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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

Radical Archive Fever

by [Mostafa Heddaya](#) on April 12, 2014



Artist Lara Baladi delivers keynote address at the Radical Archives conference at NYU (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

“The archive is consuming its host, brandishing all the malicious resentment of the profaned, the philistine, the exile.” Though prophetic, this statement — penned by Gregory Sholette in his recent book *Dark Matter* — refers not to future projects but the subversive potential of those radical archives long since entombed within neoliberal cultural institutions. Snowed in as such archives may be, notably the thirty-year-old [Political Art Documentation/Distribution \(PAD/D\)](#) archive now at the Museum of Modern Art’s Queens warehouse, the practice of what Lucy R. Lippard called “archival activism” in 1979 is today more hybrid than it has ever been, its need ever more exigent.

This charge is taken up in earnest by [Radical Archives](#), a two-day conference organized by the artists Chitra Ganesh and Mariam Ghani running yesterday and today at New York University (NYU). Collaborators since 2004 on the project “[Index of the Disappeared](#),” Ganesh and Ghani organized Radical Archives as part of their 2013–14 residency at the Asian/Pacific/American Institute at NYU, where they have also staged a trio of exhibitions. (Two have closed; the third consists of two parts

— [Parasitic Archive](#), on view at the NYU Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies through May 12, and *Watch this Space*, running April 16 to May 12 in NYU's Kimmel Windows Gallery.)

The Radical Archives conference unites a broad spectrum of scholars and practitioners on diverse facets of archival practice: “It’s a conference about archives as a radical practice in four different ways: as radical politics, as radical or experimental in form, in movements or contexts where archiving is the last site of resistance, and as activating absence,” Ghani told Hyperallergic.

The programming was inaugurated yesterday morning with a didactic keynote speech on Egypt by the artist Lara Baladi entitled “Archiving a Revolution.” How does one archive a revolution, in which, as Baladi put it, “lots of media was constantly being uploaded”? Though her 45-minute talk packed an impressive density of information on the many projects and initiatives that emerged in the many aftermaths of Tahrir Square’s January 2011 eruption, Baladi would have benefited from further context on the structural antagonisms facing the archival practices she highlighted, like the presence of a monolithic state media apparatus embedded within what has been termed Egypt’s military deep state.

Her account was also limited to successful archival projects, privileging high-visibility online initiatives and well-publicized guerilla ventures like Cinema Tahrir. This resulted in the unfortunate omission of one of the post-revolutionary period’s most important archival projects: the defunct [u-shahid.org initiative](#), which allowed Egyptians to anonymously document electoral abuses during the 2012 People’s Assembly (parliamentary) elections, overlaying the reports on a map. The failure of such a rigorous and politically potent project surely entails important considerations for the active and passive dimensions of archival practice.

By the same token, Baladi overlooked areas of archival success in Egypt, like the complete digitization of Napoleon’s *Description de l’Égypte* by the [Bibliotheca Alexandrina](#) in 2005 (and the institution’s much larger manuscript digitization program), in favor of alarmist news narratives about the wholesale loss of Egyptian cultural heritage, including a burned [handwritten copy](#) of the *Description* at the Institut d’Égypte and the looting of a minor museum in Malawi (since [restored](#)).

This tension between the archive as a means of making knowledge and information more resilient, of deploying the radical potential of the past, and its possible reinscription of a retrograde object-fetish emerged on the subject of zine digitization at a subsequent panel. “Disrupting Standards, Remarking Interfaces” united a university archivist, library and independent archivists, an academic, and a zine archive technologist under the able moderation of Alexander Provan, founding editor of Triple Canopy — likely an indication that the programming of Radical Archives is of interest to many audiences.

A detailed schedule can be [accessed online](#). The conference [is archived at Creative Time Reports](#).

[Radical Archives](#) continues today at NYU’s Cantor Film Center (36 E. 8th Street, Greenwich Village, Manhattan) through 8pm.

[Chitra Ganesh](#)[Gregory Sholette](#)[Index of the Disappeared](#)[Lara Baladi](#)[Lucy Lippard](#)[Mariam Ghani](#)[Radical Archives](#)