used here, names a specific mode of curatorial engagement with archival materials — one that is distinct from and in some aspects in tension with, the standard logic of archival preservation and display.

To preserve an archive is to stabilize its materials, to protect them from deterioration and loss and to make them accessible for future research. To display an archive is to make its materials visible, to contextualize them within a narrative or interpretive frame and to offer them to an audience as historical evidence or aesthetic experience. Activation goes beyond both. To activate an

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 590.

⁶⁰ Cf. Patricia Hill COLLINS, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed., New York 2000, p. 251–253.

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archive is to bring its materials into relation with living communities, political claims and present conditions producing something new, a form of engagement with the past that changes both the archive and those who encounter it.

The four registers of activation that structure the comparative analysis: *interpretive*, *communal*, *structural* and *aspirational* are this thesis's own analytical contribution. They are not borrowed from any single theoretical source and are not attributed to any one of the scholars surveyed in Chapter 1. They are, rather, derived from the researcher's reading of that literature: an attempt to sort the different dimensions along which curatorial activation operates in practice. Each register corresponds to a cluster of theoretical concerns developed in Chapter 1; the registers are, in this sense, the practical and comparative face of the theoretical framework. They make it possible to ask, of each case study, not just whether activation occurs but how deeply and along which dimensions and to compare cases across a shared analytical vocabulary without imposing a false equivalence between them.

The first register is interpretive activation: the reframing of archival materials through curatorial juxtaposition, contextual documentation and critical analysis, challenging established interpretations and opening new lines of inquiry. This register draws primarily on Bennett's concept of the exhibitionary complex and on Stoler's method of reading against the grain; it asks what new meanings emerge when archival materials are placed in unexpected relation with each other. *The second register is communal activation*: the involvement of communities in the interpretation, governance and use of archival materials, producing collective knowledge and political agency in contrast to merely adding community perspectives to an institutionally determined framework.⁶¹ This register draws on Caswell and Cifor's ethics of radical empathy and on Taylor's concept of the repertoire; it asks whether communities are co-producers of archival knowledge or merely its subjects.

The third register is structural activation: the transformation of archival structures themselves through curatorial intervention, the creation of new organizational frameworks and new modes of governance that challenge the institutional architectures within which archives are typically held. This register draws on Caswell's distinction between the *salvage paradigm* and meaningfully liberatory practice and on Smith's argument that the inclusion of decolonial content does not by itself constitute decolonization; it asks who has the authority to decide what is worth preserving and on whose terms. *The fourth register is aspirational activation*: the use of archival materials to

⁶¹ TAYLOR, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, op. cit., p. 19.

generate historical knowledge and political perspective, to produce, through the encounter with the archive, a sense of possibility and solidarity oriented toward the future rather than the past. This register draws on Appadurai's concept of the *aspirational archive* and on Munoz's concept of *queer futurity*; it asks whether the archive generates the conditions for imagining and inhabiting different futures or it just documents the past.

These four registers are not mutually exclusive: the most important instances of curatorial engagement with activist archives tend to operate across all four simultaneously. They are also not a hierarchy, though they do form a spectrum from the most accessible, *interpretive activation* can be achieved within conventional institutional frameworks, to the most demanding, which requires transforming the structures of institutional authority themselves. This spectrum reveals where institutional limits tend to appear: consistently at the *structural register* and most clearly under conditions of political pressure. No single instance of curatorial engagement achieves all four registers equally. That asymmetry is what the comparative analysis turns on.

2.3 Case study selection and critical exhibition analysis

The cases examined in Chapter 3 have been chosen because they represent significant instances of curatorial engagement with community and activist archives. The method of critical exhibition analysis that organizes the case study chapters draws on Tony Bennett, Australian cultural theorist and sociologist, whose concept of the exhibitionary complex offers a framework for understanding exhibitions as instruments of social regulation and subject formation.⁶² Bennett's argument — that exhibitions do not only display objects but produce viewers, constructing particular kinds of seeing, knowing and self-understanding⁶³ — complements this thesis's understanding of curatorial practice as knowledge production. It implies that the analysis of an exhibition must attend not merely to its content but to the conditions it creates for audience engagement: who is addressed, from what position, with what assumptions about knowledge and authority.

⁶² Tony BENNETT, *The Exhibitionary Complex*, in: *New Formations*, 4, 1988, p. 73–102, here p. 74.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 88–90.

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The method also draws on Diana Taylor's scenario analysis, which attends not solely to the explicit content of what is displayed but to the implicit scripts — about who speaks, who is spoken about and who is expected to identify with displayed materials — that shape audience experience and interpretation.⁶⁴ The German art historian and theorist of curating Beatrice von Bismarck, whose understanding of the curatorial as constituted through relations as opposed to through any of its individual components resonates with this thesis's understanding of activation as a relational practice: it is not what any single curatorial decision does but what the relations between decisions, materials, communities and institutions produce together that determines the character of a curatorial engagement. Irit Rogoff, Israeli-British cultural theorist and art critic, whose concept of criticality, the idea that critical engagement with cultural institutions requires not only critique from outside but an inhabiting of the contradictions and gaps within institutional frameworks⁶⁵ — provides a further analytical resource, particularly for the analysis of the most institutionally ambivalent case.

2.4 Positionality and reflexivity

As a desk-based study relying primarily on published and documented sources, this thesis does not include the ethnographic fieldwork that would be required for a more fully participatory research design. The communities whose archives are examined in Chapter 3 are, in this study, analyzed rather than engaged as co-producers of knowledge, a limitation that points toward directions for further research.⁶⁶

As a researcher working within an academic institutional framework — the /ecm programme at the Angewandte — this study is itself subject to the archival frameworks it seeks to interrogate: it produces a particular version of curatorial history, privileges certain voices and perspectives and is shaped by the disciplinary conventions of the academic field in which it is situated.⁶⁷ These conditions cannot be transcended, but they can be acknowledged and that

⁶⁴ TAYLOR, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, op. cit., p. 28–31.

⁶⁵ Cf. Irit ROGOFF, *Smuggling - An Embodied Criticality*, in: *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies*, 2006, URL: <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0806/rogoff/en>.

⁶⁶ Linda Tuhiwai SMITH, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed., London / New York 2012 (1st ed. 1999), p. 34.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 120–123.

acknowledgment is itself a form of methodological rigor. Stoler's insistence that all archival practice is situated practice applies with equal force to academic analysis: this thesis is not a neutral survey of curatorial practices but a politically situated argument about their significance and their limits.⁶⁸

The concept of radical empathy that Caswell and Cifor propose⁶⁹ names not a solution to this positioning but an ethical orientation within it: a commitment to listening carefully, acknowledging what I do not know and allowing the knowledge of the communities I study to challenge and revise my own frameworks. Elke Krasny, Austrian feminist art historian and curator, whose understanding of archival practice as conversation⁷⁰: an ongoing negotiation between past and present, between those who hold the archive and those whose lives it holds⁷¹, shapes this thesis's approach throughout. For this research, that negotiation takes the form of a sustained and critical engagement with the practices, institutions and communities at the intersection of archiving, activism and curatorial work: an engagement that is, from the outset, partial, situated and oriented toward the political commitments that motivated the research.

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⁶⁸ Cf. STOLER, *Along the Archival Grain*, op. cit., p. 53.

⁶⁹ CASWELL, CIFOR, *From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics*, op. cit., p. 38.

⁷⁰ Cf. Elke KRASNY, *Archive, Care and Conversation*, in: *OnCurating*, 33, 2017, p. 46-52, here p. 48.

⁷¹ KRASNY, *Archive, Care and Conversation*, op. cit., p. 50.

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**3. Case Studies:
activating
community
and activist
archives**

The three case studies examined in this chapter were selected because together they trace a spectrum of curatorial activation across different institutional forms, different archival formations and different political horizons. When viewed through the theoretical framework of Chapter 1 and the methodological approach of Chapter 2, the three case studies cannot be reduced to a single model of archival practice. SAVVY Contemporary in Berlin operates as a participatory community archive and research institution, activating the colonial archive through long-term collaborative engagement with Berlin's African and Afrodiasporic communities. The Vereinigung bildender Künstlerinnen Österreichs in Vienna holds more than a century of feminist institutional archive whose reactivation requires the institution to read its own history against its own grain. The Otolith Group in London treats the archive as the primary medium of artistic and intellectual production, activating documentary materials from the Non-Aligned Movement, Third Cinema and post-colonial feminist organising through the form of the essay film.

Each case embodies a distinct configuration of the four registers of activation (interpretive, communal, structural and aspirational). Together they reveal different structural possibilities and limitations, producing forms of historical and political knowledge from its engagement with archival materials that could not have been anticipated and produced through theory alone.⁷²

Two orientations are shared across all three cases. First, they share an understanding of the archive not as a fixed historical record, but as a site of ongoing struggle. None of the three cases treats archival materials as stable evidence whose meaning has been fixed once and for all by institutional custody. They approach the archive as an active and unstable field, whose meaning is produced through the conditions and terms of its activation. This perspective reflects with Derrida's insight that every archival act is simultaneously an act of destruction and a process of selection and exclusion.

Second, all three cases emphasise the relationship between archival practice and living communities. Rather than viewing activation in the curatorial practice as a technical task, they treat it as a relational practice. This happens when the curator or institution enter into a relationship of accountability and reciprocity with the communities whose histories are at stake. Ultimately, the quality of activation process depends on whether this commitment remains rhetorical or is done seriously in more levels of the process, from governance, to decision-making and structures of access, in a way that changes the institutional governance of the archive. This tension between mere inclusion and

⁷² On case study selection criteria, see Chapter 2.3 of this thesis.

genuine transformation lies at the heart of Michelle Caswell's distinction between the salvage paradigm and liberatory practice and it a central lens for the comparative analysis of each case that follows.

A further methodological note about imparity of the available documentation is necessary before proceeding. The analysis draws on published and documented sources: institutional statements, exhibition catalogues, curatorial essays, critical reviews and scholarly engagements with each case. This means the analysis is inevitably shaped by the differing extent and nature of documentation for each case, which are themselves uneven: the Otolith Group's practice is extensively documented in their own published writings and in critical literature; SAVVY Contemporary's practice is documented through its institutional communications and through engaged curatorial scholarship; the VBKÖ's archival reactivation, being a more recent curatorial project, is documented through exhibition records, curatorial statements and the scholarship that has begun to attend to it and has comparatively less published material to date. The analysis acknowledges these differences and does not claim a false equivalence of documentation across the three cases.⁷³

The ordering of the cases — SAVVY Contemporary, VBKÖ, Otolith Group, follows a logic of institutional form and community relation rather and not a logic of chronological order or hierarchy. The cases move from the practice that is more directly rooted in community relationships to the most experimentally oriented; in this order the comparative analysis makes it easier to ask — at different stages of the analysis — how the institutional conditions shape what activation can achieve and where its limits appear. The synthesis in section 3.4 draws on this arc to develop two broader arguments: one concerning the relationship between institutional form and the accessibility of the four registers of activation and one concerning the relationship between the archipelagic model and the curatorial practices examined across all three cases.

