Abstract

In the practice of contemporary art in Indonesia in recent years, there is a growing trend related to the presence of archives. In this trend, archives are no longer viewed as "stored objects" on the shelves of libraries or museums. Archives also no longer serve as a source of literature for research that is accessed when only needed. In recent years, there have been many art exhibitions that show archives as their main exhibition object and interestingly, such exhibitions are not only initiated and made by museums or curators, but also by artists in the context of becoming works of art. Observing this trend, this article attempts to describe what shifts have occurred in relation to the position of archives in the art world, and how the presence of archives in various exhibitions can be seen and interpreted. This article makes use of research conducted qualitatively, by utilizing literature review. In the process of analysis, this article draws on Hal Foster's idea of archival impulse.

Keywords: archives; archival impulse; art exhibition; contemporary art

1 Introduction

In general, archives are always associated with research activities, especially historical research. Archives are part of a researcher's literature reviews. Also in research, archives are often not present in its entirety, rather in pieces of it. Through descriptions or quotations made by researchers, archives are present and can be accessed by the public, who reads the results of the research concerned. In another form, archives are present in the interpretations and interpretations of researchers in the results of their research. Therefore, the public—in this case, the readers—can imagine the archives as a whole through its parts.

As an object, an archive is always imagined as one or a collection of documents stored on a shelf or library or museum rooms. Access to archives is not free and open as it can be accessed when there are clear reasons and purposes. Sue Breakell in [1] offered some popular definitions of archives. The impact of the development of the idea of electronic document archiving is that the word ‘archive’ became a verb, which means: (1) to keep historical records or documents in an archive; and (2) in computing, storing electronic information that no longer needs to be used regularly. ‘Archive’ can also be a noun, with the definition (1) a collection of historical records relating to a place, organization or family; and (2) a place to store historical records.

Even in the art world, such a situation is not much different. With regard to Indonesian art, access to art archives in particular is not an easy matter. Apart from being stored in libraries, museums and archival institutions—which are not many in number—art archives are also stored tightly in
the houses of the artists.

However, there are times when archives are no longer a “stored object” that is closed from public visits. Museums or archival institutions often hold “archival exhibitions” where archives are the main object in the art gallery. In the exhibition, archives are presented to be approached, visited, and observed by the public. In the art world, archival exhibitions are not only carried out by the two institutions. Art galleries—through curators—can now hold an exhibition of archives. On the other hand, archives have also infiltrated into the part of the artist’s ideas. Today, it is a common to see an exhibition of artworks that bases its material on archives. Among such phenomena, it is common for an exhibition to only display archives in the art space and without the presence of any artwork.

In the field of contemporary art today, this phenomenon is often seen. Some artists, in fact, even base their work ideas on archives of the past. Archives do not seem to be a strange item in our contemporary art scene today. Seeing the existence of the two phenomena above, namely archive exhibitions and archival-based works, this article seeks to understand the frame that can be used to see and interpret this phenomenon. Also, it attempted to find out what has shifted in archives as objects when it is present in art exhibitions.

2 Archives in Art Exhibitions

2.1 Stored Objects – Exposed Objects

In its original condition, archives can be said to be “stored objects”, located in closed spaces and can only be accessed by certain parties who have interests in them. Breakell clearly illustrated the popular perception of archives stating that archives are often imagined as rows of boxes that can only be accessed with codes of types and locations. As a result, archives are also imagined as things hidden in a state of stasis and “imbued” with secrecy, mystery, and power. In an art exhibition, such perceptions are “broken down”. The archive is presented “naked” in the art gallery, which becomes the main object that invites visiting and public meaning. Anyone can come and visit the archives in the exhibition, regardless of whether they have an interest in the archives on display or not. In the exhibition, the archive underwent a shift in position: from “stored objects” to “exposed objects”.

