Tropical Fantasia:

Towards a New Archivo-Museological Imaginary

Ana Helena Arévalo

We have observed ubiquitously, although not yet exhaustively, academics and practitioners alike catching archive fevers and chasing archival impulses down rabbit holes. We have borne witness to historiographical and archaeological turns in art and art history, in the chasing and longing for irretrievable pasts. We have found refuge in these *milieux de mémoire*. For what are archives but time-traveling machines; portals between *unfinished pasts* and *reopened futures*? What are archives but the mirrors of civilization, perpetually reflecting us as we are?[1]

Cloistered away within Arctic mountains sits the Svalbard Global Seed Vault (fig. 1). The Judd-esque structure, also known as a *doomsday vault*, houses the globe's largest seed archive, one that is perpetually protected and isolated from the threats and dangers of the outside world. It includes backups of seed samples extracted from crop collections all around the world, which endeavor "to stand the test of time and the challenge of natural and man-made disasters."[2] It was conceived as an apparatus of survival against the promise of ominous futures of deserts, deforestation, and desolation, very much feeding into humanity's cultic celebration of permanence and its fetish of continuation.

Fig. 1. Entrance to the Svalbard Global Seed Vault. Image credit: Heiko Junge/NTB scanpix/Zuma.

As we now transcend into the Pyrocene—with forests, museums, and cathedrals blazing into flames—we must consider the prevailing crises of fire as intellectual discourse, academic discipline, and critical practice. Fire has not only become inherent of the condition of contemporary culture, but it will also ultimately dictate the ways we are to continue in time. This understanding of the future does not come in regards to obscure or implausible states, but rather facing very tangible, very real forms determined by fire.

For centuries the existence of collections (that is, of museums, libraries, and archives, and any of their archaic forms as repositories of culture and knowledge) has in part been mediated by the many bonfires of history, which therefore have shaped our understanding of culture and civilization. No matter how systemically different the flames may be—being that of a Gothic cathedral in a European capital or a modest scientific institution in the Global South—the consequences of such forces inevitably culminate in the disruption of already-existing histories and historicities.

The paradoxical energy of fire—and its cyclical process of construction-dissolution—is fundamentally ingrained in the way these collections are to continue in time. So much of what it is known today about long-lost repositories is, essentially, all the tangible and intangible material culture, knowledge, and collective memory that has been gathered and systematically (re)organized *after* the destruction of these collections. All of which have been reconstructed from fragments, remnants, and dust.[3]

Hal Foster briefly stated that, similarly to the famous incident of the fire at Library of Alexandria, "any archive is founded on disaster (or its threat), pledged against a ruin that it cannot forestall."[4] Perhaps this self-contradictory energy of fire, as *both* tool and weapon, can be utilized as catalyst for the reconsideration of the current condition of archivo-museological practices as a whole. Collecting and archiving have become interchangeable activities, especially in terms of *reconstruction*, as it is equally about the material unearthed and gathered, and the ways this material can be displayed, as it is about the formulation of new forms of knowledge that root out from the process of archiving. That is to say that the reconstruction of future collections does not come as a quixotic attempt, but rather as an almost expected and anticipated instance of critical impetus.

The Seed Vault offers prospects of rebirth and regrowth after episodes of mass decay (fig. 2). How does this translate, then, to current (material and immaterial) forms of culture, heritage, and knowledge, and consequently, to the collections that encompass them, the spaces that store them, and the systems that define them? How can we (somewhat) pre-package and safeguard the *backups* of today so they are available and accessible to the archivists of tomorrow? What are the limits and the possibilities for an *archive of archives* to come about, and how could it inform and facilitate the reconstruction of future collections and collections in the future?

Fig. 2. The Svalbard Global Seed Vault's main storage room, which can house 2.25 billion seeds. Image credit: National Geographic Creative/Alamy.

With the conflagration at the Museu Nacional as foundational premise, this article considers the ways in which material and digital archival methodologies (along with anarchival practices) are intrinsically embedded within the process of reconstruction of a collection. It does so not only by acknowledging the process of reconstruction in its literal understanding as building something once again after it has been damaged or destroyed, highlighting the role of archives as *tools* of reconstruction, but also by placing archivo-museology at the crossroads between the real and the imaginary, the Total and the fragmented, which allows for alternative forms to emerge as *living archives*.

As with any article, it should not be considered as a definitive or complete whole, but rather as a starting point that attempts to catalyze critical interchange and encourage further action.

Museu Nacional

On the evening of September 2, 2018, an unforgiving inferno erupted, consuming almost in its totality a collection surpassing 20 million cultural artifacts, rarities, and relics, along with over 630,000 volumes from its library (fig. 3).[5]The Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, a 200-year-old building and once a magnificent imperial palace, housed one of the most comprehensive scientific and ethnographic collections in Latin America. It displayed objects of universal relevance, such as Luzia, the oldest human skull in the Americas, and Bendegó, formerly considered the largest meteorite on Earth. Among the material artifacts lost in the fire were Egyptian and Greco-Roman treasures, dinosaur skeletons, mummies and human remains, and several study collections of brightly colored butterflies, rare insects, and assorted fossils, as well as furniture and works of art belonging to the former Portuguese royal family.