3.1 Diasporic reckoning and the community archive: SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin

SAVVY Contemporary, founded in Berlin in 2009 by the Cameroonian curator, cultural theorist and otorhinolaryngologist Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, has grown into one of the most influential independent art spaces in Europe dedicated to decolonial, feminist and anti-racist curatorial practice. Describ-

⁷³ On the methodological constraints arising from uneven documentation across cases, see Chapter 2.4 of this thesis.

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- ⁷⁴ SAVVY Contemporary, About, URL: <https://savvy-contemporary.com> (accessed April 2026). On Ndikung as founding director, see the same URL. The formulation *laboratory of form-ideas* is SAVVY's own, used consistently across institutional communications since 2009.
- ⁷⁵ SAVVY Contemporary, Colonial Neighbours, URL: <https://savvy-contemporary.com/en/pillars/colonial-neighbours/> (accessed April 2026). The project addresses German colonial history including the Herero and Nama genocide (1904–1908), the exploitation of territories in present-day Tanzania, Cameroon and the Pacific and the structural legacies of these histories in contemporary German society.
- ⁷⁶ David OLUSOGA, Casper W. ERICHSEN, *The Kaiser's Holocaust. Germany's Forgotten Genocide*, London 2010; Jürgen ZIMMERER, *Von Windhuk nach Auschwitz? Beiträge zum Verhältnis von Kolonialismus und Holocaust*, Münster 2011. Germany formally recognised the genocide in 2021 following negotiations with Namibia.

ing itself as a laboratory of form-ideas, it understands artistic and curatorial work as inseparable from rigorous intellectual inquiry and positions itself in the contested space between Western and non-Western frameworks in order to examine and dismantle them.⁷⁴ SAVVY deliberately situates itself outside the dominant frameworks of large-scale state-funded institutions, operating at the intersection of exhibition-making, discursive programming, artistic research and community archiving. Its organizational form: a team of approximately thirty-five mostly volunteering members drawn from across continents is already a critique of the professional and economic structures that determine who can participate in European cultural life and this organizational critique reflects its understanding of what the archive is and what archival practice can and should do.

“SAVVY Contemporary is a space for epistemological diversity [...] producing antidotes to the epistemicidal activities that have been practiced all over the globe, by accommodating and celebrating knowledges and epistemic systems from Africa and the African diaspora, Asia-Pacific, Latin America, but Europe and North America.”

— Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, SAVVY Contemporary:
A Concept Reloaded, 2017

The project “Colonial Neighbours”, a long-term participatory archive and research project, coordinated by Lynhan Balatbat-Helbock and Matthew Hansen at SAVVY Contemporary, constitutes a paradigmatic case of curatorial activation that sees the colonial archive not as a static repository of historical facts but as a living and contested field.⁷⁵ The project explicitly addresses Germany's colonial history: including the Herero and Nama genocide in Namibia (1904–1908)⁷⁶, the exploitation of territories in present-day Tanzania,

Cameroon and the Pacific⁷⁷ and the persistent structural legacies of these histories in contemporary German society, through constant collaboration with Berlin's African and Afrodiasporic communities, neighbourhood residents, artists, researchers and activists. Contributors are invited to donate material traces of colonial and postcolonial experience: family photo albums, personal diaries and letters, colonial-era magazines and advertising, everyday objects such as tin containers and sweets bearing colonial branding, small sculptures, stamps, jewellery, textiles and recorded oral histories. These contributions are deliberately heterogeneous and non-hierarchical, organized around the concept of history as entanglement drawn from Conrad and Randeria's post-colonial historiography,⁷⁸ which proposes that colonial histories cannot be transmitted and told as separate national trajectories but must be understood as mutually constitutive processes that shaped both colonizer and colonized across time.

Project coordinators Balatbat-Helbock and Hansen have consistently emphasized the relational ethos of "Colonial Neighbours". The open call invited contributors with the words: "Share with us the story behind them and become part of SAVVY Contemporary's project Colonial Neighbours."⁷⁹ This approach foregrounds process over product and understands the archive as a site of ongoing co-production and not preservation.

The approach resonates directly with Glissant's archipelagic thought: meaning is generated through the relations between fragments rather than through any imposed continental totality and opacity is respected as communities have control over how, when and in what form their stories circulate.

One of the most compelling activations of the "Colonial Neighbours" archive occurred through the invitation of Accra-based curator and researcher Rose Esinam Damalie. Damalie conducted extended fieldwork in Ghana's Volta region, uncovering complex entanglements of German colonial administration, missionary activity, local resistance movements and contemporary memory practices. Selected fragments of her research, including oral testimo-

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nies, photographs and material objects, were integrated into exhibitions at SAVVY. Significantly, key texts were translated into Ewe, an explicit political and epistemological gesture that directly contests the colonial linguistic hierarchy and enacts a form of restitution of voice and knowledge production.⁸⁰ This gesture embodies Glissant's right to opacity at the most concrete formal level: the translation does not only make the materials accessible in a third language but refuses the monolingual Eurocentric frame within which colonial archives have consistently been organized and interpreted.

The FRAGMENTS series, a recurring programme initiated in 2016 and closely linked to "Colonial Neighbours", has featured artistic interventions by a wide range of practitioners including Abrie Fourie, Tito Aderemi-Ibitola and Lizza May David, who work directly with contributed materials to produce site-specific installations, performances and spatial rearrangements that challenge conventional museum display frameworks.⁸¹ Objects are frequently presented in domestic or semi-domestic settings, inviting visitors to touch, rearrange and reinterpret them, in this way transforming passive spectators into active participants. In the first FRAGMENTS intervention, "Moving Still: How Do We Go From Here" (2016), Aderemi-Ibitola led a six-week devised theatre workshop in which participants used physical movement, text examination and community excursions through Berlin to engage the colonial archive's materials, creating multiple points of entry into the archive and clearing space for new forms of thinking about Germany's colonial past. This is activation in Taylor's most precise sense: the curatorial act of turning the archival record into repertoire, bringing documentary materials into contact with the embodied knowledge of living communities and producing historical understanding that neither the archive nor the community could generate alone.

Public-space extensions such as the collaboration with the artist duo Various & Gould on "Monumental Shadows" further expand the project's reach beyond SAVVY's institutional walls. Using large-scale shadow projections onto public buildings and monuments in Berlin, the work provokes passers-by to confront the persistence of colonial iconography in urban space and to imagine alter-

⁷⁷ Sebastian CONRAD, *German Colonialism. A Short History*, Cambridge 2012.

⁷⁸ Sebastian CONRAD, Shalini RANDERIA, *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus. Postkoloniale Perspektiven in den Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften*, in: Sebastian CONRAD, Shalini RANDERIA (Hg.), *Jenseits des Eurozentrismus*, Frankfurt 2002, S. 9–49; for an English-language elaboration see Sebastian CONRAD, *What is Global History?*, Princeton 2016, S. 58–73.

⁷⁹ Lynhan BALATBAT-HELBOCK, Matthew HANSEN, *Colonial Neighbours. Open Call*, in: *savvy-contemporary.com* (2016), URL: <https://savvy-contemporary.com/en/pillars/colonial-neighbours/> (accessed April 2026).

⁸⁰ On Rose Esinam Damalie's fieldwork in Ghana's Volta region and the subsequent translation of key texts into Ewe for integration into SAVVY Contemporary exhibitions, see SAVVY Contemporary, *Colonial Neighbours*, URL: <https://savvy-contemporary.com/en/pillars/colonial-neighbours/> (accessed April 2026).

⁸¹ SAVVY Contemporary, *FRAGMENTS 1. Moving Still. How Do We Go From Here* (2016), URL: <https://savvy-contemporary.com/en/events/2016/fragments-1-moving-still-how-do-we-go-from-here/> (accessed April 2026); on Lizza May David's contribution to the *Colonial Neighbours* installation, see <https://www.gorki.de/en/colonial-neighbours> (accessed April 2026).

native forms of memorialization and repair.⁸² These activations demonstrate that curatorial practice can move fluidly between the interior of the archive and the exterior of public life, refusing the separation between institutional and communal spheres that conventional archival practice tends to enforce.

When read through the four registers of activation developed in Chapter 2, “Colonial Neighbours” emerges as one of the strongest examples of comprehensive curatorial engagement with activist and community archives available in contemporary European practice. Interpretive activation operates through sophisticated curatorial juxtaposition and reframing. Archival objects are not presented as transparent evidence of the past but as symptoms of colonial anxiety and epistemic violence, in what Stoler calls reading against the archival grain.⁸³ They simultaneously function as carriers of intense affective charge, aligning with Cvetkovich’s concept of an archive of feelings that foregrounds trauma, desire and resilience rather than official documentation.⁸⁴ The deliberate use of non-traditional display formats, including domestic settings, performative installations and participatory rearrangement stations, generates new layers of meaning that disrupt sedimented Eurocentric historical narratives and open unexpected lines of inquiry. A colonial administrative photograph of an African subject placed in a curatorial context that addresses that subject’s descendants as co-producers of the archival encounter, instead of as audiences for a historical display, is a different archival object from the same photograph held in a Bundesarchiv folder. The curatorial act changes not the material but its relational and political conditions and through those conditions, its meaning.

Communal activation constitutes the ethical and political core of the project. By centering Caswell and Cifor’s framework of radical empathy, SAVVY positions itself in a relation of accountability to the communities whose histories have been systematically erased or marginalized from German national memory.⁸⁵ Contributors are not merely sources of material but co-producers of knowledge, generating what Caswell terms representational belonging: a sense of recognition produced through seeing one’s history reflected in cultural institutions. This approach moves decisively beyond the salvage paradigm,

82 Various & GOULD, *Monumental Shadows*, in: *savvy-contemporary.com* (2021), URL: <https://savvy-contemporary.com/en/projects/2021/monumental-shadows/> (accessed April 2026).

83 Ann Laura STOLER, *Along the Archival Grain. Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton 2009, p. 20.

84 Ann CVETKOVICH, *An Archive of Feelings. Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Durham 2003, pp. 7–9.

85 Michelle CASWELL, Marika CIFOR, *From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics. Radical Empathy in the Archives*, in: *Archivaria*, 81, 2016, pp. 23–43, here pp. 36–38.

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in which marginalized materials are incorporated into existing institutional structures without transforming those structures, toward meaningfully liberatory archival practice.⁸⁶ SAVVY does not bring community representatives into a pre-existing curatorial framework as informants or validators; it structures the curatorial encounter so that the knowledge produced within it exceeds what any single participant, including the curatorial institution itself, could have produced alone. The material implications extend to questions of archival governance that most curatorial institutions prefer to leave unexamined: who controls the terms on which colonial archival materials are made accessible and whose criteria of historical significance determine what is preserved and what is not? By staging the encounter between the colonial archive and the communities it organized away as a fundamentally political encounter, the project makes visible the governance questions that the archive’s normal institutional life conceals.

Structural activation is evident in SAVVY’s organizational model itself. As an independent, artist-run space operating with relative autonomy from state funding, SAVVY can experiment with governance models that prioritize community advisory boards, rotating curatorial roles and non-hierarchical decision-making processes, challenging the form of traditional museums and archives.⁸⁷ This structural freedom makes meaningfully transformative archival practice possible within the constraints of European institutional culture, even if those constraints remain real. The fact that this activation occurs in an institution that operates at the margins of the European art world does not diminish its political significance; it makes the tensions it generates more clear, because it shows that aspirational archival practice is possible within institutional constraints.