This shift in position is strongly related to other shifts in the accessibility of archives, namely authority. Due to its position as stored objects, in most cases, archives are under the authority of an archivist (competent person in the field of archiving/archiver). This person manages and creates or determines the “rules of the game” and codes, as well as storage locations so that the archive can be accessed by the user. Meanwhile, shifting into an exposed object in an art gallery, the archives are under the authority of the curator or artist because both of them carry the archive from its storage, condition it for how it is present in the art gallery, and at the same time for how the archives are read and accessed by the public (in terms of interpreting them in the art gallery, of course there is no longer a single authority who can determine the most correct meaning).

In the work of archivists, records are approached and handled with the most objective effort possible. They describe the archives in a neutral way, document all the procedures carried out on the archives, and minimize the least possible intervention to the condition of the archives. The work aims to provide the same experience to different people when dealing with the same archive
and to make the tracks and the same information available to different users.

This of course will be different from what happens in an exhibition. In an exhibition, archives can be seen as a medium for conveying ideas of curators and artists to the art public. The presence of an archive in the art gallery has blended with the ideas and interpretations of curators and artists, and thus the work of curators or artists on archives tends to take place in a more subjective process.

There is another perspective in seeing the presence of archives under curators and artists in the art gallery. In Breakell, artists Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska thought that the archives that were present at such exhibitions were more suitable to be called “collections” rather than “archives”, because for them, the archives showed an area and not a specific narrative; and in the archives, interpretation is something that has not been determined.

2.2 Archives and the Potential of Construction Sites

In many exhibitions, the archives that are presented in the art gallery are often the result of a selection process that was done first. Therefore, these archives are often only part of a larger collection of archives. There is always priority—placing one as more important than the other—in such a selection process based on the need to accommodate the ideas of both the curators and the artists. In such a process, archives have been extracted from their original context—space, time, and configuration—and then used and presented again for different ideas and purposes. In the midst of such a process, as according to Breakell, the archives serve as a place for creation and become a part of manifestation.

Observing something similar to archives as places of creation, Hal Foster in [2], wrote:

“its utopian ambition – its desire to turn belatedness into becomingness, to recoup failed visions in art, literature, philosophy, and everyday life into possible scenarios of alternative kinds of social relations, to transform the no-place of the archive into the no-place of utopia … This move to turn ‘excavation sites’ into ‘construction sites’…”

From Foster’s writing, it appears that there are changes or shifts that occur when archives function as a place of creation. The archives have changed form from an “excavation site” to a “construction site”. In this situation, the archives are no longer seen as stored objects (preserved), as monuments to the past, and waiting to be “unearthed”, but as objects ready for various possibilities inviting new interpretations and ideas to emerge and waiting to be processed and presented again with different messages or meanings.

The meaning in an exhibition or archival-based work is created from the construction of the configuration of the archives on display or the relationships that might exist and be created between the existing files. In the art gallery, a collection of archives can exist side by side simultaneously, even between files of different collections or classifications. Foster described several characteristics of archives: found yet constructed, factual yet fictional, and public yet private.

2.3 Archives and Historical Themes

Generally, in the field of art, archives are identical with historical contents. They are usually present at exhibitions or works with historical themes. In this case, archives are identified as “records” of the past containing information that can provide a picture of what happened in the past. Hence, history can be interpreted more broadly and fluidly; not only related to time and timeline of a
development or journey, history can also be associated with memories of the past. Also, in recent years, artists have often appeared with their archival works while raising themes related to memory.

Regarding the relationship between archives and historical ideas, Priscila Arantes in [3] considered that the presence of archives in contemporary art works is often related to the idea of “rewriting” history. For Arantes, the presence of archives in artworks has an intrinsic connection with the desire and need to write “another history”, which is away from official history—dictated by hegemonic thinking. Arantes saw this tendency in contemporary Brazilian art works that present ideas about Latin American culture as well as Brazilian art expressions—through archival material—which in official and universal historical narratives are neglected by historical narratives centered on Europe and (North) America.

