



THE COALITION OF MASTER'S
SCHOLARS ON MATERIAL CULTURE

Author(s): Madeleine Larson

Published by: The Coalition of Master's Scholars on Material Culture

URL: <https://cmsmc.org/publications/archivists-creative-act>

Date Published: April 30, 2021

Citation: Larson, Madeleine. "The Archivist's Creative Act: A Postmodern Analysis of Tate Archive." The Coalition of Master's Scholars on Material Culture, April 30, 2021.

CMSMC is run by fellow master's scholars as a platform for colleagues to disseminate their work. We are an independently run organization and are not affiliated with any university or institution. This work is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

For more information about The Coalition of Master's Scholars on Material Culture, please email us at admin@cmsmc.org

The Archivist's Creative Act: A Postmodern Analysis of Tate Archive

By: Madeleine Larson

Abstract: This paper explores the value of Tate Archive as it fits into a postmodern paradigm. Archivist Terry Cook defines the postmodern archive as highlighted by several key tenets, including emphasizing the creative or authoring intent or process behind the record; acknowledging the archivist as active mediator of records with innate subjectivity and bias; centering ways to capture, display, and share archival information; and focusing on the context of material rather than universal authorial voice. Overall, Tate Archive has taken an active, postmodern approach, as defined by Terry Cook, by enforcing the continuous value of the materials via expanded access, diversifying its users, and emphasizing the new dynamic and interlacing ways that users can experience and consequently preserve their material. By prioritizing transparency, access, and participation across platforms, Tate Archive has paved a path to empower and enrich users in the modern age.

Keywords: *Tate Archive, Tate Britain, Terry Cook, postmodernism, archives, digitization, museums, access*

The photograph that first grabbed my attention while digitally thumbing through Tate Archive is, in many ways, a perfectly ordinary picture (See [Tate Britain](#)). In fact, one might even classify it as a below-average composition. The camera cuts close in on four figures standing on a beach, each facing a different direction and clearly not focused on the photographer. One woman opens a bag, holding it awkwardly in front of her as if unaware of any vigilant onlookers. Another woman, gripping a cigarette in the corner of her mouth, hikes her bikini top up candidly. We see only the tanned, bare back of another male figure, his identity and motivations unreadable. The final main figure is a fully dressed man wearing an oversized sun hat, who eyes the camera and sports a pinched smile, as if looking into the sun. A female figure lies prone, almost comically, like a dozing side character, sunbathing on the sand just beyond these four people.

At first glance, this photograph might appear as an awkward portrait of a beach day, one taken by an amateur on vacation. However, further inspection on the Archive's website reveals hidden delights. The male figure with his back to the camera is Pablo Picasso, the smoking woman is French model and performer Nusch Éluard, and the man in the sun hat is Paul Éluard, poet and founding member of the Surrealist movement. This photograph, from the Eileen Agar collection in Tate Archive, is among a series documenting Agar's travels around Europe with flocks of artist and socialite friends. Agar took dozens of photographs of this beach outing in September 1937, and, as this beautifully imperfect picture demonstrates, he captured those vital, in-between moments that truly define us as artists and as people.

Tate Archive, founded in 1970 and housed at Tate Britain in London, is a repository where visitors can delve into the lives, musings, memories, and unseen moments that lie beneath the ostensible surface of modern British art. Collection materials include letters, diaries, financial

records, sketches, photos, exhibition histories, audiovisual material, and even born-digital material. The Archive includes more than 900 individual collections and over 100,000 items, and it has made more than 52,000 items from eighty-two collections accessible online with photographs.ⁱ Tate's goal in its Archive is to make a large amount of material about the history of British art from 1900 to the present accessible through a variety of media and content.