Aspirational activation provides the forward-looking horizon of the entire project. Drawing on Appadurai’s notion of the aspirational archive and Muñoz’s queer futurity, “Colonial Neighbours” treats archival practice as a generative act that produces collectivity and political possibility rather than merely documenting what already existed.⁸⁸ By continuously linking colonial

86 Michelle CASWELL, *Urgent Archives. Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*, New York 2021, pp. 21–25.

87 Bonaventure Soh Bejeng NDIKUNG, *SAVVY Contemporary. A Concept Reloaded*, in: *savvy-contemporary.com* (2017), URL: <https://savvy-contemporary.com> (accessed April 2026); CASWELL, *Urgent Archives* (op. cit.), pp. 21–25.

88 Arjun APPADURAI, *Archive and Aspiration*, in: Joke BROUWER, Arjen MULDER (Hg.), *Information Is Alive. Art and Theory on Archiving and Retrieving Data*, Rotterdam 2003, pp. 14–25, here p. 17; José Esteban MUÑOZ, *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York 2009, pp. 27–32.

pasts to present-day struggles around racism, migration policy, border regimes and anti-colonial resistance, the project creates conditions for imagining and inhabiting decolonial futures.

Despite its many strengths, “Colonial Neighbours” also has structural limits linked to independent spaces. Resource dependency, precarious funding and the constant labour of maintaining community relationships put significant pressure on a small team. Questions of scalability, meaning how deeply relational practices that it developed might be translated into larger, more bureaucratic institutions, are open and point toward important directions for further research. Nevertheless, the project realizes Glissant’s right to opacity while enacting Taylor’s call to turn the archive into repertoire. It demonstrates how curatorial activation can honor the archive’s situated and political nature and intervene in the conditions of historical possibility.⁸⁹ Applied to the Glissantian framework, SAVVY’s practice is the most fully archipelagic of the three cases examined in this chapter: it does not seek to produce a master narrative of colonial history in Berlin but generates meaning through relation: between the colonial documentary record and the community-contributed archive, between the institutional space and the communities it convenes, between the historical materials it engages and the political futures it opens.

3.2 The feminist institution and its archive: VBKÖ, Vienna

The Vereinigung bildender Künstlerinnen Österreichs (the Association of Austrian Women Artists, hereafter VBKÖ) was founded in Vienna in 1910, making it one of the oldest continuously operating feminist professional associations in the German-speaking world.⁹⁰ At the time of the VBKÖ’s establishment, the Künstlerhaus, the Secession and the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna were all exclusively open to men as members and students. Women artists working in Vienna had no institutional home of their own, no organizational structure through which to advance their professional interests and no recognized platform through which to exhibit their work on terms they controlled. The VBKÖ

⁸⁹ Jacques DERRIDA, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago 1996, pp. 10–12; Michel FOUCAULT, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, New York 1972, p. 129.

⁹⁰ Vereinigung bildender Künstlerinnen Österreichs (VBKÖ), *The Archive*, URL: <https://www.vbkoe.org/en/the-archive/> (accessed April 2026); VBKÖ, *The History of VBKÖ*, URL: <https://www.vbkoe.org/en/the-history-of-vbko/> (accessed April 2026).

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was constituted, from the beginning, as a counter-institutional formation: an organizational response to the existing institutions of the Viennese art world, which were incomplete and structured by the exclusion of women as professional subjects.

The archive the VBKÖ has produced and preserved over more than a century has exhibition catalogues, correspondence, photographs, membership records, administrative files, governance minutes and artworks spanning from the association’s founding in the late Habsburg era through the period between First and Second World Wars, National Socialist collaboration in 1938, post-1945 continuities and contemporary queer-feminist expansions. This history is marked by profound contradictions: progressive advocacy for women artists in a male-dominated art world on the one hand and documented involvement with the Nazi regime on the other. The association was Aryanized and renamed “Künstlerverband Wiener Frauen” in 1938, with provisional administration appointed and subsequently renamed “Vereinigung bildender Künstlerinnen der Reichsgaue der Ostmark” in 1941. Many Jewish women artists who had been members were driven to emigration; others participated in propagandistic exhibitions organized under the Nazi structures. In the Association’s history there is an absence of decisive denazification after 1945 and gaps in documentation from certain periods, specifically 1938–1945 and the 1980s–early 2000s: this make the archive a site of both presence and silence.⁹¹ The VBKÖ has engaged critically with this history since the 1990s, but the critical engagement itself remains uneven and ongoing. In every sense it is an archival problem: it concerns what the archive holds, what it has concealed and also how it has been narrated and by whom.

Critical reactivation of the archive began after a generational shift in the late 1990s and the establishment of the archive in 2004. Since then, more than twenty-six artistic and scholarly projects engaged the collection in terms of revision, reinterpretation and collective rearticulation.⁹² The archive is not a neutral repository of documents about women’s artistic production; it is a record of feminist counter-institutionality, of what it has meant, in successive and profoundly different historical moments, to maintain a collective organizational structure in a context of constant institutional exclusion. This means that the archive has a specific political texture that distinguishes it from

⁹¹ VBKÖ, *The History of VBKÖ* (op. cit.); MARCH, *Storying the Silence. The Archive of the Vereinigung bildender Künstler*innen Österreichs* (VBKÖ), URL: <https://march.international/storying-the-silence-the-archive-of-the-vereinigung-bildender-kuenstlerinnen-osterreichs-vbko/> (accessed April 2026).

⁹² VBKÖ, *The Archive* (op. cit.).

- 93 VBKÖ, Polyphonic Archive, Entangled Voices, exhibition announcement, 14 March – 2 May 2026, URL: <https://www.vbkoe.org> (accessed April 2026). The archive renovation was supported by the Cultural Department of the City of Vienna (MA 7).
- 94 VBKÖ exhibition documentation, Polyphonic Archive, Entangled Voices (op. cit.). Exhibition organised by Georgia Holz, Veronika Hösch, Mika Maruyama, Stephanie Misa, Miwa Negoro, Tsai-Ju Wu and Julia Wieger; residency artists: Pêdra Costa, Zoe Gudović, Daniel Hill, Vinko Nino Jaeger, Eszter Katalin, Tahereh Nourani and Christina Werner.
- 95 VBKÖ exhibition materials and artist statements, Polyphonic Archive, Entangled Voices (op. cit.). The question is drawn from the documentation of the research subgroup formed by Daniel Hill, Eszter Katalin and Vinko Nino Jaeger.

both the archives of mainstream cultural institutions and from community archives in Caswell's primary sense. Every decision the VBKÖ has made about what to preserve, how to catalogue and what to allow to fall out of the record has shaped the archive as surely as any external exclusionary pressure. The Derridean archiviolithic drive to preserve is inseparable from the violence of selection and in this case that violence has been exercised by the feminist institution itself, not just by the mainstream institutions it was founded to contest.

The most recent and significant phase of activation culminated in the archive's first extensive renovation, supported by the Cultural Department of the City of Vienna (MA 7) and its public re-opening on 14 March 2026. This milestone was marked by the group exhibition "Polyphonic Archive, Entangled Voices" (14 March — 2 May 2026), organized by VBKÖ members including Georgia Holz, Veronika Hösch, Mika Maruyama, Stephanie Misa, Miwa Negoro, Tsai-Ju Wu and Julia Wieger.⁹³ The exhibition emerged directly from the VBKÖ Member's Archive Residency Program, during which seven artists — Pêdra Costa, Zoe Gudović, Daniel Hill, Vinko Nino Jaeger, Eszter Katalin, Tahereh Nourani and Christina Werner — engaged in sustained dialogue with the archive's documents, photographs, objects, files, voices, silences and violences. Their contributions span installation, video, sound, performance and research-based practices that activate historical materials while highlighting queer-feminist perspectives and refusing the tone of a totalizing institutional narrative.⁹⁴

Daniel Hill, Eszter Katalin and Vinko Nino Jaeger formed a research subgroup investigating queer absences in the archive, resulting in multi-channel video installations and spatial interventions that pose the question: "Where are the queer people in the archive?"⁹⁵ this question is itself an act of archival activation, it makes visible through its very articulation the logic of selection that produced the absence it names.

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An earlier curatorial intervention that established the critical framework within which the 2026 reactivation operates is "The Art of Women — Friends and Accomplices", curated by Barbara Steiner and presented at the VBKÖ in 2015–16.⁹⁶ The exhibition reactivated the title of the association's inaugural 1910 exhibition under contemporary conditions, it examined the conflict relationship between art and economy from the perspective of artists and art institutions in a period of intensifying neoliberal re-structuration. By intentionally repeating the title of the founding exhibition, the curatorial approach produced a juxtaposition of the context in which feminist art organizing was possible and necessary in 1910 and the conditions under which it operates in the present. This is Freeman's temporal drag applied to the feminist institutional archive: the way that the VBKÖ carries within it the traces of anachronistic aspirations and non-normative temporalities that the dominant art world has consistently sought to normalize or domesticate.

When read through the four registers of activation, the VBKÖ's 2026 reactivation is an example of strong *structural activation* inside an existing institutional framework. By turning the archive inward and reading its own ambivalent history against the grain, in Stoler's sense, the association presents a form of institutional self-accountability that Caswell would recognize as meaningfully liberatory.⁹⁷ The renovation and public re-opening transform the archive from a volunteer-run, semi-closed into a polyphonic, publicly accessible platform: a realization of Sternfeld's para-museum concept, which inhabits institutional contradictions while appropriating institutional resources for radical democratic ends.⁹⁸

Communal activation at VBKÖ works powerfully through member-led governance and collective performance. The residency program and exhibition foreground the repertoire in Taylor's sense: embodied readings, radio conversations, workshops and artist talks bring living feminist and queer bodies into direct relation with documentary traces.⁹⁹ This produces representational belonging for current and historical members while making visible the affective and care labour that sustains the institution, this labour that the official archival record, always focused on exhibitions and professional achievements, has

96 VBKÖ, The Art of Women. Friends and Accomplices, curated by Barbara Steiner, Wien 2015/16, URL: <https://www.vbkoe.org/en/the-art-of-women-friends-and-accomplices/> (accessed April 2026).

97 CASWELL, Urgent Archives (op. cit.), pp. 21–25.

98 Nora STERNFELD, Das radikaldemokratische Museum, in: ecm (Hg.), Curating. Ausstellungstheorie & Praxis, Bd. 3, Wien 2018 (Edition Angewandte), S. 64.

99 Diana TAYLOR, The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas, Durham 2003, p. 19.

until recently excluded. Interpretive activation is achieved through curatorial juxtaposition and contemporary artistic intervention: archival materials are reframed alongside new works that highlight continuities of exclusion, moments of solidarity and queer-feminist resistances. The polyphonic structure, in which multiple voices coexisting without forced synthesis, respects Glissant's right to opacity and excludes narratives that try to totalize.¹⁰⁰

“The archive here is approached not as a static storage space, but as something relational, attentive and constantly in motion.”