Fig. 3. The fire at the Museu Nacional, September 2, 2018. Image credit: Fabio Teixeira/Picture Alliance Via Getty Images.

The fire at the Museu Nacional was attributed to the state of disrepair into which the building had fallen, and ultimately pinpointed to a fault in the A/C system. When the fire brigade arrived on site, they quickly realized that the fire extinguishers were not up to date due to previous budget cuts, and that the water tanks closer to the Museu Nacional had been previously emptied. The brigade, along with the museum's personnel and civilian volunteers, were able to salvage a small part of the collection. The museum soon had to be fully evacuated, and as the fire burned throughout the night, feelings of rage and impotence were fueled when individuals quickly fathomed that nothing could be done other than to wait.

This was a direct consequence of over twenty-five years of negligence and the lack of support—financial and institutional—from past (and current) administrations in the Brazilian government. Catastrophes as such raise myriad questions regarding the role and responsibility of local, regional, and national institutions in the protection, conservation, preservation, and now *digitization* of their own collections and archives. Nevertheless, it concurrently opens up larger inquiries regarding the position of external entities in these processes, whether international organizations such as UNESCO and ICOM, or foreign governments and cultural institutions, especially in the context of collections held in the Global South, which often face more precarious conditions than that of collections in the Global North.

The idea of fire (and the destruction of cultural heritage by fire) can quickly lead to realms of nostalgia, romanticism, and unproductive pondering, mediated by the *what-ifs.* Focusing on the past, and on what could and/or should have been done, will not change the very real fact that a museum burned down, and with it, hundreds of years of culture, heritage, and knowledge. Rather than turning the now-charcoaled site into ruins *plus beau que la beauté*, we should look at it as a potential productive opportunity for the critical reconsideration of the museum, the library, and/or the archive as apparatus of survival and continuation.

It is for this reason, then, that this article does not elaborate on specific details about the events that led to the fire, or the events that have unhinged consequently, at administrative and governmental levels, in terms of prevention, responsibility, and accountability. The current efforts for the reconstruction of the Museu Nacional touch upon multiple (equally relevant) domains, ranging from the sociopolitical and the economic, to the cultural and the institutional. The article rather focuses on the idea of *reconstruction* as a general whole, at archivo-museological levels, primordially.

The permanent and irreversible damage of the fire extends far beyond simply the destruction of tangible artifacts and the physical infrastructure that encompassed them. The Museu Nacional accommodated an archive comprised of records, documents, and material knowledge, not only about objects in its collection, but also about Amazonian tribes and ecosystems that have now ceased to exist. A great part of the material gathered in the museum was destroyed, including research and writing about these cultures, traditions, and magic-religious systems, along with audio recordings of extinct languages and chants. The fire obliterated material evidence that attested to their existence, and what remains are merely memories in the collective mind. The conflagration at the Museu Nacional represents a monumental loss of Brazilian history and heritage, by all means equally as much as of universal culture and the history of mankind.

Current attempts to reconstruct the Museu Nacional have been carried in their most literal denotation: in the repair of a burned building, the retrieval of surviving fragments from the debris, and the restoration of damaged artifacts.[6] The museum-now-turned-archaeological-site does not exist as burial ground, but rather as a treasure mine of elements that once again beg to be *rediscovered*. However, said process of reconstruction extends far beyond the walls of the museum in the physical world, all the way to their virtual

counterparts in the online realm (fig. 4).

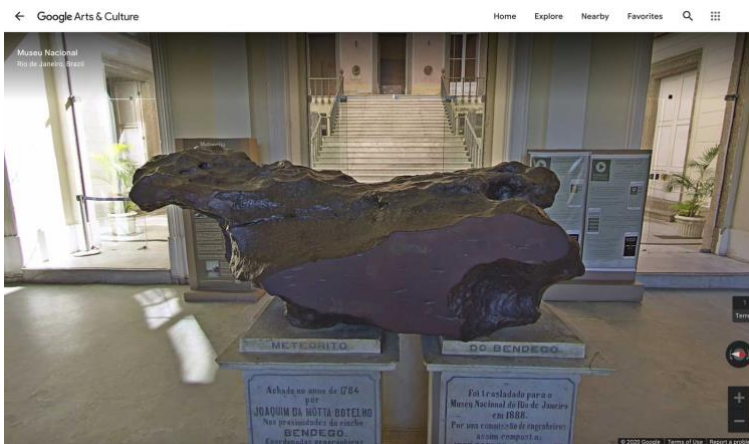*Fig. 4a. Bendegó before the fire. Image credit: Google Arts and Culture.*

Fig. 4b. Bendegó as seen on Google Arts and Culture. Image credit: Google Arts and Culture.

Fig. 4c. Bendegó after the fire. Image credit: Leo Correa/Ap/Rex/Shutterstock.