This paper analyzes Tate Archive through a postmodern lens as defined by archivist Terry Cook, arguing that the Archive, as a separate branch from the Tate museum, empowers users to go beyond the impressions they can draw from the gallery spaces themselves. Through the major aspects of archival practice – appraising, acquisition, access, arrangement and description, and preservation – this paper illustrates how users can employ this postmodern approach in a way that can enrich and enhance their experience of materials in Tate Archive. Primarily through its prioritization of transparency and user interaction, Tate breaks down many traditional barriers that the archival profession is based on to decentralize the institution and reprioritize users, creators, and subjects. Such traditional barriers can prioritize values including the supremacy of the singular archivist and the original order of material, as well as inflexible access and organizational policy. Due to the legal status of the Tate Britain itself as a Public Record Body, much of Tate's record collection and management is dictated by legislation, as the Public Records Act of 1958 mandated that any records created by these bodies must become public.ⁱⁱ This requires Tate to preserve and make available their institutional records, as well as provide an “audit trail” to ensure accountability and transparency.ⁱⁱⁱ Beyond this mandate, however, Tate Archive has been taking many productive steps to enrich user experience and reinforce continuous archival value. Many of these efforts are the result of initiatives within the past five years at the museum, funded by outside grants, such as the Archives & Access and the

Reshaping the Collectible projects. These grants have allowed Tate to become more introspective in how the museum wants to approach and present its archives in ways that can enrich all audiences today.

In “Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts,” Terry Cook uncovers connections between postmodern theory and archival practice and conceives of a paradigm for the field to adapt to a postmodern world. Overall, Cook explains that this is underscored by de-fetishizing the record as object and reemphasizing the “creative act or authoring intent or process or functionality behind the record.”^{iv} By stressing the functional and structural contexts of records, as well as centering ways to capture, display, and share this “conceptual-provenance information,” the archivist becomes an “active mediator” in shaping collective memory through their collected material.^v Within this paradigm, the archivist can thus be self-aware and work self-reflexively in all their choices. Cook appeals for archivists to be dynamic and to take great care for context rather than universal absolutes to form an archival conceptual paradigm appropriate to the profession in the 21st century. “The broader conditions of postmodernity in which we live, even if one does not accept postmodernism as an animating philosophy, force archivists to play new roles,” Cook writes.^{vi} Technology, globalization, and new theoretical conceptions of history and memory require corresponding adaptability in archival work.

It is worth considering the postmodern archival paradigm vis-à-vis postmodernism as an art and cultural movement in order to bolster its importance in memory institutions, and especially in an eminent art museum like Tate. Understanding postmodernism in the art historical sense can also illuminate its broader implications about how we, as societies, approach and reevaluate objects of our pasts. As an art and culture movement of the second half of the 20th

century, postmodernism embodies an anti-bourgeois skepticism toward authority and institution, instead embracing democratization of art and voice. It often foregrounds the circumstances around and theories behind how art is created, as well as the individual subjective experience of the object, rather than relying on one central narrative and/or aesthetic. Art critic Hal Foster, in an introduction to a collection of essays on the subject, writes that “In short, [postmodernism] seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations.”^{vii} Where modernism essentially began with a breakdown of figural painting and rebuffing of classical forms, postmodernism completely obliterates those remaining structures of what art should be. With postmodernism, we get the death of the author-artist, the attack of the genius male artist trope embodied in modernists like Jackson Pollock, and a new emphasis on subjectivity and skepticism. Taking these aspects in mind, we can begin to apply them to Cook’s analysis of the postmodern archive. Most importantly, this exercise highlights the decentralization of archive as authority and promotion of diverse and heterogeneous use. As opposed to a small number of institutional leaders wielding the bulk of archival power, control is diffused throughout a larger body of users as the primary stakeholders. As an archive of modern and contemporary art, Tate Archive is a self-reflective locus where the content it houses reflects an overarching commitment to postmodern interpretation.