— Zoe Gudović, VBKÖ: When Archives Speak, 2025/2026¹⁰¹

The *structural register* is where the VBKÖ's archival situation is most distinctive. Unlike SAVVY, which has no permanent collection and so it exercises archival governance from a position of institutional independence, the VBKÖ holds its own archive: a condition that gives its practice an unusual degree of autonomy as well as simultaneously exposing it to the risk of the salvage paradigm operating from within. The VBKÖ occupies both sides of Caswell's distinction simultaneously: it is the community whose archive needs activation and the institution whose archival governance decisions determine the conditions of that activation. The most important questions raised by the archive are: Whose artistic practice has the association recognised and whose has it left out? And how far has the VBKÖ's feminist commitment gone in challenging the old criteria of professional recognition inherited from the male-dominated art institutions it once contested? These are questions the institution cannot fully answer without potentially unsettling aspects of its own organizational identity.¹⁰²

The *aspirational register* orients the entire 2026 project toward future collectivity. The reopened archive becomes a living collection that generates new forms of queer-feminist imagination and political possibility. By activating histories of struggle alongside present-day practices, the VBKÖ produces conditions for imagining alternative institutional futures. This aspirational dimension is clearly activated when curatorial engagement with the archive addresses in an explicit way the relation between the association's historical practice and the contemporary feminist, queer and decolonial art organizing that is both continuous with and critically distinct from it. As an institution with its own complicated past, the VBKÖ faces tensions that have to confront

¹⁰⁰ GLISSANT, *Poetics of Relation* (op. cit.), p. 29.

¹⁰¹ Zoe GUDOVIĆ, in: VBKÖ (Hg.), *When Archives Speak*, Wien 2025/2026, URL: <https://www.vbkoe.org> (accessed April 2026).

¹⁰² APPADURAI, *Archive and Aspiration* (op. cit.), p. 19; MUÑOZ, *Cruising Utopia* (op. cit.), p. 27.

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how to address historical complicity without neutralizing contemporary activist commitments and how to balance preservation with openness. The need to rely on member labour and very limited funding reflects and highlights broader challenges of feminist self-organization. But this internal, member-driven approach demonstrates that liberatory archival practice can and often must, begin with the institution's own records, enacting Sternfeld's para-museum not as a structure imposed from outside but as a transformation generated from within.

In Glissant's terms, the VBKÖ's archival situation is characterized by a productive tension between continental and archipelagic frameworks. The institution's long history, its organizational identity and its professional continuity lean toward the continental model: toward rooted identity, institutional self-legitimation and a unified narrative of feminist art history in Austria in which the VBKÖ is recognized as origin and guard figure. The archipelagic reading of the archive insists, against this, on the opacity and relational multiplicity of the materials it holds, on the contradictions, the silences and the unresolved organizational tensions, including the Nazi period, that constitute a century of feminist institution-building as surely as its achievements. “Polyphonic Archive, Entangled Voices” has been up to this year the most sustained recent attempt to hold and express this tension: it honors the historical significance of what the VBKÖ has built while refusing the institutional closure that a purely celebratory archival narrative would impose. The question posed by the research subgroup investigating queer absences — “Where are the queer people in the archive — encapsulates this tension with precision: it openly points silence as what the official record has organized away and it proposes a sustained and formally inventive inquiry as the curatorial practice adequate to an archive that is in its constitution as much by its absences as its documented holdings.

3.3 The archive as medium: the Otolith Group, London

The Otolith Group, the London-based artistic research collective founded in 2002 by Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun, occupies an important position in relation to the archival practices examined in this thesis.¹⁰³ Where SAVVY Contemporary and the VBKÖ engage with archives held by institutions and communities and produce curatorial practices that bring those archives into

¹⁰³ The Otolith Group, *About*, URL: <https://otolithgroup.org> (accessed April 2026).

relation with public audiences, with living communities and with political claims, the Otolith Group treats the archive itself as an artistic medium: raw material whose recombination, juxtaposition and reframing is seen as the primary aesthetic and political act. The collective does not manage an archive in the custodial sense, does not hold materials as an archival institution and does not organize community engagement in the programmatic manner of either SAVVY or the VBKÖ. Yet it is archival in the deepest sense that this thesis's theoretical framework makes available: it activates the archive as a site of political possibility, turning what Taylor calls the archival record into what Taylor calls the repertoire and it does so through a formal commitment to the essay film as the genre most adequate to the temporally complex, politically dense character of the archival materials it engages. Rather than treating archival materials as stable historical evidence, the Group activates documentary fragments from the Non-Aligned Movement, Third Cinema, Pan-African independence struggles and postcolonial feminist organizing through sophisticated montage, voice-over, sound design and digital intervention to produce what the artists describe as histories of futurity.

This methodology aligns closely with Foster's concept of the archival impulse in contemporary art and Enwezor's elaboration of the uses of the document in critical artistic practice.¹⁰⁴ The Otolith Group does not merely illustrate history but transforms archival traces into multi-temporal, speculative constructs that challenge linear historicism and open possibilities for alternative modernities. Their work consistently foregrounds the affective, ephemeral and embodied dimensions of archival experience in Cvetkovich's sense, while insisting on the epistemic validity of performed and essayistic knowledge in the tradition Taylor and Schneider develop.¹⁰⁵ Sagar brings to the collective a sustained engagement with the archival and personal materials of Indian postcolonial history, feminist organizing and the Non-Aligned Movement, including the personal archive of her grandmother Anasuya Gyan Chand, former President of the National Federation of Indian Women. Eshun contributes a theoretical framework shaped by his writing on Afrofuturism and Black diasporic culture's relation to temporality and technological modernity. Together, their practice demonstrates how the personal, the familial and the political

¹⁰⁴ Hal FOSTER, *An Archival Impulse*, in: *October*, 110, 2004, pp. 3–22, here p. 4; Okwui ENWEZOR, *Archive Fever. Photography Between History and the Monument*, in: Okwui ENWEZOR (Hg.), *Archive Fever. Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, New York/Göttingen 2008, pp. 10–51, here p. 23.

¹⁰⁵ CVETKOVICH, *An Archive of Feelings* (op. cit.), pp. 7–9; TAYLOR, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (op. cit.), p. 19; Rebecca SCHNEIDER, *Performing Remains. Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, London/New York 2011, pp. 6–9.

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archive can be brought into productive and formally complex relation with institutional documentary holdings, producing a form of archival engagement that is simultaneously intimate and structural.

“In the Year of the Quiet Sun” (2013, 33 minutes 57 seconds) takes its title from the solar phenomenon of reduced sunspot activity that coincided with a pivotal period in African decolonization. The film centres on Ghanaian postage stamps issued between 1957 (the year of independence under Kwame Nkrumah) and 1966, the year of the military coup that deposed him. Archival footage, photographs and stamps from the Non-Aligned conferences in Bandung, Cairo and elsewhere are interwoven with narration that excavates the temporal contradictions of decolonization: the optimism of tricontinental solidarity, the Volta River Project as a symbol of technological sovereignty and national self-determination and the rapid unraveling of Pan-African aspirations under the combined pressures of Cold War geopolitics and neocolonial economic structures.¹⁰⁶ The film does not use these archival materials to document a history; it activates them as what T.J. Demos has called past-potential futures: the trace of an aspirational political horizon that was closed by the historical processes that followed, but that the film insists on holding open as a resource for political imagination in the present.

“We looked at the Bandung and Pan-African moment through a post-disillusionment lens because we were born after.”

— Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun, *The Otolith Group*, Ocula, 2022

“Nucleus of the Great Union” (2017/2018, approximately 32 minutes) reworks an unpublished collection of over 1,500 photographs taken by Richard Wright during his 1953 visit to the Gold Coast (soon to become Ghana) during the rise of Kwame Nkrumah's Convention People's Party, West Africa's first mass socialist party, as it campaigned for independence against British rule. Collaborating with writer Saidiya Hartman, whose voice-over draws from “Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route” (2007), the film treats Wright's images as actors and extras in a drama of Black internationalism. Contact prints, digital spirals and excerpts from Wright's notes and correspondence with Nkrumah are montaged to explore disappointment, desire and

¹⁰⁶ The Otolith Group, *In the Year of the Quiet Sun*, 2013, HD video with colour and sound, 33 min 57 sec; on the film's engagement with Ghanaian independence stamps, the Volta River Project and Non-Aligned Movement archives, see Ocula, *The Otolith Group's Science Fiction of the Present*, July 2022, URL: <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/the-otolith-group-science-fiction-of-the-present/> (accessed April 2026).

the ongoing need for radical solidarity.¹⁰⁷ The photographs were unpublished during Wright's lifetime and remained in institutional custody without public activation; the Otolith Group's recovery and reframing of this archive is an act of *structural activation* in the most precise sense: it intervenes in the archival logic that had left these materials inaccessible and produces a new form of public knowledge from materials that institutions had held without activating. The collaboration with Hartman is equally significant: it places Wright's visual archive in relation to a contemporary theoretical and literary framework for thinking about Black Atlantic history, producing a form of archival meaning that the materials alone, held in institutional custody, could not generate.

Both works exemplify the Group's signature strategy: archival materials are not fixed in the past but rendered multi-temporal through techniques of temporal drag in Freeman's sense and speculative narration. Sound design, including original compositions and manipulated archival audio, further activates the affective charge of the documents, making audible the traces of political emotion and collective aspiration that conventional archival display suppresses.¹⁰⁸ The essay film as a form is particularly suited to this operation because it refuses the claim to objectivity that the documentary convention typically asserts, explicitly foregrounding its own formal operations as interpretive and political acts rather than neutral transmissions of archival content. This is Stoler's method of reading against the grain applied at the level of the moving image itself: exposing not just what the archive declares but the conditions under which those declarations were produced: the Cold War institutional frameworks, the postcolonial state formations and the gendered frameworks of political recognition and preserved.

When read through the four registers, the Otolith Group's practice leans strongly toward interpretive and *aspirational activation*, operating primarily within the autonomous space of artistic production as opposed to direct institutional or community governance. Interpretive activation is achieved through essayistic reframing and montage: archival images of Bandung-era optimism or Third Cinema militancy are placed in dialogue with contemporary crises, revealing the archive's contradictions and unfulfilled potentials.¹⁰⁹ The grain

107 The Otolith Group, *Nucleus of the Great Union*, 2017/2018, HD video, approx. 32 min; on Richard Wright's photographic archive (over 1,500 photographs from his 1953 visit to the Gold Coast) and Saidiya Hartman's voice-over, see *Ocula* (op. cit.); Saidiya HARTMAN, *Lose Your Mother. A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, New York 2007.

108 Elizabeth FREEMAN, *Time Binds. Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Durham 2010, pp. 62–65.

109 STOLER, *Along the Archival Grain* (op. cit.), p. 47; CVETKOVICH, *An Archive of Feelings* (op. cit.), pp. 7–9.

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of film stock, the haunting presence of gestures and the affective weight of deferred futures become central to meaning-making, aligning the practice with Cvetkovich's archive of feelings and resisting the epistemological demand for archival transparency.

