

‘How do Exiles mediate memories of a homeland through acts of archival art and writing?’

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When you become close to a Something, you examine it from odd side-angles. Bits of it jut into one another, they fracture and splinter and collage, smearing their mess all over the other parts of that Something. It becomes a little part of you, burrowing into your critical response to it, emerging from all the things you hear, you read, you see – it changes the very fabric of You, so when you come to write and to give a proper account of it, You are not the same You who first came to research that Something.

This piece of work intends, through implementing methodologies of ‘creative criticism’¹ and practice-led research, to investigate the question of how ‘exiles’ mediate memories of a homeland through acts of archival art and writing. ‘Exile’, from the OED, is ‘a state or condition... of prolonged absence from one's native country or a place regarded as home, endured by force of circumstances or voluntarily undergone for some purpose’. Often ‘politically motivated’. ‘Archive’, it suggests, stands as ‘a collection of historical documents or records providing information about a place, institution, or group of people’.² Of the portmanteau ‘archival art’, Hal Foster suggests that, as a genre, it seeks to make (often lost or displaced) historical information physically present, usually displayed via installations based around these found images and texts.³ Crucially, with regards to the parameters of this investigation, the work in question is usually archival because it not only draws conceptually upon archives but produces them as well – as Derrida famously notes, ‘the archivization produces as much as it records’⁴. The archive is a thing often founded in threat or disaster, ‘pledged against a ruin it cannot forestall’⁵ – and here, I would argue that the destruction, loss and tragedy associated with the state of exile often leads it to be intrinsically linked with the

¹ Benson, Stephen, Clare Connors, Roland Barthes, John Cage, Anne Carson, and others. 2014. *Creative Criticism : An Anthology and Guide* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press)

² Oxford English Dictionary. 1884. ‘Oxford English Dictionary’, *Www.oed.com* (Oxford University Press) <<https://www.oed.com/?tl=true>>

³ Foster, Hal. 2004. ‘An Archival Impulse’, *October*, 110.110: 3–22 <<https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379847>>

⁴ Derrida, Jacques. 1995. ‘Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression’, *Diacritics*, 25.2, ed. by Eric Prenowitz (Johns Hopkins University Press): 17 <<https://doi.org/10.2307/465144>>

⁵ Foster, Hal. 2004. ‘An Archival Impulse’, *October*, 110.110: 5 <<https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379847>>

concept of the archive. To create ‘archival art’, can therefore be seen as an intentional act of mediation between the exile and their conception of a lost homeland, and, as evidenced in the examples I have researched, provides alternate solutions to problems associated with this dichotomy, problems often characterised by an engagement with political struggle and censorship.

In the Dokumentationszentrum Flucht, Vertreibung, Versöhnung in Berlin, I am encouraged by a series of white labels on the wall to wrap myself in the scratchy fabric of felt blankets dangling above my head. They are made by the Russian-born artist Varvara Keidan Shavrova (who now lives in Ireland) – screen-printed with domestic images from her family album, and accompanied by a series of other ‘domestic’ textile objects from the museum’s collection. (a tablecloth from East Prussia, a bedspread from Bohemia, and a tablecloth from Brandenburg). The blankets become uncomfortably warm in the humid afternoon. The museum is completely empty.

I believe the figures of the exile/the archive and the archivist/the exiled are linked inextricably. The quiet presence of their entwined, embracing ghosts characterises much of our critical engagement with the subject of ‘exile’. In Edward Said’s essay, ‘Reflections on Exile’, he describes the death of the Palestinian poet Rashid Hussain, who worked as a Hebrew language journalist in Tel Aviv, and ‘succeeded in establishing a dialogue between Jewish and Arab writers’⁶, post-1948. Hussain left for New York, and began ‘working in the PLO office at the United Nations, but regularly outraged his superiors with unconventional ideas and utopian rhetoric.’ He flitted between the Arab world and the USA, discontented with both and in a permanent state of exile, eventually passing in 1977, during a fire in his New York flat. Hussain asphyxiated on the fumes of cassette tapes set alight by a discarded cigarette – reels of plastic containing recordings of poets reading aloud their verse. The horrific irony of his death-by-archive, of an exiled poet literally choking, unable to speak, suffocated by the smoky inarticulacy of his treasured words is an irony amplified by the posthumous characterisation of his tomb in the town of Musmus in Israel as a symbol of Palestinian nationalism. Hussain was an exile literally silenced by the destruction of his archive, and yet his repatriated body became a monument to the passionate vocalism of Palestinian poets; the exile & the archive are not just figuratively entwined ‘ghosts’, trapped inside prose, but literally, presciently haunting contemporary political dialogue and protest. In