In a somewhat different way, recent exhibitions and archival-based works show a desire for the same effort. The presence of previously unknown “new” archives, or search results deep into personal collections, as well as isolated spaces such as the storehouse and cupboards of figures, indicate an urge to tell history through other versions or viewpoints, beyond the general and the official. The “other” sources are being pursued.

Some exhibitions present personal archives of a figure to tell the life of that person at a time. Others try to capture the conditions of a time through the person’s perspective as the actor. Such an idea is an attempt to see a larger context through other smaller contexts; such as records of perpetrators, victims, letters or various items from that period. Themes such as the Dutch colonial period, the revolutionary struggle, the G30S, the New Order regime, or the reform era were also commonly chosen to be raised by utilizing archives from smaller contexts. Another idea is the exposure to the life of a figure, who is usually the owner of the archive. In the formation of ideas such these, personal and intimate narratives are allowed to continue to flow and develop. Themes such as family memory, childhood, self-travel are often the embodiment of the ideas.

Several other exhibitions—especially the archival exhibition—focus on historical themes of art itself. The curator displays various kinds of archives, such as works, exhibition catalogs, and exhibition posters. They are also often configured with personal notes, correspondence, and collections of clippings or photographs of art activities. This effort is usually made to have a more detailed view, and as an attempt to describe the development of art through the variables that may exist in it. Several themes are commonly raised in exhibitions of this kind, such as the development of a style or genre of work, the trend of the work at a certain time or period, the history of an art movement or what has recently begun to develop; in other words, the exhibition history.

The desire to “rewrite” history, as Arantes said, also often shows a tug of war between two historical aspects that may accompany the presence of the archives in the art gallery. Personal history and social history often appear to be of interest in the archival-based exhibitions. The curator’s or artist’s construction of the archives makes this attraction possible. The bigger or general the (social) picture is often drawn from the smaller aspects that are part of it (personal). On the other hand, the situation and conditions in an environment can greatly influence an individual to think and act. This is possible, considering that an individual lives not in a vacuum, but in the middle of a certain space (social, cultural, political, etc.) and time, and then the individual’s personal self-image can reflect the situation of space and time in which the individual lives. In this case, archives—as written by Breckell—can be viewed as a product of a social process and system at that time, which can reflect the positions and exclusions of various groups or different individuals in the system.

Interest in archives that tend to be personal, outside the official (canonical) archives also shows
the dominant view prevailing in contemporary art practice today which is the impact of the development of post-modern ideas: alignment with small narratives and then considering it as equal and as important as the dominant narratives to float.

Merging into the creative process and artistic vision of the artists, the archives have further possibilities to be handled and presented in public. Then, what might be the basis for the presence of archival-based works? What drives the artists to create such work? In his writings, Hal Foster identified the motivation behind the creation of these archive-based works as “archival impulse”.

There were principles found in the archival impulse in Foster’s writings. Sarah Haylett in her presentation “Beyond an Archival Impulse: the artist-as-archivist at Tate” at the Artpool 40-Active Archives and Art Networks International Conference, noted the principles:

- In the first instance archival artists seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present.
- These sources are familiar, drawn from the archives of mass culture, to ensure a legibility that can then be disturbed or *detourné*; but they can also be obscure, retrieved in a gesture of alternative knowledge or counter memory.
- Archival art is… concerned less with absolute origins than with obscure traces (perhaps “anarchival impulse” is the more appropriate phrase), these artists are often drawn to unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects—in art and in history alike—that might offer points of departure again.
- Finally, the work in question is archival since it not only draws on informal archives but produces them as well.

Based on the explanations in the previous paragraphs, archival-based works often deal with historical themes. The archives carry historical information and often in between, artists present “new” archives, which they find as a result of winding searches.

Artists also often present archives (knowledge) that are already familiar to the public to shake or disturb the public. Thus, establishment is disturbed and sued to convey alternative knowledge. In this context, the desire to “rewrite history” is also an effort to create alternative knowledge.