Communal activation occurs more indirectly than in either SAVVY or the VBKÖ. The Otolith Group does not run participatory community archives; their public programming, screenings, lectures and discursive events invite audiences into relational encounters with the materials and the essay film form itself functions as a kind of repertoire, performed, temporal and embodied, that circulates knowledge beyond institutional walls.¹¹⁰ The communities that the Otolith Group's work addresses are not geographically bounded or institutionally organized; they are the communities of political and aesthetic memory constituted by the films themselves: the viewers who, encountering archival footage of the Non-Aligned Movement or of postcolonial feminist organizing, find in those materials the traces of futures not yet realized and solidarities not yet formed. This is Appadurai's aspirational archive at its most expansive: the archive generates the community it appears to represent through the encounter rather than presupposing it.

Structural activation is limited by the autonomy of artistic practice. The Group does not transform the holding institutions of the original archives, such as museums, national collections and personal estates, but creates parallel critical counter-archives in the space of contemporary art.¹¹¹ Their presence in major international venues including Tate Modern, the Sharjah Art Foundation and the MIT List Visual Arts Center generates the platform that makes this archival practice visible, but it also subjects that practice to the institutional framings that it is simultaneously working to contest, namely the art-world categories of medium, genre and cultural value. This is a genuine tension that the Otolith Group's practice does not resolve so much as inhabit.

Aspirational activation is the strongest and most distinctive register. Drawing on Appadurai's aspirational archive and Muñoz's queer futurity, the works resuscitate the political imaginaries of the Non-Aligned Movement and Pan-Africanism not as nostalgia but as resources for imagining alternative futures. By working, in their own words, "from the end backwards", the Group produces histories of futurity that orient viewers toward what has not yet been

110 TAYLOR, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (op. cit.), pp. 19, 28.

111 On structural activation and its limits within the autonomous space of artistic practice, see Chapter 2.2 of this thesis.

realized.¹¹² Foster's argument that archival art seeks to transform the no-place of the archive into the no-place of a utopia finds its most radical contemporary elaboration in the Otolith Group's practice, which insists that the utopian dimension of the archival encounter is not just aesthetic but politically and historically specific: constituted through the particular histories of decolonization, anticolonial struggle and postcolonial feminist organizing that the archives they engage carry within them.

Their practice radicalizes Derrida's insight that the archive constitutes as opposed to merely records the past. By making the archive the primary medium of artistic and intellectual production, the Otolith Group enacts Glissant's archipelagic relationality, constructing meaning through constellations of fragments from multiple geographies, languages, institutional origins and historical periods instead of through any synthesis into a master narrative and insists on the epistemic validity of performed, essayistic knowledge in Taylor's sense. Their work demonstrates how activation can occur powerfully outside traditional museum or community-archive settings, through the mobility, speculation and poetic density afforded by the essay film form.¹¹³

3.4 Synthesis: registers of activation across institutional contexts

The three case studies, SAVVY Contemporary's "Colonial Neighbours", the VBKÖ's "Polyphonic Archive, Entangled Voices" reactivation and the Otolith Group's essay films, trace a rich spectrum of curatorial activation. They operate across different institutional scales (independent community space, self-organized feminist association, autonomous artistic practice), different archival formations (participatory community contributions, institutional self-history, transnational documentary collections) and different political horizons (decolonial diaspora work, feminist institutional critique, speculative post-colonial futurity). Read through the theoretical framework of Chapter 1 and the methodological apparatus of Chapter 2, these cases resist any model of archival practice while collectively demonstrating the analytical and polit-

112 APPADURAI, *Archive and Aspiration* (op. cit.), p. 17; MUÑOZ, *Cruising Utopia* (op. cit.), p. 27; the phrase "from the end backwards" is drawn from Ocula (op. cit.); cf. T.J. DEMOS, *Openings*. The Otolith Group, in: *Artforum*, September 2006.

113 DERRIDA, *Archive Fever* (op. cit.), pp. 10–12; GLISSANT, *Poetics of Relation* (op. cit.), p. 11; TAYLOR, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (op. cit.), p. 19.

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ical productivity of the four registers of activation.¹¹⁴ Each case treats the archive not as a neutral repository but as a situated and generative site: a living practice in which memory, activism and imagination converge. They share two fundamental orientations: on one hand the archive as a site of ongoing struggle rather than settled record and curatorial activation as a relational practice grounded in accountability to living communities. On the other hand, they reveal distinct strengths, necessary trade-offs and contextual limits, making clear the conditions in which different registers of activation become possible or constrained.¹¹⁵

To deepen the synthesis, it is useful to consider the four registers not as isolated categories but as interlaced dimensions whose emphasis shifts according to the institutional context, political urgency and curatorial resources. In "Colonial Neighbours", *communal* and *structural activation* dominate because the project was designed from the outset as a participatory counter-institutional initiative. The open-call structure and community workshops create a constant (and continuous) feedback loop in which interpretive and aspirational dimensions emerge organically from collective processes. This stands in productive contrast to the VBKÖ reactivation, where *structural activation* is foregrounded because the institution must first confront its own compromised history: *communal activation* takes the form of internal member labour and care practices, while *interpretive activation* serves as the vehicle for making visible the archive's silences around National Socialist collaboration and queer absences. The Otolith Group, operating in the more flexible but more isolated context of artistic research, privileges *interpretive* and *aspirational registers*. Their essay films achieve depth in reframing archival temporality but also rely on the viewer's own contextual knowledge for communal resonance.¹¹⁶

This distribution of emphasis reveals a broader pattern: independent or community-led projects tend to excel in *communal activation* because they can bypass bureaucratic gatekeeping, while long-established institutions like the VBKÖ achieve structural transformation only through sustained internal critique. Artistic practices such as the Otolith Group's offer the greatest freedom for aspirational speculation because they are not bound by preservation or community accountability. These observations do not imply a hierarchy

114 On the four registers of activation and case study selection, see Chapter 2.2 and 2.3 of this thesis.

115 The two shared orientations are named in the introductory framing of Chapter 3 of this thesis.

116 On the interlocking nature of the four registers and their variable emphasis across institutional contexts, see Chapter 2.2 of this thesis.

117 Donna HARAWAY, *Situated Knowledges. The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, in: *Feminist Studies*, 14/3, 1988, pp. 575–599, here p. 583; Patricia Hill COLLINS, *Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed., New York 2000, pp. 251–253.

118 On Rose Esinam Damalie's fieldwork and the Ewe translation as archipelagic gesture, see footnote 2 above; GLISSANT, *Poetics of Relation* (op. cit.), p. 29; CASWELL, *Urgent Archives* (op. cit.), pp. 21–25.

119 STOLER, *Along the Archival Grain* (op. cit.), p. 47; TAYLOR, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (op. cit.), p. 19; on "Who Brings the Cake?" and Gudović's radio work, see VBKÖ, *Polyphonic Archive, Entangled Voices* (op. cit.).

between the case studies, they highlight the situated nature of curatorial activation: a point that resonates directly with Haraway's situated knowledges and Collins's matrix of domination as discussed in Chapter 2.1.¹¹⁷

"Colonial Neighbours" most directly realizes Glissant's archipelagic thought and Caswell's liberatory ethics. The project's refusal of continental totality, with its embrace of fragmented contributions, multilingual translations (Ewe, German, English) and community-controlled narratives, embodies the right to opacity while generating relational meaning across diaspora experiences. Rose Esinam Damalie's fieldwork and the subsequent integration of Volta region materials into Berlin exhibitions literally perform archipelagic relation: the archive becomes a network of islands in contrast to a unified mainland narrative.¹¹⁸

The VBKÖ reactivation enacts Stoler's method of reading against the archival grain at the level of institutional self-examination. By confronting the association's 1938 alignment with National Socialist cultural policy and the gaps left by the lack of decisive postwar rupture, "Polyphonic Archive, Entangled Voices" transforms the archive's constitutive violence into a generative force. The collective performance "Who Brings the Cake?" and Gudović's radio work further activate Taylor's repertoire, turning administrative documents and institutional silences into embodied acts of care and memory work. This internal labour demonstrates that liberatory archival practice need not always originate outside the institution; it can and sometimes must, begin with rigorous self-reflexivity.¹¹⁹

The Otolith Group's essay films most explicitly engage Cvetkovich's archive of feelings, Freeman's temporal drag and Appadurai's aspirational archive. In "In the Year of the Quiet Sun", the slow unfolding of Ghanaian postage stamps alongside archival footage produces an affective temporality in which the optimism of 1957 coexists with the disappointments of 1966 and the uncertainties of the present. "Nucleus of the Great Union" extends this logic by treating Richard Wright's photographs as spectral presences that haunt contemporary

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Black radical imagination, activated through Saidiya Hartman's voice-over as a form of temporal and affective bridge. These works do not resolve historical contradictions but hold them in productive tension, generating the kind of queer futurity Muñoz describes as a then and there that is never fully realized but always beckoning.¹²⁰

Taken together, the cases confirm central arguments from Chapter 1. They demonstrate Derrida's archiviolithic drive and Foucault's productive archive in action: activation makes visible the violence of selection while intervening in the conditions of historical possibility. Glissant's archipelagic thought provides a unifying structural model: each project generates meaning through relation, opacity and multiplicity rather than totality. Taylor's archive/repertoire framework is realized concretely as activation turns documentary traces into embodied, performed and relational knowledge. Caswell's liberatory ethics and Sternfeld's para-museum find concrete expression in the more institutionally engaged cases, while Foster and Enwezor's archival impulse in art finds its fullest realization in the Otolith Group.¹²¹

The three case studies collectively demonstrate that curatorial activation operates as a multifaceted, context-specific practice. By mobilizing the four registers in different configurations, they show how archives can be transformed from sites of epistemic violence into platforms for justice, relation and aspiration. They affirm the thesis's core argument that the archive is not a neutral structure but a situated and political one, one that curators can and must engage against the grain. In each case, the most important instances of activation are those in which the archive is treated not as a unified object but as a constellation: a network of relations that generates meaning through connection instead of through origin and that understands incompleteness and opacity not as failures of the archival project but as its necessary and enabling conditions. It is this archipelagic logic, understood as Glissant's insistence on relation, opacity and the refusal of totality, that names both a theoretical position and a practical curatorial orientation and that the three cases examined here enact, each in its own situated and irreducible way. Chapter 4 will be synthesising insights across the cases to propose a broader framework for activist curatorial practice in museums and beyond.¹²²

120 CVETKOVICH, *An Archive of Feelings* (op. cit.), pp. 7–9; FREEMAN, *Time Binds* (op. cit.), pp. 62–65; MUÑOZ, *Cruising Utopia* (op. cit.), p. 27.

121 DERRIDA, *Archive Fever* (op. cit.); FOUCAULT, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (op. cit.); GLISSANT, *Poetics of Relation* (op. cit.); FOSTER, *An Archival Impulse* (op. cit.); ENWEZOR, *Archive Fever* (op. cit.).

122 On hybrid curatorial models combining participatory, institutional and artistic approaches, see Chapter 4 of this thesis.

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**4. Discussion
and synthesis**

Each of the preceding chapters has built on the last. The theoretical framework of Chapter 1 made the methodological apparatus of Chapter 2 possible; the methodology made the case study analysis of Chapter 3 possible. Chapter 1 established the conceptual field: Taylor, Caswell, Appadurai, Muñoz. Chapter 2 derived from that field a methodological framework of four registers of activation and situated the researcher's position within it. Chapter 3 applied both to three cases of contemporary archival practice. What follows tries to say what that application means: to answer the research question with the specificity the case studies make possible, to evaluate the four registers as an analytical contribution, to name the structural tensions the comparison has made visible and to sketch what a transformative curatorial practice with activist archives might look like now.

