

'Hauntings in the Archive': London Feminist Film Festival 2017

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In this two-part blog, we have three viewpoints on the recent London Feminist Film Festival. For the WFTHN network, [Selina Robertson](#) and [Ania Ostrowska](#) and, separately, [Elaine Burrows](#) share their impressions of a session which raised key questions about politics in the feminist archive.

This week, Ania and Elaine respond to the European premiere of *Hauntings in the Archive!* (2017). Next week, we will feature an exclusive, extended extract from Selina's presentation on the Rio Cinema archive specialising in queer and feminist films. Finally, our writers will reflect on the concluding discussion, which featured crucial questions of archives and intersectionality.



— Performing 'Hauntings in the Archive!' (Spukem im Archiv!) (2017) © SKGAL

Ania Ostrowska writes:

This August, the [London Feminist Film Festival](#) returned for the sixth time with great success and sold out screenings, including that of Iranian director Marva Nabili's 1977 feature *The Sealed Soil*, which took place at BFI Southbank's largest screening room NFT 1. All other events happened at the East London's beloved independent, the Rio Cinema. On Saturday 19 August 2017, in the early afternoon, we participated in the session 'Feminism and the Archive': Selina presented her doctoral research on stage (details next week) whilst Ania engaged less stressfully from the audience. The event showcased the European premiere of a feature-length Austrian documentary *Hauntings in the Archive!* (2017) and a panel discussion with Julia Wieger (the film's co-director), Althea Greenan (curator of [Women's Art Library](#) held at Goldsmiths University, London) and Samia Malik (of [Women of Colour Index](#) reading group which explores Women's Art Library catalogue to make visible the work of Women of Colour artists). Following from the detailed focus on three feminist archives from the UK and Austria, the closing discussion included audience members and asked broader questions around feminist archives and feminist approaches to an archive.^[1]

Hauntings in the Archive!

Hauntings in the Archive!, co-directed by Julia Wieger and Nina Hoehchl, dives into the rich Vienna-based archive of VBKÖ, the Austrian Association of Women Artists. Wieger and Hoehchl, both the association's members, established the internal Secretariat for Ghosts, Archive Politics and Gaps ([SKGAL](#)) to revisit the organisation's history and conjure up the spectres of the past that some of their contemporaries would, even now, rather see left in peace.

VBKÖ was established in 1910 and it became obvious for us in the audience that, after its rather progressive early history of collaborating with Austrian women's rights movement of the time, the 1930s saw it reflect the spectre of National Socialism. The filmmakers discussed in the Q&A a disturbing resistance to a wider acknowledgment of this history. Equally disturbing to them was a cultural appropriation of Native American culture in the 1960s and 1970s through VBKÖ-exhibited, romanticised portraits of Native Americans, painted by its members. It was an artistic style which the film's directors situated in the broader context, relating Nazi cultural fascination with 'tribal ancestors' to the interest in both North America and India.



— Recovering complicated his/her-story: 'Hauntings in the Archive!' (2017) © SKGAL

The project has strong theoretical underpinnings, made manifest in the film by voiceover recorded in three languages (we watched the English version). Foucault and Derrida are referenced, the latter via *Specters of Marx* (1993) rather than *Archive Fever*. Ann Cvetkovich is never mentioned by name but her work on trauma and affect in the archive from *An Archive of Feelings* (2003) resonates here as well. After conventional documentary opening shots, detailing the types of items held in the archive and acid-free folders, the documentary comes into its own as a powerful two-hander, with the two director-authors often present in the frame, self-reflexively performing their investigation/exorcism. The film brought to life key questions of time and history in its presentation of archival material on screen, with sequences showing old photos and documents being laid out on the table by a pair of hands with brightly painted nails sometimes disturbed by another, 'aggressively' black leather-gloved pair of hands.

Archival material is thus made contemporary and shown to be important now to the current young generation of Austrian feminist artists.