⁶ Said, Edward. 1984. ‘Reflections on Exile’, *Granta Magazine* <<https://granta.com/Reflections-on-Exile/>>

a single moment of destruction and horror, Hussain's exile status was memorialised forever, enclosed within the words of another poet – Mahmoud Darwish. In 'On Fifth Avenue he greeted me' (1986), Darwish writes;

*'He came to us a blade of wine
And left, a prayer's end
He flung out poems
At Christo's Restaurant
And all of Acre would rise from sleep
To walk upon the sea'.⁷*

Perhaps to have 'flung out poems', embodying the frenetic, vibrating energy of creating and writing, of documenting and archiving, is Darwish's description of the act of 'mediation' – both poets are mediating memories of a non-existent homeland, now most potently alive within the words and creations of artists. A form of archival art which exists both within the alternate space of New York, of 'Christo's Restaurant', but also whispers of a delicately poeticised homeland – 'All of Acre' rising, conjured up 'from sleep / To walk upon the sea'.

Visiting the University of Glasgow, I watch recovered footage from Mustafa Abu Ali's documentary on the Palestinian Resistance in the 1970s. Grainy footage of the streets of the Gaza Strip are emblazoned with the flickering words 'Long Live the Revolution'. This is footage that was believed to be entirely lost along with the complete destruction of the Palestinian Film Archive in Beirut, 1982. These remaining copied tapes were kept safe, secretly, in a film laboratory in Tokyo. The archive might have been destroyed, but I can't help but thinking, in some strange, awful way, these 'exiled' remnants were preserved and allowed to live on by the very nature of their displacement.

Darwish's utopic vision of words, places and peoples floating above a sea returns us Edward Said's original description of Rashid Hussain's 'utopic radicalism'. This conceptual thread of the utopic recalls Hal Foster's iconic essay, 'An Archival Impulse'. Foster, when discussing the 'paranoid' and 'connecting' elements of archival art (a terribly beautiful paranoia certainly identifiable in Hussain's 'flinging out' of verse), writes that 'the 'paranoid dimension of archival art is the other side of its utopian ambition – its desire to turn

⁷ Lean, Garth, and Russel Staith. 2016. 'Travel and Transformation', *Google Books*
<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=XgWgCwAAQBAJ&pg=PA92&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false>
[accessed 30 September 2025]

belatedness into becomingness, to recoup failed visions... To transform the no-place of the archive into the no-place of a utopia'⁸. What Foster identifies as the 'transformative' power of archival art is, I believe, something rather akin to what I have referred to as 'mediation'. The stark image of Hussein's plastic-fumed death is obviously an image of destruction; both of the life of an exiled artist, but also his own collected archive of audio recordings of other poets. Despite this, Darwish's utopic reframing and mediation upon this moment of death, the fatality of the archive redirected, directly fulfils what Foster also refers to as archival art's power 'to turn "excavation sites" into "construction sites"'. I would go as far as to suggest that the historical fetish for melancholic, suffering exiles and their oft-times traumatic relation to a concept of 'homeland' transforms, through the work of archival art, this illusory and inaccessible 'homeland' into a more productive illusion. An imaginary stronghold, a construction site where fragmentary and disjointed pieces of ephemera, memory and loss can be reformed into a new tapestry of experience.

I'm standing in a second-hand music shop in Kadiköy, Istanbul. The walls are stacked high with tape recorders, cassette players, Walkmans, record players, and reels and reels of plastic tape. They are built-up, impenetrably dense and I think of the Barbican in 2021, Shilpa Gupta, wandering vibrating air thick and wet with the sounds of other worlds. Can we be tourists of exile? Museums are like a fetish-space for unplaced, out-of-space and out-of-time detritus, we're always tourists inside them. Are these tapes made of the same plastic which burned so quickly in Rashid Hussain's flat?

The creation of almost fantastical, imagined homelands in these liminal 'construction sites' left by destruction returns me to the question of what it might mean to imagine, or perhaps more accurately fictionalise the relationship between the exile and the archive. Perhaps, through staging installation art that digs into this dialectic between the real and fictional archive, artists and writers are given liberty to express what might be unspeakable in blunt, literal fact – that the lines between truthful experience and imagined solutions to the issues of mediation are productively blurred. This ambiguous space provides freedom from censorship so often applied to the literal – and in the case of Shilpa Gupta's monumental installation 'For in your tongue, I cannot Fit', the artist nimbly exploits the supposedly 'uncensored' qualities of installation art to explore the experience of real-world censored and imprisoned 'exiles'.