The central research question, how curators activate community and activist archives through feminist, queer and decolonial perspectives to produce knowledge unavailable within conventional institutional archival frameworks, has been answered empirically by the three cases. To establish that SAVVY's "Colonial Neighbours", the VBKÖ's "Polyphonic Archive, Entangled Voices" and the Otolith Group's essay films each activate archives effectively and in different configurations, is to show that these kinds of activation are possible. The present chapter will try to explain and address why it matters, what it requires or where it reaches its limits.¹²³

4.1 The four registers as an original contribution

The four registers are this thesis's own analytical contribution. They were not taken from any existing source but built from the theoretical framework in Chapter 1, as a way of comparing practices that differ significantly in institutional form and political context. Having applied them across three cases, it is worth asking what they offer beyond the purposes of this thesis.¹²⁴

The framework's primary contribution is analytical rather than prescriptive: it describes what different practices actually do, where they invest their energies and where their limits appear. This distinction matters. When the *structural register* is weak in a given project, the reason is almost never that curators

¹²³ On the central research question, see the Introduction and Chapter 2.1 of this thesis.

¹²⁴ The four registers are derived and defined in Chapter 2.2. Their application to the three cases is developed across Chapter 3.

have failed to think about institutional transformation, it is usually that the conditions around them: funding dependencies, governance structures, professional protocols that make *structural activation* genuinely difficult. Making that difficulty visible and naming its causes is itself a form of critical intervention in the field.¹²⁵

The framework also makes it possible to read very different practices through the same analytical lens without flattening them. Caswell's liberatory framework, Taylor's archive/repertoire distinction and Appadurai's aspirational archive each developed in relation to specific types of practice. Reading SAVVY, the VBKÖ and the Otolith Group together demonstrates that these are not simply different things that happen to involve archives. They are different configurations of a shared problem which is how to activate materials that dominant institutional frameworks have suppressed, marginalized or neutralized and understanding them in relation to each other is more analytically productive than studying each in isolation.¹²⁶

One of the framework's most important findings concerns differential availability. Not all registers are equally accessible in all contexts. Interpretive activation has the widest reach: a curatorial commitment to reframing and juxtaposition could operate even in relatively constrained environments. Communal activation demands more, specifically a will to redistribute authority and allow communities to revise curatorial frameworks, which is structurally harder in institutions where professional expertise is the primary legitimating principle. Structural activation is the most demanding: it requires either the independence to challenge governance from outside or the political will to transform it from within and it is consistently the register at which institutional limits appear most clearly. Aspirational activation is the most flexible, achievable through participatory programming, institutional self-examination and speculative artistic practice alike, though the political horizon it points toward varies significantly across these contexts.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ On the diagnostic function of analytical frameworks in curatorial research, cf. Maura REILLY, *Curatorial Activism. Towards an Ethics of Curating*, London 2018, pp. 12–16.

¹²⁶ Michelle CASWELL, *Urgent Archives. Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*, New York 2021, pp. 3–8; Diana TAYLOR, *The Archive and the Repertoire. Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Durham 2003, p. 19; Arjun APPADURAI, *Archive and Aspiration*, in: Joke BROUWER, Arjen MULDER (eds.), *Information Is Alive. Art and Theory on Archiving and Retrieving Data*, Rotterdam 2003, pp. 14–25.

¹²⁷ On the differential availability of the four registers across institutional contexts, see sections 3.1, 3.2 and 3.3 and the synthesis in section 3.4 of this thesis.

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This differential availability is an important finding, it shows how different configurations make different registers accessible. The question for practitioners is which registers are most urgently needed in a given context and which institutional form is most adequate to it. That is a situated political judgment that a universal framework will not give in advance, which is the reason why the four registers function diagnostically rather than prescriptively.

4.2 Institutional form and political ambition

Each of the three cases represents a fundamentally different configuration (an independent community space (SAVVY), a self-organised feminist association (VBKÖ) and an autonomous artistic practice (Otolith Group), and each makes certain forms of political ambition possible while making others structurally difficult. Understanding this relationship is essential for anyone seeking to develop transformative archival practice, because mismatches between ambition and institutional form are one of the most consistent sources of difficulty in activist curatorial work.¹²⁸

SAVVY's independence is the condition of its most significant achievements. Free from the demands for neutrality, comprehensiveness and professional credentialing that state-funded institutions enforce, it can position itself as accountable to communities rather than institutional standards that conventionally governed institutions could not sanction and make the political stakes of archival engagement explicit in ways most funded institutions must avoid. This freedom is politically significant, but it comes with structural vulnerability: precarious funding, limited resources and heavy dependence on volunteer labour. The political possibilities and the organisational precarity are inseparable.

The VBKÖ is an institution with governance structures, membership criteria, a professional identity and a long organizational history pressing toward continuity and self-legitimation. The most politically demanding work available to it, namely the work that "Polyphonic Archive, Entangled Voices" and "The Art of Women — Friends and Accomplices" both pursue, is the work that turns critical resources against the institution's own history. This means reading the archive against the grain not of an external colonial administration or

¹²⁸ Cf. REILLY, *Curatorial Activism* (op. cit.), pp. 22–28; Nora STERNFELD, *Das radikaldemokratische Museum*, in: *Curating – Ausstellungstheorie & Praxis*, Bd. 3, Wien 2018 (Edition Angewandte), pp. 44–48.

a mainstream art world, but of the feminist institution itself: asking what the archive disavows rather than only what it declares, treating the Nazi period not as an exceptional rupture but as a structural symptom and posing the question of queer absences not as a gentle supplement to the feminist narrative but as a challenge to the criteria of recognition the association has historically enforced. This kind of self-examination puts the institution's own identity at risk, which is why it has consistently required external curatorial agency to reach its most fully developed form.¹²⁹

The Otolith Group's autonomy is a different kind of condition entirely. Holding no archive of its own and circulating through the international spaces of contemporary art, the collective has a structural freedom that neither SAVVY nor the VBKÖ possesses. It can engage materials from multiple holdings without being subject to any single institution's terms of access and make formal and political moves that preservation mandates and community accountability protocols would not permit. This freedom is the condition of the practice's most important achievements and at the same time also the reason of its limit. Without a fixed institutional base, without sustained community accountability and without organizational continuity, the Otolith Group's archival activations remain events: powerful and politically charged, but episodic rather than cumulative, circulating in art-world contexts not themselves exempt from the frameworks the work contests.¹³⁰

None of this implies a hierarchy. It describes a topology of trade-offs in which each configuration makes certain possibilities available while foreclosing others. The question is not which form is best in general but which is most adequate to a specific political and archival situation: which registers are most urgently needed, which communities are most directly implicated and which conditions can realistically be created. That judgment requires both theoretical clarity about the registers and empirical knowledge of the specific institutional landscape within which practice occurs.

129 On "Polyphonic Archive, Entangled Voices" and "The Art of Women - Friends and Accomplices" as instances of institutional self-examination, see section 3.2 of this thesis. On the structural demands of reading against the grain, cf. Ann Laura STOLER, *Along the Archival Grain. Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton 2009, p. 47.

130 On the Otolith Group's institutional conditions and the episodic character of the archival encounters their practice produces, see section 3.3 of this thesis; cf. Hal FOSTER, *An Archival Impulse*, in: *October*, 110, 2004, pp. 3-22, here p. 22.

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131 Édouard GLISSANT, *Poetics of Relation [Poétique de la Relation]*, trans. Betsy Wing, Ann Arbor 1997 (French original: 1990), p. 11. On Glissant's archipelagic thought as a model for archival practice, see section 1.3 of this thesis.

132 GLISSANT, *Poetics of Relation* (op. cit.), p. 29; Jacques DERRIDA, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression [Mal d'Archive: Une impression freudienne]*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago 1996, pp. 7-12; Michel FOUCAULT, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, New York 1972, p. 129.

4.3 The archipelagic curator

Glissant's archipelagic thought has served throughout this thesis as the most adequate model for what transformative archival practice requires and produces. Having traced it through three cases, it is possible to be more concrete about what practicing curating archipelagically actually means.¹³¹

The continental model that archipelagic thought contests understands the archive as the origin and guarantee of a unified historical narrative. It is not merely a theoretical abstraction; it is the operational logic of most major archival and museum institutions, expressed in protocols of professional archival description, in organizational structures that separate acquisition from interpretation and in institutional ideologies that position the archivist and curator as neutral custodians of an objective record. Against this, Glissant proposes an understanding of meaning-making as relational, incomplete and constitutively dependent on encounter between irreducibly different formations. Opacity is not a problem to be overcome through more comprehensive documentation. The refusal of totality is not a failure of the archival project. Both are its enabling conditions.¹³²

What does archipelagic curating look like in practice? The three cases suggest several answers. It means treating the archive as a field of relations to be activated rather than a collection to be completed: the meaning of any archival holding is not intrinsic to its materials but produced through the conditions in which those materials are placed in relation with other materials, living communities and the political present. It means respecting the right to opacity, the right of communities to withhold from the archival encounter the dimensions of their experience that full transparency would expose to appropriation or institutional neutralization. It means refusing the pressure to resolve the contradictions and incompleteness of the archival record into a coherent narrative the institution can authorize and present as historical truth. And it means understanding the curatorial encounter as relational rather than transmissive: not

the passage of knowledge from archive to audience, but an event in which the meaning produced exceeds what any single participant, be it the institution, the community or the curator, could have generated alone.¹³³

This has implications for how curators understand their own position. The continental model positions the curator as an expert whose training confers authority to determine what is significant and what it means. The archipelagic model requires a different self-understanding: the curator as a practitioner of relation, whose primary skill is not expert knowledge of the archive's contents but the capacity to create conditions in which different formations, communities and political horizons can be brought into productive encounter without being absorbed into a unified institutional frame. This is a harder and less legible professional identity, one that does not fit easily into job descriptions, funding applications or training programmes, but it is the form of curatorial identity that the most important archival activations examined here consistently require.¹³⁴

Sternfeld's para-museum comes closest to naming what this requires at the level of institutional form. The para-museum inhabits the museum's contradictions rather than resolving them, appropriating its resources, including spaces, authority and public platform, while refusing the ideologies of neutrality, comprehensiveness and professional expertise that typically accompany them. It does not seek to replace the museum but to practice within and against it, using its affordances to open forms of encounter that the museum's own logic would normally foreclose. What the three cases suggest is that the para-museum is not solely an institutional concept but a curatorial orientation: a way of practicing within and against whatever institutional form one inhabits, keeping the encounter open, maintaining accountability to communities and refusing the closure that institutional self-legitimation tends to impose.¹³⁵

¹³³ GLISSANT, *Poetics of Relation* (op. cit.), p. 62; TAYLOR, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (op. cit.), pp. 19–28; CASWELL, *Urgent Archives* (op. cit.), pp. 21–25.

¹³⁴ Cf. REILLY, *Curatorial Activism* (op. cit.), pp. 34–38; Irit ROGOFF, *Smuggling – An Embodied Criticality* (2006), URL: <http://eicpc.net/transversal/0806/rogoff/en> (accessed April 2026).