Elaine Burrows writes:

Coincidentally, the London Feminist Film Festival screening of *Spuken in Archie!* (*Hauntings in the Archive!*) took place in the middle of the furore surrounding the pulling down of statues of figures of the American Civil War. An interesting question: what do you do with a past that you or anyone else finds unsavoury? It is your history, after all; it is also part of your country's history. At the very least, denying that that past exists is to falsify that history.

Hauntings in the Archive! is an attempt to pose the question, without necessarily expecting to formulate definitive answers. As its programme note says, it:

“reflects on and exposes the his/herstory/ies of the Austrian Association of Women Artists ([Vereinigung bildender Künstlerinnen Österreichs] VBKÖ) through its century-old archive of letters, photos, catalogues and thousands of other documents. The Secretariat for Ghosts, Archive Politics and Gaps [Sekretariat für Geister, Archivpolitiken und Lucken, SKGAL] curates the material to conjure up the spectres of the multiple lives of the VBKÖ that meet and share the scene in the film: ghosts of national socialism encounter colonial fantasies and old and new feminist agencies.”

The VBKÖ website explains that, in 2013:

“The new Secretariat shall enable a critical analysis and examination of the association’s history. In particular, the role of the VBKOE during the course of Austrofaschism and Nationalsozialism will be discussed, alongside the association’s class-specific and colonial entanglements.

“The Secretariat establishes connections between projects, investigations and discussions by different authors and in various formats setting up a continual, multi-perspective and collective historical work. The structures and methods of the Secretariat will enable the continual analysis of historical narratives anew and create a space in which historical works can be learnt and unlearnt. Thereby, feminist and decolonizing perspectives will be integrated and debates will be made public.”

The VBKÖ was established in 1910 by a group of mainly middle-class women artists to support women and their art by lobbying for “improvements in artistic, economic and educational conditions, and to increase their representation, organising international collaborations”, and by providing exhibition spaces. Several of its members became, to say the least, sympathetic to National Socialist policies. Those who were Jewish were forced out.

The film shows documents and images from the VBKÖ archive, as well looking at a group of women on a tour of the premises, of rooms in the archive, and projections of a photograph of the (almost all as yet unidentified) members in the 1930s. The documents – laid out individually, one on top of the other – consist of Minute books, letters, application forms, reproductions of paintings by members, and so on. Commentary is occasionally direct to camera, but often consists of voice-over whispered questions about how to deal with the history represented. Elsewhere, the soundtrack consists largely of quotations, many from women – Julie M Johnson’s book *The Memory Factory* (2012) looms large, but includes Derrida and Foucault’s musings on the nature of archives. A question remained for me about when the decision to look archive critically was

made, and when someone began to seriously examine what its contents represents, to explore those questions of the country's past.

The trailer is available [here](#) and further information about the project can be found at <http://www.ninahoechtl.org/works/hauntings-in-the-archive/>

Ania Ostrowska is a PhD candidate at the University of Southampton (UK), researching authorial agency of contemporary British women documentarians as part of AHRC-funded project Calling the Shots: Women and Contemporary UK Film Culture. Since 2011 she has been a film editor of popular British feminist blog: The F-Word.

<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/cswf>

<https://www.thefword.org.uk/>

Elaine Burrows worked for many years at what is now the BFI National Archive. She has been a member of WFTHN since it was founded, and is also a longstanding member of the boards of both Cinenova and the British Entertainment History Project.

<http://www.cinenova.org/>

<https://historyproject.org.uk/>

[i] Please see our 2015 blog entry on Feminist Archives, Feminist Futures at Leeds University|:

<https://womensfilmandtelevisionhistory.wordpress.com/2015/10/11/feminist-archives-feminist-futures/>

Image Credit: Nina Hoechtl and Julia Wieger / Secretariat for Ghosts, Archival Politics and Gaps, *SPUKEN IM ARCHIV!* (Hauntings in the Archive!), 2017, film still. Camera: Liesa Kovacs, Nick Prokesch

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