⁸ Foster, Hal. 2004. 'An Archival Impulse', *October*, 110.110: 15
<<https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379847>>

The title of Gupta's work establishes its' parameters – the 'your' indicating an othering dynamic between the viewer and the anonymised exiles contained within Gupta's soundscape, the 'tongue' a dysfunctional representation of institutional archives which are unable to create space for the poems of prison which she restages. It is a title that also references a 14th century poem by an author known as Nefisi – resident in modern-day Azerbaijan, and executed for his unorthodox religious beliefs expressed through his poetry. This intertextuality and deeply historical sensibility runs throughout the work, with poems by imprisoned, exiled and detained poets dating from the 8th century, played across 100 suspended speakers in English, Azeri, Hindi, Arabic, Russian and more 'tongues', all accompanied by thick bound books detailing the poems of each writer. The soundscape is vast, echoing rhizome of mutiplicitous forms of expression – but each speaker holds in it a tiny secret; they are all rewired microphones.⁹ Gupta complicates the relationship between the viewer, the exile, and the archive by inverting a symbol of aural information distribution. We are held in a delicate, strained web, unsure of our role as speaker or listener, archivist or activist.

'For in your tongue, I cannot fit' is a tremendously powerful example of archival art that thoughtfully and innovatively tests the limits of the archive as a concept, yoking together struggles of national identity and censorship and the role of the viewer and the artist in representing these struggles. Gupta simultaneously draws attention to the intrinsic links between the censorship of the exile and the fragility and impermanence of the archive as an institution. In 'ART + ARCHIVE', Sarah Callahan suggests that the archive must be in part defined by what it does not include; it is an inherently exclusionary form, but is also, crucially, not a public one.¹⁰ To fictionalise and reperform the alluringly material aspects of the archive, hundreds of thick pages filling the echoey space of a gallery, Gupta makes a conceptually private form specifically and intentionally public – and in doing so, cleverly points out the ironies of censorship, by conveying the words of its' victims through a reframed version of what originally oppressed their speech. We interact with an imaginative

⁹ Gupta, Shilpa. 2021. 'For, in Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit (Audio)-TN – Shilpa Gupta', *Shilpagupta.com* <<https://shilpagupta.com/for-in-your-tongue-i-cannot-fit-audio/>>

¹⁰ Callahan, Sara, Marsha Meskimmon, and Amelia Jones. 2022. *Art + Archive : Understanding the Archival Turn in Contemporary Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 43

solution to the historic problem of censorship, and in doing so become conduits and channels for the archive, part of the process of mediation in and of ourselves.

The giftshop of the Palais de Tokyo in Paris is selling me a book. 'Past Disquiet: Artists, International Solidarity, and Museums in Exile.' In the 1970s, in Chile, the art critics José María Moreno Galván and Mario Pedrosa created a 'solidarity museum', a circulation of artworks via international support groups which travelled in exile in order to raise awareness about political issues and censorship in the country of origin. It's an interesting reframing of the concepts I've been dissecting. What if mediation wasn't a two-way channel initiated by a living person, a capital-E 'Exile' using archival art to think about loss of 'home(land)', but rather a museum itself taking on the state of exile? Something like Walter Benjamin's portable archive, his suitcase – but a portable museum, drawing attention to the political struggles of a homeland by exiling itself.

Currently re-housed at the University of Mosul, Edmund de Waal's 'Library of Exile' is an installation piece composed of a large porcelain pavilion, the four walls lined with shelves holding over 2,000 books by 'exiled' writers – from Dante and Ovid to Nabokov and Joyce, Judith Kerr's 'The Tiger who Came to Tea' nestled between Hannah Arendt and Azar Nafisi. The delicate, porcelain walls of the 'library' should be, by nature of their material, fragile and vulnerable, easily fragmented – but they stand tall, inscribed with memorials to past libraries now lost and destroyed. The names of Nineveh in 6th century BC Assyria, the Library of Alexandria, and the University of Mosul Library in Iraq all feature. This is a mobile 'hut', of sorts, a mini-archive of exile that has travelled from the Venice Biennale to the British Museum, ending its travels at the University of Mosul Library.¹¹ The 'Library' can be experienced and 'read' (both literally and metaphorically) as an interactive installation, visitors asked to annotate the volumes with their thoughts and use the texts as a starting point for conversations in the space. De Waal himself suggests that this kind of dedicated museum-space both of exile and in-exile provides a radical solution to the problems of censorship so prevalent in spaces associated with displaced persons and artists – stating that "I needed to make a new library. I needed to do something incredibly positive. It was a feeling of: 'How can I do something which is generative and positive against a landscape of polarisation and