The lifecycle of archival material often begins with appraisal: the process of determining the value of materials offered to the institution so as to accession or not. Tate publicizes its acquisition and disposal policy for art and archive collections online. According to the museum’s website, archival material is considered in the same process as artwork: proposals are discussed by specialized curators and recommendations are made to the Acquisitions Group, which includes the Director and the museum’s Board. The Collections Committee, comprised of

Trustees, then makes acquisitions decisions.^{viii} Specific criteria about what is accepted are not itemized on Tate's website, but the museum's Public Record status requires it to maintain and make accessible all institutional records, housed at the Archive. Tate's Reshaping the Collectible project has employed a researcher in the Archive to take an active role in understanding how Tate collects and manages its artwork (through acquisition, exhibition, loan, and conservation records). Tate makes these behind-the-scenes records available to researchers upon request. This transparency and visibility of institutional records, including appraisal and acquisition information, not only help keep the museum accountable but, as researcher Sarah Haylett explains, "also contain narratives that capture what it means to work with artworks in collections like Tate's and how these records are evidence of 'ongoing achievements of institutional practices.'"^{ix} While this record management approach is mandated by UK legislation, Tate is taking individual initiative, primarily through Reshaping the Collectible, to understand the full extent of value of its public records and dissolve the traditional hegemonic status of the memory institution. Memory institutions are those places that take on the mantle of preserving public knowledge into the future, such as museums and libraries, and by their nature are governed by reactionary policies as they look toward the past to collect for the future. Tate Archive is an example of a memory institution that attempts to acknowledge its active role in power dynamics with users through collection of public records.

Tate Archive's approach to user access also reflects its proclivity for a postmodern understanding of archival practice. Tate's Archives & Access project, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, was a five-year initiative that concluded in 2017. The most significant yield from this project was the digitization of over 52,000 objects from the Archive, now available online.^x Online, the Archive explains the unique benefits of this level of digitization: "Increased visibility

can offer ways to increase representation – the stories of lesser-known figures may be celebrated and championed by virtue of circulation. Further, digital technologies provide alternative terms of engagement with information [...] offering additional, recreationally-led means of access.”^{xi} Removing physical barriers to images, information, and metadata allows for more connections to be made across objects and collections beyond traditional institutional narratives. The Public Archive Gallery at Tate is a space that visualizes archival material and provides critical connections between archival objects and the museum’s art collection. With rotating displays, these galleries situate archival material within the larger institution and draw attention to new ways audiences can connect with historical material. This is a dynamic strategy that reflects the postmodern paradigm of context and theoretical fluidity outside the traditional archival model of original order.

Similarly, the Archives & Access project at Tate Archive has opened the collection to postmodern exercises of arrangement and description by new audiences. The project created several online tools, in addition to collection digitization, to aid users in creating meaningful relationships between objects and redress the power imbalance of meaning-making from institution to user. The Archive’s website touts feature like collating user discoveries in the digital collection into an “Album,” which can be published on Tate’s website. Individual visitors to the website are invited to browse the collection, make connections between objects, and write about how they have engaged with the material in these Albums. This tool outwardly invites diversity and subjectivity of interpretation by decentralizing the arrangement and description authority of the Archive. The Archives & Access project also launched AnnoTate, an online crowdsourcing transcription process where users actively contribute to digitization using their own skills, knowledge, and background.

Lastly, with respect to user access tied in with arrangement and description, Tate has recognized that simply digitizing material does not yield instantaneous, increased engagement. Tate's solution has been the launch of the Learning Outreach program, created with a goal to "invite new interpretations and uses of the materials."^{xii} The Learning Outreach program has developed a wide range of activities, in collaboration with other cultural organizations around the United Kingdom, with the goal of encouraging participants to develop personal understandings of the Archive, discover items and themes that resonate with them, and create their own creative responses to archival materials. One example of the activities developed was a series of drawing workshops based on digitized artists' sketchbooks from the Archive. This was an innovative way for specifically young, school-aged groups to engage with material outside of the traditional reading room experience and led to enriching new understandings of materials and connections with artists. Terry Cook, in his examination of the postmodern archive, explains the importance of allowing this diversity of arrangement and description. "The research-based knowledge of the archivist needed to fill these empty boxes will always by definition be subjective, interpretive, narrative," he writes. "Postmodern archival thinking requires the profession to accept that it cannot escape the subjectivity of performance by claiming the objectivity of systems and standards."^{xiii} Allowing new approaches for how archival material is understood outside traditional orders and contexts embraces the inherent subjectivity of users and allows it to be an enhancing factor, rather than an obstructive one.