¹³⁵ STERNFELD, *Das radikaldemokratische Museum* (op. cit.), p. 64; *ibid.*, pp. 72–76.

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4.4 Limits, tensions and the question of Scale

The limits of the practices examined here and of the framework developed to analyse them, need to be addressed as a substantive part of the argument rather than a disclaimer appended to it. The most important limits are structural. They arise from the conditions of the field itself, not from the failures of individual practitioners and they will not be resolved by better practice within existing institutional arrangements.¹³⁶

The most persistent structural limit concerns the relationship between political ambition and resource availability. The forms of activation that are most politically significant, namely SAVVY's sustained communal engagement, the VBKÖ's institutional self-examination and the Otolith Group's formal and research investment, are also the most resource-intensive. They require long-term commitment, small and trusted teams, sustained community relationships and the freedom to pursue practice whose outcomes cannot be guaranteed in advance. These are exactly the conditions that dominant funding models in the European cultural sector consistently fail to support. Project-based, output-oriented funding accountable to quantitative metrics of reach and impact is structurally incompatible with what genuinely transformative archival practice needs. The mismatch is not incidental; it is a structural condition that reproduces institutional conservatism even in institutions whose stated commitments are to radical practice. Any serious account of the limits of curatorial activation must name this as a primary constraint rather than locating the limitation in the practices themselves.¹³⁷

Scale is a related problem. The three cases operate at what might be called an artisanal scale: they achieve depth of engagement and political seriousness, but their reach is necessarily limited by the resources and organizational structures available to them. "Colonial Neighbours" reaches Berlin's African and Afrodiasporic communities and SAVVY's Neukölln audiences; the VBKÖ's "Polyphonic Archive" reaches its membership and the specialized publics of feminist and queer cultural practice in Austria; the Otolith Group's films reach the audiences of international art institutions and film festivals. None of these approaches the scale of a national museum or a state broadcasting institution and none is positioned to transform mainstream conditions of archival governance at that level. Working at the artisanal scale is often a deliberate political

¹³⁶ Cf. CASWELL, *Urgent Archives* (op. cit.), pp. 47–52; Linda Tuhiwai SMITH, *Decolonizing Methodologies. Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed., London/New York 2012, pp. 120–123.

¹³⁷ Cf. REILLY, *Curatorial Activism* (op. cit.), pp. 45–50; STERNFELD, *Das radikaldemokratische Museum* (op. cit.), p. 44.

choice, a refusal of the compromises that institutional scale typically demands but it remains a genuine limit that the framework cannot resolve on its own.¹³⁸

The question of what transformative archival practice would look like at scale, in a national museum, a major state archive or a large cultural institution with the resources and public platform that small independent spaces lack, is one the three cases cannot fully answer. What they do suggest is that the archipelagic orientation is not scale-dependent. The commitment to relation rather than totality, to accountability rather than neutrality, to aspiration rather than mere preservation can in principle be practiced within large institutions, even if the structural conditions that make such practice possible are harder to establish and maintain within the institutional forms that scale typically requires. The VBKÖ's "Polyphonic Archive" is the most instructive example here: it demonstrates that *structural activation* is possible within an established institution with a long and contradictory history, provided those undertaking it are willing to read that history against its own grain and the governance structures allow sufficient space for that reading to occur. Whether these conditions can be reproduced in larger and more bureaucratically complex institutions is among the most important questions the framework opens for future research.¹³⁹

4.5 Toward hybrid practice: future directions

The most promising direction for transformative archival curatorial practice is not the refinement of any single model but the development of hybrid forms that combine the strengths of different configurations while managing their respective limits. This is not a proposal for institutional compromise or for a practice that finds a comfortable middle ground. It is a call for a genuinely different institutional imaginary: one that takes the archipelagic model seriously as an organizational principle and asks what institutions designed around relation, accountability and aspiration rather than comprehensiveness, neutrality and professional expertise, would actually look like.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Cf. CASWELL, *Urgent Archives* (op. cit.), pp. 3–8; Ricardo L. PUNZALAN, Michelle CASWELL, *Critical Directions for Archival Approaches to Social Justice*, in: *Library Quarterly*, 86/1, 2016, pp. 25–42, here p. 36.

¹³⁹ On the conditions that made "Polyphonic Archive, Entangled Voices" possible, see section 3.2 of this thesis. Cf. STERNFELD, *Das radikaldemokratische Museum* (op. cit.), p. 72.

¹⁴⁰ Cf. STERNFELD, *Das radikaldemokratische Museum* (op. cit.), pp. 76–80; REILLY, *Curatorial Activism* (op. cit.), pp. 55–60.

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One direction concerns the relationship between participatory archival practice and artistic research. The separation between SAVVY's community-oriented model and the Otolith Group's artistically autonomous model is not inevitable. Practices that combine the depth of community engagement that "Colonial Neighbours" achieves with the formal and speculative sophistication of the essay film are conceivable. The VBKÖ's residency program points toward a structural form that could hold both: it provides the time and relational depth that genuine community engagement requires alongside the conditions for formal experimentation that artistic practice needs, because it gives artists sustained and iterative dialogue with the archive rather than a single encounter with its materials.¹⁴¹

Another direction concerns digital infrastructure. The three cases are predominantly site-specific: they depend on physical spaces, face-to-face encounters and the material presence of archival objects that both limit their reach and constitute their political significance. How the relational and communal dimensions of archival activation can be developed and sustained in digital environments, without reproducing the decontextualized access model of conventional digital archives that makes materials available without creating conditions for genuine encounter, is one of the most important methodological challenges facing the field. The Otolith Group's essay films represent one response, using the distributability of the moving image to extend archival encounter beyond the site-specific constraints of exhibition; but the communal and structural dimensions of activation that their practice attenuates would need to be more fully developed in any digital model adequate to the political requirements of genuine archival transformation.¹⁴²

A third direction concerns accountability and governance. All three cases demonstrate that accountability to communities is the ethical core of transformative archival practice, but they demonstrate it differently. SAVVY's accountability is relational and ongoing, built into the open-call structure and long-term community relationships. The VBKÖ's is institutional and membership-based, expressed through member-driven governance and collective curatorial process. The Otolith Group's is more diffuse, oriented toward communities of political memory constituted through the encounter with the work rather than organized in advance. Developing governance structures that make multiple

¹⁴¹ On the VBKÖ Member's Archive Residency Program as a structural model, see section 3.2.2 of this thesis. Cf. Elke KRASNY, *Archive, Care and Conversation*, in: *OnCurating*, 33, 2017, p. 48.

¹⁴² Cf. PUNZALAN, CASWELL, *Critical Directions* (op. cit.), pp. 38–40; TAYLOR, *The Archive and the Repertoire* (op. cit.), p. 36.

forms of accountability simultaneously available, combining the relational, the institutional and the expansive political, is the organizational challenge the field most urgently needs to address.¹⁴³

Building on the four-register framework, future research could usefully expand the comparative scope to include Indigenous archives and the specific legal and epistemic frameworks that archival sovereignty requires; migrant community initiatives and the challenges of archiving across national borders; large-scale state-funded museum projects in which something approaching archipelagic practice has been attempted; and digital activist archives, whose affordances and vulnerabilities differ significantly from the physical archives examined here. Mixed-method approaches combining qualitative analysis with audience reception studies, longitudinal impact assessment and participatory action research would also strengthen the framework considerably, providing empirical grounding for claims about communal and aspirational effects that the desk-based method of this study cannot generate.¹⁴⁴

The question of how archives are activated, by whom, for whom, through what strategies and under what institutional conditions, is not a technical question. It is a political one, with consequences for the communities whose histories are at stake that extend far beyond the walls of any institution. Curatorial activation, understood through the four registers and informed by the archipelagic model, is not a supplementary gesture that adds political value to an otherwise neutral archival practice: it is a constitutive intervention in the conditions under which historical knowledge is produced, held and made available for political use. The practices examined here do not resolve the structural tensions of the field, between political ambition and resource availability, between depth of engagement and breadth of reach, between institutional accountability and curatorial freedom. But they demonstrate, each in its own situated and irreducible way, that those tensions can be inhabited productively and that the archive, activated archipelagically, remains one of the most powerful resources available to communities seeking to understand their histories and imagine their futures differently.¹⁴⁵

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¹⁴³ Cf. Michelle CASWELL, Marika CIFOR, *From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics. Radical Empathy in the Archives*, in: *Archivaria*, 81, 2016, pp. 23–43, here p. 40; CASWELL, *Urgent Archives* (op. cit.), pp. 47–52.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. PUNZALAN, CASWELL, *Critical Directions* (op. cit.), pp. 39–42; SMITH, *Decolonizing Methodologies* (op. cit.), pp. 120–123.

¹⁴⁵ GLISSANT, *Poetics of Relation* (op. cit.), p. 11; APPADURAI, *Archive and Aspiration* (op. cit.), p. 24; CASWELL, *Urgent Archives* (op. cit.), p. 52.

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**Con-
clusion**

Dominique Luster's question, "If your history is not preserved, do you exist?", opens this thesis and returns to close it, not because the answer has changed but because the question has deepened.¹⁴⁶ What the preceding chapters have established is not only that certain histories have been excluded from archival preservation, though they have, but that the context in which such exclusions are produced and sustained are themselves curatorial: they are the result of decisions, institutional frameworks, professional protocols and epistemological frameworks that determine what counts as worth preserving, who is authorized to determine this and in whose interests the determination is made. The archive is not the place where history is stored after the fact; it is one of the primary mechanisms through which history is constituted. To curate against the grain of that mechanism, as this thesis's title, drawn from and extending Stoler's method, proposes, is not to supplement an otherwise neutral institutional practice with political content.¹⁴⁷ It is to intervene in the context in which historical knowledge is produced.

The central argument of this thesis has been made across four chapters that move from theory to method to empirical analysis to synthesis. The archive is a situated and political structure that produces history as much as it preserves it. Curatorial activation: the act of bringing archival materials into relation with living communities, political claims and present conditions that exceed mere display or documentation, is not supplementary to archival practice but constitutive of it. And the form that activation takes, the registers through which it operates and the political horizons it opens, is shaped decisively by the institutional conditions under which it occurs. These three claims together constitute the thesis's argument and each depends on the others: the political character of the archive requires a form of curatorial response that the concept of activation names; the concept of activation requires an analytical framework that the four registers provide; and the framework requires empirical grounding in practices that the three case studies supply.

The four registers of activation, interpretive, communal, structural and aspirational, are the thesis's original analytical contribution to the field.¹⁴⁸ They were derived not from any single theoretical source but from a sustained

¹⁴⁶ Dominique LUSTER, *Seeing Ourselves: Curatorial Representation and Community Memory*, in: *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 35/4, 2020, p. 353–368, here p. 355.

¹⁴⁷ Ann Laura STOLER, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton 2009, p. 20. The shift from *along* to *against* as the governing preposition of this thesis is elaborated in the Introduction.