¹¹ de Waal, Edmund . 2020. 'Library of Exile – Making - Edmund de Waal', *Edmund de Waal* <<https://www.edmunddewaal.com/making/library-of-exile-1>>

rhetoric?’¹². De Waal’s Library was initially inspired by a challenge to the destruction of his own grandfather’s collection by the Nazis, and it holds a deep reverence and connection to this again historic sense of the exile. Indeed, the whiteness of the installation walls recall the intentionally blank parchment pages of another exiled artist, the Romanian-born Jewish poet Paul Celan (who De Waal’s work often references, specifically in regard to experiences of exile). His work is here, too, inside the ‘Library of Exile’, and we might recall a line in his poem ‘Totdnauberg’, or ‘The Mountain of Death’. Celan includes a single archived and recontextualised line, words which he wrote in 1967, in the guestbook of Heidegger’s hut in the Black Forest. They read ‘a hope, today, / for a thinker’s / word / to come, / in the heart’ or ‘einer Hoffnung, heute, / auf eines Denkenden / kommendes / Wort /im Herzen’¹³. The hut was used for Nazi indoctrination sessions in 1933, and Celan’s words, a single archived and fictionalised record of his conversation with Heidegger, become a kind of transitional boundary, a hopeful suggestion that words, and art might allow for communication, however horrific, between these heterodox points of view.

I end on this example, as Celan fulfils Adorno’s injunction that the only home-land truly available now, though fragile and vulnerable, is in writing. Elsewhere, ‘the house is past. The bombings of European cities, as well as the labour and concentration camps, merely precede as executors, with what the immanent development of technology had long decided was to be the fate of houses. These are now good only to be thrown away like old food cans.’¹⁴ If exiles yearn for a connection to homeland, perhaps the only effective mediation they can find is through acts of archival art and writing, and these are enacted through what I have found to be a tripartite form; mobile museums which embody the experience of exile, fictionalised installations which interrogate the relationship between the exile and the viewer, and poetry which offers up utopic and hopeful reimaginings and afterlives for previously marginalised and censored individuals. And, as I have evidenced through this piece of work, as viewers and readers we can productively contribute to these dialectics of mediation through producing our own work that relies on the archives of others, interconnecting and interweaving their

¹² Brown, Mark. 2020. ‘Library Closures Are “Violent and Vile”, Says Edmund de Waal’, *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2020/mar/09/edmund-de-waal-brings-library-of-exile-to-british-museum>>

¹³ Prynne, J. H. 2008. ‘Huts’, *Textual Practice*, 22.4: 613–33 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09502360802457392>>

¹⁴ Theodor Adorno. 2020. *MINIMA MORALIA : Reflections from Damaged Life*. (S.L.: Verso Books), p. 38

methodologies. The horror and ruin that Derrida suggests the archive cannot ‘forestall’ is a misidentified issue – we should hope not to forestall, but rather to continue to re-examine and recontextualise the fragments left behind by this ruination.

‘In the Berlin zoo, beside the pool containing the live walrus, there is an unusual display. In a glass case are all the things found in the stomach of Roland the walrus, who died on 21 August 1961. Or to be precise: a pink cigarette lighter, four ice-lolly sticks (wooden), a metal brooch in the form of a poodle, a beer-bottle opener, a woman’s bracelet (probably silver), a hair grip, a wooden pencil, a child’s plastic water pistol, a plastic knife, sunglasses, a little chain, a spring (small), a rubber ring, a parachute (child’s toy), a steel chain about 18 ins in length, four nails (large), a green plastic car, a metal comb, a plastic badge, a small doll, a beer can (Pilsner, half-pint), a box of matches, a baby’s shoe, a compass, a small car key, four coins, a knife with a wooden handle, a baby’s dummy, a bunch of keys (5), a pad-lock, a little plastic bag containing needles and thread. The visitor stands in front of the unusual display, more enchanted than horrified, as before archaeological exhibits. The visitor knows that their museum-display fate has been determined by chance (Roland’s whimsical appetite) but still cannot resist the poetic thought that with time the objects have acquired some subtler, secret connections. Caught up in this thought, the visitor then tries to establish semantic coordinates, to reconstruct the historical context (it occurs to him, for instance, that Roland died one week after the Berlin Wall was erected), and so on and so forth.’

(Dubravka Ugresic, ‘The Museum of Unconditional Surrender’). ¹⁵

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¹⁵ Dubravka Ugrešić. 1998. *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (Phoenix)

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