Tate also employs a postmodern approach to its preservation of archival records aligned with the "Records Continuum" model. The continuum model preserves vital context around a record and does not distinguish between an object's value at creation and its continuous historic value within the archive as it is exposed to new audiences and experiences interrelated axes of

accountability.^{xiv} This approach emphasizes the active role of the archivist, as well as the necessity of preserving digital information. It runs counter to the more traditional “Life Cycle” model of records management. As explained by researcher Sarah Haylett in regard to Tate’s Reshaping the Collectible project, Tate approaches its archives and art records in this continuum model, as the materials are constantly building in value as they are evaluated in relation to the museum’s art collection. Thus, the records never reach the end of their life cycle and remain infinitely valuable as users encounter them across time. “In doing so they shape institutional memory and support the creation of new records throughout the artwork’s life in the contemporary art museum,”^{xv} Haylett writes. This is a feature of a postmodern archival model, where archivists understand their role and the institution’s intervening roles in how records live over time. In this regard, preservation can occur through digitization because opening up records to new audiences allows a plethora of new connections to be made, which serves to enrich the record and let it retain its value in the future. “The act of remembering involves both storage and retrieving: it is not a passive process, especially in the digital age,” writes archivist Sue Breakell.^{xvi} Tate Archive’s commitment to digitization enforces this continuum model of preservation by relying not on implicit value statements made by the museum, but a wider range of user interpretation that enhance overall value—a democratizing feature of postmodern meaning-making.

Through this postmodern analysis of Tate Archive and its online presence, we can observe room for expansion in the Archive’s emphasis on social responsibility and accountability. While Tate published a thorough post on its website about the institution’s commitment to racial equality in 2020, these sentiments are yet to be fully implemented in Tate’s specific archival practices. Cook and Schwartz explain: “Postmodernism requires archivists to

accept their own historicity, to recognize their own role in the process of creating archives, and to reveal their own biases. [...] Above all, it asserts that no actor or observer, historian or archivist, is ever neutral or disinterested in any documentary process.”^{xvii} Tate can take greater measures to publicly acknowledge these biases as individual archivists and as an institution. At present, they could benefit from more transparency about the current archival staff, as well as demographics of primary users, and what biases they may be bringing that impact archival appraisal and arrangement. Even more effective would be a proactive evaluation of what voices are underrepresented in the staff, in the content of the Archive itself, and in the user pool. Being more transparent about these efforts would enhance the postmodern model of a true “commitment to self-reflection and accountability.”^{xviii}

Sue Breakell, in an essay for the museum’s journal *Tate Papers*, expresses an eagerness for archives to question and even dissolve existing boundaries between archivist, artist, and researchers. “Archives are traces to which we respond; they are a reflection of ourselves, and our response to them says more about us than the archive itself,” she writes.^{xix} This emphasis on individual experience and added value reflects the postmodern attitude that is nascent at Tate Archive. Breakell explains the impossibility of objectivity in archival processes at the museum: “Tate Archive’s holdings are viewed first and foremost as art records, while non-art historians would see them as documents of a much wider-ranging significance. Multiple readings of archive material are possible, through each user (student, art historian, theorist, artist) having the same experience of encounter without disturbing the traces for others.”^{xx} Tate is highly successful in illuminating and encouraging these interlacing traces of meaning through its postmodern approaches and activities in record appraisal and acquisition, access, arrangement and description, and preservation. “Postmodernists try to denaturalize what society

unquestionably assumes is natural, what it has for generations, perhaps centuries, accepted as normal, natural, rational, proven—simply the way things are,”^{xxi} Terry Cook writes. Indeed, Tate makes great, admirable strides towards denaturalizing the individual, hegemonic, institutional authority of the archive, all while inviting in a huge range of voices to work both analytically and creatively with its material. Tate allows us to see Picasso not only through in the colorful, broken expression rendered in *Weeping Woman* (1937 – See [Tate Britain](#)), but through the way he lounges on the beach with his friends, how he turns away from the camera and hunches his tanned back, how he exists as a human entity that we can observe in intimate, imperfect detail. By prioritizing transparency, access, and participation across platforms, Tate Archive has paved a path to enliven material culture in a new, truly accessible way, ultimately empowering and enriching users in the modern age.