¹⁴⁸ On the four registers as the thesis's original analytical contribution, see Chapter 2.2 and the evaluation in Chapter 4.1.

reading of the literature surveyed in Chapter 1, which moves from Derrida's and Foucault's accounts of archival constitution and power, through Stoler's colonial archive theory and Caswell's liberatory archival ethics, to Glissant's archipelagic thought, Cvetkovich's archive of feelings, Freeman's temporal drag, Munoz's queer futurity, Taylor's archive/repertoire distinction and Appadurai's aspirational archive. Each of these frameworks illuminates a dimension of what archival practice does and what it could do; the four registers are an attempt to name those dimensions in terms adequate to curatorial practice and to make them analytically usable across cases of very different institutional form and political horizon. Their value is diagnostic in contrast to prescriptive: they do not tell practitioners what to do but provide a vocabulary for understanding what any given practice does, where it invests its energies and where its limits appear.

The three case studies examined in Chapter 3 were chosen because together they trace a spectrum that no single case could trace alone. SAVVY Contemporary's "Colonial Neighbours" represents the most fully communally embedded of the three practices: a participatory archive built through long-term collaboration with Berlin's African and Afrodiasporic communities, whose curatorial logic is explicitly aspirational in Appadurai's sense, generating the community it appears to represent through the act of archiving rather than presupposing it. Rose Esinam Damalie's extended fieldwork in Ghana's Volta region and the subsequent translation of key texts into Ewe represent, within this project, an instance of archipelagic relation in its most precise sense: the archive becoming a network of connections across geographies and languages instead of a repository organized around a single institutional centre.¹⁴⁹

The Vereinigung bildender Künstlerinnen Österreichs represents a different configuration: the institution that must turn its critical resources against its own history in order to activate its archive most fully. "Polyphonic Archive, Entangled Voices" (2026) is significant not simply as an exhibition but as an institutional gesture: the public reopening of an archive that had been semi-closed, the multiplication of voices within a formation that institutional logic tends toward unification, the posing of the question "Where are the queer people in the archive?" as an act of curatorial activation that makes visible, through its very articulation, the logic of selection that produced the absence

¹⁴⁹ On SAVVY Contemporary's *Colonial Neighbours* as the most fully communally embedded of the three cases, see section 3.1. On the Ewe translation as an archipelagic gesture, see section 3.4. On Appadurai's aspirational archive, see Arjun APPADURAI, *Archive and Aspiration*, in: Joke BROUWER, Arjen MULDER (eds.), *Information Is Alive: Art and Theory on Archiving and Retrieving Data*, Rotterdam 2003, p. 14–25, here p. 22.

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¹⁵⁰ On the VBKÖ's *Polyphonic Archive, Entangled Voices* and the question "Where are the queer people in the archive?" as an act of archival activation, see section 3.2.2. On the archiviolithic drive as a generative force, see DERRIDA, *Archive Fever* (op. cit.), p. 10–12.

¹⁵¹ On the Otolith Group's *In the Year of the Quiet Sun* and *Nucleus of the Great Union* as instances of aspirational activation through the essay film, see section 3.3. On temporal drag, see Elizabeth FREEMAN, *Time Binds. Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Durham 2010, pp. 62–65; on queer futurity, see José Esteban MUÑOZ, *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York 2009, pp. 27–32.

it names. That this gesture required external curatorial agency, including Holz and Misa, Gudović and the residency artists, is itself an important finding: the *structural activation* of an institution's own archive consistently requires frameworks from outside the institution's existing self-understanding. The archiviolithic drive is not only a theoretical concept; it names a real institutional force that resists, from within, the critical examination it most needs.¹⁵⁰

The Otolith Group occupies the third position in the comparative arc: the practice most formally autonomous, most expansive in its political horizon and most explicitly aspirational in its theoretical commitments. "In the Year of the Quiet Sun" and "Nucleus of the Great Union" do not document the aspirations of the Non-Aligned Movement or of Pan-African solidarity; they activate those aspirations as resources for a political imagination that the historical record, left to its institutional custodians, would treat as closed. Richard Wright's 1,500 unpublished photographs of the Gold Coast, recovered and reframed with Saidiya Hartman's voice-over, constitute the most concentrated instance in the thesis of what it means to read against the archival grain: to take materials that institutional logic had rendered inaccessible and produce from them a form of historical knowledge and a form of political possibility, that the archive's custodial life had suppressed. The essay film is the form adequate to this operation because it refuses the documentary's claim to objectivity, explicitly foregrounding its own interpretive and political acts as constitutive of the archival meaning it produces.¹⁵¹

The comparative analysis across these three cases demonstrates that institutional form shapes, without determining, what activation can achieve. SAVVY's independence enables structural and *communal activation* that funded institutions cannot easily sanction; the VBKÖ's institutional embeddedness makes its *structural activation* more demanding but more consequential for the institutional landscape it inhabits; the Otolith Group's formal autonomy enables *aspirational activation* of unusual scope and formal sophistication at the cost

of sustained communal embeddedness. None of these configurations is superior; all three are necessary to a full account of what curatorial activation with activist archives can look like and what it requires.¹⁵²

The Glissantian framework that runs through the theoretical architecture of this thesis: the archipelago as a model for archival practice, the right to opacity as a political and epistemological principle, the refusal of continental totality as both a curatorial orientation and an ethical commitment, finds its fullest empirical confirmation in the comparative analysis. Each of the three cases, in its different way, refuses the continental model: refuses the demand for synthesis, the pressure toward a unified narrative, the institutional logic that would absorb the multiplicity of archival formations into a coherent and authorizable institutional frame. SAVVY's "Colonial Neighbours" generates meaning through the relations between community-held materials and colonial documentary holdings without synthesizing them. The VBKÖ's "Polyphonic Archive" holds the contradiction between the institution's centripetal pressure toward self-legitimation and the centrifugal force of critical archival reading in productive tension as opposed to resolving it. The Otolith Group's films produce political and aesthetic meaning through constellations of archival materials from multiple geographies, languages and historical periods that resist any reduction to a single narrative origin. In each case, the archipelagic logic is not a theoretical position imposed from outside but a practical curatorial orientation: the orientation that keeps the encounter open, maintains accountability to communities and refuses the closure that institutional self-legitimation tends to impose.¹⁵³

This thesis has tried to be honest about what that orientation costs. The structural tensions of curatorial activation, between political ambition and resource availability, between depth of engagement and breadth of reach, between institutional accountability and curatorial freedom, are not resolved by the practices examined here, nor by the framework developed to analyse them. SAVVY operates at the cost of institutional precarity. The VBKÖ's most important curatorial achievements require forms of institutional self-risk that not every governance structure can sustain. The Otolith Group's formal freedom produces archival encounters that are powerful but episodic, circulating in art-world contexts that are themselves not exempt from the institutional frameworks

¹⁵² On the differential availability of the four registers and the topology of trade-offs between institutional forms, see Chapter 4.2.

¹⁵³ GLISSANT, *Poetics of Relation* (op. cit.), p. 11. On the archipelagic curator as a concept and the para-museum as its institutional form, see Chapter 4.3; on Sternfeld's para-museum, see Nora STERNFELD, *Das radikaldemokratische Museum, Curating – Ausstellungstheorie & Praxis*, Bd. 3, Wien 2018 (Edition Angewandte), p. 64.

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the work contests. These are not failures of individual practitioners; they are structural conditions of a field in which the political requirements of meaningfully transformative archival practice are consistently in tension with the organizational conditions of the cultural sector. Naming these tensions is not a counsel of despair but a precondition of changing them.¹⁵⁴

What the thesis ultimately proposes, through its theoretical framework, its case studies and the concept of the four registers, is a reorientation of curatorial practice toward the archive as a living site of political possibility rather than a repository of settled historical fact. Archives are not behind us, available for neutral retrieval. They are constitutively present, shaping the context in which communities understand their histories, experience themselves as historical subjects and imagine their futures. The curatorial act that activates an archive, that brings its materials into relation with living communities, that reads its silences against its declarations, that refuses its claims to neutrality and makes visible the political stakes of its organizational logic, is not a supplementary gesture that adds value to an otherwise neutral institutional practice. It is an intervention in the conditions under which historical knowledge is produced, held and made available for political use.¹⁵⁵

To return to Luster's question: if your history is not preserved, do you exist? The practices examined in this thesis do not provide a simple answer, because they understand that the question is not simply about preservation but about activation, about the context in which preserved materials are made to speak, to whom and in whose political interest. What "Colonial Neighbours", "Polyphonic Archive, Entangled Voices" and the Otolith Group's essay films demonstrate, each in its own situated and irreducible way, is that existence is not confirmed by the archive alone but by the encounter: by the relational, communal and aspirational acts through which archival materials are brought into contact with living communities and living political struggles and through which histories that institutional logic had suppressed are restored not to a corrected historical record but to the ongoing work of imagining and inhabiting different futures. The archive, activated archipelagically, does not answer the question. It keeps it open, which is, in the end, the most politically necessary thing it can do.

¹⁵⁴ On the structural limits of curatorial activation and the mismatch between political ambition and resource availability, see Chapter 4.4.

¹⁵⁵ STOLER, *Along the Archival Grain* (op. cit.), p. 47; CASWELL, *Urgent Archives* (op. cit.), p. 52; APPADURAI, *Archive and Aspiration* (op. cit.), p. 24.

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- Grammarly was used for grammar checking.
- DeepL was occasionally used for translation support between German and English.
- Local offline AI tools, specifically Ollama (running open-source models such as Llama 3.1) and LM Studio, were used occasionally as assistive tools for rephrasing sentences and improving structure.

These tools served exclusively as editorial aids. All ideas, arguments, theoretical analysis, case interpretations and final formulations are the result of my own intellectual work. I have carefully reviewed, revised and take full responsibility for every part of the thesis.

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The Otolith Group: In the Year of the Quiet Sun, 2013, HD video with colour and sound,
33 min 57 sec.

The Otolith Group: Nucleus of the Great Union, 2017/2018, HD video,
approx. 32 min.

Statutory declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis has been written independently and without the use of any sources other than those indicated. All ideas taken directly or indirectly from external sources are identified as such. This work has not been submitted in the same or similar form to any other examining authority and has not yet been published.

Wien, Juni 2026

Ana Laura Santos Ribeiro

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Curriculum Vitae

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On the object

“Against the Grain” is printed in B5 format.
The binding uses a metal binder clip, a conscious
formal choice. To consult the work, the reader
must press, release and open. This gesture mirrors
the logic of the archive itself, where access is not
passive or automatic, something must be activated
before the document opens itself.

The typeface is “Catalog”, designed by Michael
Mischer and Nik Thoenen (Binnenland Typefaces)
published in Swiss in 2005.

The main text runs in a justified block.
The footnotes are set separately, right-justified,
positioned at the bottom right of the page outside
the text block. On certain pages, they migrate
to the top right, the same right-justified block,
displaced upward. This breaks the convention
that keeps footnotes and subordinate. To push the
footnote to the top is to insist on its presence,
to refuse the hierarchy that separates the main
argument from what it rests on. It is one way
of reading against the grain.

Between each chapter, there is a transparent leaf.
These pages are blank — available. The reader
may use them or not. They exist as a threshold:
one chapter still visible through the surface onto
which the next has not yet begun. To write on
transparency means to write over what came
before without erasing it. This, too, is one way
of reading against the grain.

On the paper

The work moves across different paper stocks.
As the archive becomes activated through
the curatorial practice described in these pages,
the texture accumulates.

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