Returning to the issue of the potential of archives as construction sites, artists are often interested in bringing up topics that have not been concluded or topics that have many perceptions about them. This allows ample space for the artist’s personal interpretation: for the construction of meaning by the artist.

To a certain point, personal interpretation and sign construction by involving and combining various kinds of archives, make archival works often seen as a new archival formation. At this point, the artists are the ones producing the archives.

### 2.4 Archives Exhibition – Archival Works

Based on observations on the exhibitions that present archives held in recent years in the Indonesian art scene, the presence of archives in these various exhibitions can be divided into two forms.

The first form is what is often referred to as an “archival exhibition”. This is a type of exhibition in visual art where the content of the exhibition puts forward most or even the entire archive. Archives become the main object on display. In the archive exhibition, the presence of the archive is under the authority of the exhibition curator. The archives become a medium for the curator’s ideas. In
such exhibitions, the curators usually still treat the archives as archives, in which the informative aspects within are the main highlight. In the Arantes’ words, archives act as documents.

The second form is the archives become part of an artist’s artistic vision. The archives become part of the medium for an artist’s artistic expression. By merging into the artist’s artistic vision, the archive exhibition has earned a claim as a work of art. When becoming a work of art, the aspect of information contained in the archive is not always the main vision for the artist, even the presence of the information is often not fully present—due to the artist’s artistic treatment. In this case, the aspects of representation that might be raised as well as aspects of experience that might be evoked from the presence of the archives become more important. In Antares’ words, archives have served as poetic tools. Foster called such archival-based works as archive art.

Although the above distinction is not absolute, at least it shows the spectrum of the presence of archives when present in an exhibition space. This spectrum shows how archives have the potential for flexibility to be handled and explored in the context of contemporary art activities.

2.5 Informative Objects – Poetic Objects

Our encounter with archives in the art gallery allows for different situations and experiences. This cannot be separated from how the archives are treated and presented again in the art gallery.

As already mentioned in above, we may come across archives in their form and function as they are; as an “informative object”. People can read and see the content and retrieve the information contained in it. In fact, to support the delivery of this aspect of information, the archives that were present are also accompanied by a label containing additional information about the archive and various accompanying contexts. This kind of situation is especially true in archival exhibitions. In this kind of situation, we are actually dealing with an experience that is concrete or real. We are dealing with things we can find every day: books, letters, photos, tables, chairs, and so on. Even in some exhibitions, they are allowed to touch and flip through the pages of the books or letters on display. Some artists also create archival artwork in the methods described above. The concreteness discourse in Indonesian art was expressed by Sanento Yuliman when discussing the works of contemporary Indonesian artists in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, Yuliman used the discourse to explain works that present everyday material objects, as well as works that only display a collection of data. The aspects which arouse subjective emotions are minimized in works of this kind.

On the other hand, we may find archives as “poetic objects” in galleries. Archives have been transformed into a medium of expression for the artist. Often, the informational aspect is no longer the main highlight. We are invited and challenged to read and discover for ourselves the message or meaning that the artist meant to convey through the archives. In this situation, we may come across photos, pictures, books, or other objects without any description label. We may also see fragments of letters or notes without explanation. Such objects, of course, will not provide complete information for us, and it seems that the artists do not intend to do so. The aspect of representation that may exist in the archives is the main thing. The archives are expected to provide a picture of other things that are no longer limited to the information listed on them. In another form, the artist also explores aspects of experience and emotions that the archives might inspire—and this touches the subjective realm of the viewer.

An old brown sheet of letter paper with a weathered texture or a distinctive smell, handwritten with faded ink, romantic language style, full of metaphors and personifications, faded photos, black
and white pictures, crumpled books with marks of tears on them, scribbles on letter sheets, and more may not provide complete information about an event. On the other hand, these elements have the potential to connect us to certain experiences and memories—and maybe very personal. Such elements often become things that cause joy in observing an archive. The experiences that the elements might generate in such an archive may produce aesthetic experiences for us. Such elements too, are often the reasons for an archive exhibition: the authenticity and originality of an archive is important and a valuable attraction. Presenting the original archive, however, is more interesting than just a reproduction of the archive.