Bibliography

- Tate. "Acquisitions." Accessed on November 15, 2020. <https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/collection/acquisitions>.
- Tate. "Archives & Access Toolkit." Accessed on November 15, 2020. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/archive/archives-access-toolkit>.
- Breakell, Sue. "Perspectives: Negotiating the Archive." *Tate Papers*, no. 9 (Spring 2008). [tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/09/perspectives-negotiating-the-archive](https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/09/perspectives-negotiating-the-archive).
- Cook, Terry. "Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts." *Archives & Museum Informatics* 1, no. 1 (March 2001): 3–24.
- Cook, Terry, and Joan M. Schwartz. "Archives, Records, and Power: From (Postmodern) Theory to (Archival) Performance." *Archival Science* 2, no. 3 (2002): 171–85.
- Foster, Hal. "Postmodernism: A Preface." In *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, 1st ed., ix–xvi. Seattle: Bay Press, 1983.
- Haylett, Sarah. "Archives and Record Management." Published as part of the research project *Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum*. Tate, 2019. <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/reshaping-the-collectible/research-approach-archives-record-management>.
- "Public Records Bodies: Determination and Change of Status." The National Archives, 2012. <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/how-to-identify-a-public-records-body.pdf>.
- "Records Continuum." In *The Society of American Archivists*. Accessed on November 15, 2020. <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/records-continuum.html>.
- Tate. "Supporting Learning and Participation with Archives," Accessed on November 15, 2020. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/archives/archives-access-toolkit/supporting-learning-participation-archives>.
- Tate. "Tate Archive," Accessed on February 20, 2021. <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/archive>.
- Tate. "Transforming Tate Britain: Archives & Access," Accessed on November 15, 2020. <https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/transforming-tate-britain-archives-access>.

End Notes

-
- ⁱ “Tate Archive,” Tate, n.d., <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/archive>.
- ⁱⁱ “Public Records Bodies: Determination and Change of Status,” 2012, The National Archives, <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documents/information-management/how-to-identify-a-public-records-body.pdf>.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Sarah Haylett, “Archives and Record Management,” published as part of the research project Reshaping the Collectible: When Artworks Live in the Museum (Tate, 2019), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/reshaping-the-collectible/research-approach-archives-record-management>.
- ^{iv} Terry Cook, “Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts,” *Archives & Museum Informatics* 1, no. 1 (March 2001), 24.
- ^v Cook 2001, 24.
- ^{vi} Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz, “Archives, Records, and Power: From (Postmodern) Theory to (Archival) Performance,” *Archival Science* 2, no. 3 (2002), 177.
- ^{vii} Hal Foster, “Postmodernism: A Preface,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, 1st ed. (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), xii.
- ^{viii} “Acquisitions,” Tate, n.d., <https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/collection/acquisitions>.
- ^{ix} Haylett 2019.
- ^x “Transforming Tate Britain: Archives & Access,” Tate, n.d., <https://www.tate.org.uk/about-us/projects/transforming-tate-britain-archives-access>.
- ^{xi} “Archives & Access Toolkit,” Tate, n.d., <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/archive/archives-access-toolkit>.
- ^{xii} “Supporting Learning and Participation with Archives,” Tate, n.d., <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/archives/archives-access-toolkit/supporting-learning-participation-archives>.
- ^{xiii} Cook and Schwartz 2002, 175-176.
- ^{xiv} “Records Continuum,” in *The Society of American Archivists*, n.d., <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/records-continuum.html>.
- ^{xv} Haylett 2019.
- ^{xvi} Sue Breakell, “Perspectives: Negotiating the Archive,” *Tate Papers*, no. No. 9 (Spring 2008), [tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/09/perspectives-negotiating-the-archive](https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/09/perspectives-negotiating-the-archive).
- ^{xvii} Cook and Schwartz 2002, 182.
- ^{xviii} Cook and Schwartz 2002, 182.
- ^{xix} Breakell 2008.
- ^{xx} Breakell 2008.
- ^{xxi} Cook 2001, 8.