3 Conclusion

In contemporary art practice, especially in Indonesia, archives have been seen as a material that can be explored. The frequent archival exhibitions and archival works of art that are displayed show considerable interest from several parties in the art world of our country—especially curators and artists. The presence of archives in the art gallery, of course, has changed the position and function of the archives. In the art gallery, the archives are no longer functioning and provide an experience exactly the same as what researchers find in the library, for example. The archives have shifted from “stored objects” to “exposed objects”.

Archival impulse, as Hal Foster called it, is something that appears in the practice of archive-based art that we often encounter in the recent Indonesian art scene. In Indonesia, the presence of archives is identified with historical issues or—in a more personal realm—past memories. Merging into artistic practice, archives become dynamic objects, inviting various possibilities to be treated and explored. Therefore, exhibitions and archival-based works seem to be continuously in demand and carried out in the Indonesian art scene, especially considering that the realm of art and history is a realm that is open to the possibility of various interpretations and versions of perspective. The archive has become a “construction site”.

4 Acknowledgement

This research is funded and supported by ITB Research Community Service, and Innovation Program (Program Penelitian, Pengabdian Masyarakat, dan Inovasi - P3MI) year 2020 managed by the Aesthetics and Arts Sciences Research Group, under the Faculty of Art and Design, Institut Teknologi Bandung.

5 References

When an artist goes deep, they are basically peeling their skin off - working in a very undefended posture. That's one of the reasons we value them. They are willing to go places we can't and don't and stay there for extended periods and then offer up to us, in their works, the things they have discovered. Galleries are not important in the largest picture. Galleries are generally part of a relatively newish structure of the commodification of art and they mostly have a goal to make money. Thus, they show what sells most easily to people who are often relatively uneducated about art. So in this sense galleries are like the Macy's store catering to the whims of people who want to spend money on decorative things. When did you see this exhibition? and Where the exhibition was held? I would like to talk about one such exhibition that was organized in my city lately. This exhibition was held in the convention center of my town where I visited with my friends. What was on display? There was a small entry charge for visitors that we paid happily, and we got amazed to see different forms of art that were on display inside. Few of these paintings were auctioned at this exhibition as well. In the next section, we experienced pottery art. In fact, there was a live workshop where an artist was demonstrating how the pots are made. We purchased few pots to appreciate his work. Explain your impression of the exhibition. My personal archive experience began in the mid-1990s, when I felt that contemporary art and modern humans were losing substance. The focus had shifted from art to creativity. Creativity is not limited by time or space. It is a state of exaltation that blends into everyday life and is conserved museified, archived, represented) by art (here the Greek word techne is important, which is often translated as art). Valery Cherkasov created assemblages out of improvised materials, sometimes presenting garbage installations at rubbish dumps. He was a rather eccentric person. One might recall the suicide attempt when he fell on two carefully placed lancets aimed at his eyes, or his hiking trips to Finland when he was stopped by the KGB at the border and placed in an asylum. When children are learning with digitally oriented curriculums, there is something really special about showing them textile artworks. Galleries give students the opportunity to explore the textures of paintings up close, the drapery dangling off marble statues, and the scale of a large canvas. This puts art in a completely different perspective to viewing it on a phone or a laptop. Learning about art in the flesh within the context of a gallery is why we visit museums, rather than looking at art on Instagram. 4) Students will get inspired. Art provides inspiration for children and for adults. To conclude, museums and art galleries that have national artefacts and artworks besides having international collections are far rich and practical in exchanging cultural aspects. Sample Answer 3: Museums and art galleries essentially showcase significant histories and artworks to the general audience both to educate them and to preserve important artefacts. So museums and similar other places become more acceptable when they conserve local culture and present national history. For instance, most of the tourists in my country find the national museum more interesting than other museums we have because our national museum offers a true insight into our past and heritage.