Prior to the fire, Google Arts and Culture had digitized 164 artifacts that were considered the highlights of the collection, and also produced 360⁰ shots and short video presentations of its must-see rooms. In a similar effort, Wikipedia launched an initiative to collect and archive photographs and films of the Museu Nacional as recorded by its visitors. This new content, along with the material that the online platform had enclosed already—including PDFs of seventy books from its library and high-res images of single documents from its archive—has since been encompassed in a WikiCommons page dedicated to the Museu Nacional. This ultimately means that less than 1% of the collection at the Museu Nacional survived in the virtual realms as digital surrogates.[7]

The process of reconstruction of the museum has brought a radical change in the nature of these digital repositories, having emancipated from their prior position as *accessories* (passive supplements), and adopting a new role as *resources* (active tools). The acts of *digging* and *unearthing* have now transcended into the virtual world, with (media) archaeologists and non-specialized audiences alike searching for digital fragments that could facilitate the reconstruction the museum again as a whole. These spaces stand *in memoriam* the collection that burned down, while simultaneously operating as support structures of the collection that will rise from its ashes.

Said change has consequently opened a larger inquiry into the readaptation and reformulation of the Museu Nacional, as its future forms and collections will inevitably blur all existing temporal and spatial delineations. Such reorganization will occur at all levels of governance, in the comprehensive reconsideration of its systematic, taxonomical, curatorial, museological, and archival orders. This merely reinforces the position (and potential) of archives and archival practices in terms of the preservation, conservation, and mediation of histories, narratives, and memories.

But what are the implications of a reconstruction as such in terms of remembrance and oblivion, and of resistance and contestation? What are we choosing (or what is being chosen for us) to forget? What does it mean to have such a vast part of cultural heritage and collective memory be

technology-mediated? What are we failing to acknowledge by omitting the fire as part of the history, historicity, and historiography of the collection?[8] That is not to say that the ongoing efforts are not valuable or necessary—any form of reconstruction is better than no reconstruction at all, that is certain. However, the scorched building, the burned artifacts, the charcoaled pedestals and showcases all very much amount not only to what the collection is, but what it will continue on to be.

We find ourselves amid the fragments, the residual, the gaps, the lacunae, the incongruities, and the discontinuities, in critical opposition to the discourse of history, which venerates the indivisible and the complete. As described by Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, collections cannot (and should not) be described in their totality, but rather emerging "in the fragments, regions, and levels."[9] And so the reconstruction of the Museu Nacional should not necessarily conclude (or aim towards) the (re)creation of perfect facsimiles and hyperreal translations. It should rather focus on the amalgamation of fragments, in the minutiae, in what otherwise would be discarded, and thus, consigned to an accelerated oblivion. It should (re)emerge in the form of a *living archive*.[10]

Unearthing the Museum

"For what cannot be recovered can at least be remembered—or, more ambitiously as well as more ambiguously, reconstructed, reenacted, *repeated*."[11] Reconstruction comes in terms of remembrance and recollection; the act of remembering involves unearthing and burying, digging and displaying, and storing and retrieving, simultaneously. The retrieval of collective memory, as well as its simulation, manifests itself then through archival practices and the practices of the archive.

Archives exist as the most comprehensive form of repositories. Borrowing Julia Moritz's concise definition of the archive, it is understood as "a systematic accumulation of records, documents, or other materials [that] figures as a meta-institution, an institution of institutions."[12] There are independent institutions that are foundationally conceived as archives (whether administrative or governmental, public or private), and there are other institutions that either contain archives within themselves or structures that potentially follow similar archival functions and methodologies, such as museums and libraries, which can be understood as *forms* of cultural archives.[13] They construct a specific account of history, which derives directly from the traditional understanding of archives as *houses of memory*— mnemonic devices—and as such, as "the externalization of a historical consciousness."[14]

The paradoxical nature of the archive lies in its fundamental promise (and curse), which ensures that the fragment that traverses the walls of the archive—whether its physical, digital, or institutional walls—is bound to exist in perpetuity, fossilized in time, as part of a cohesive, systematic structure.

It is often conceived as an ideal totality, when in reality it is the sum of infinitesimal fragments, all of which obey the rules and logic of entropy, decay, and time.

From this meta-institutional perspective, the museum-as-cultural-archive (or as an archive of culture) comes at two main levels; that is, in terms of *chrono-politics* and the production of lineage, and *mnemo-synthesis* and the production of memory.[15] Consequently, it plays a pivotal role in the process of formulation of collective identity and heritage of cultures and communities, by portraying and embodying the shape of memory distilled in time. Archival practices have not only set forth the conditions in which we retrieve and *reprise* the past,[16] but have also very much defined the ways we are to acknowledge and assimilate the present:

Without an archive and its codifications, one is left with traces and remnants that nowadays archaeologists try to decipher in the light of the archival procedures, which were established later. Just as our archives rewrite pre-archival history, the forthcoming archives will rewrite our present, even if it is most likely not to be in a form we would comprehend, but within the frame of their future network architectures.[17]

This could then be extended apropos of the ways rethinking archival practices today might shape future modes of retrieval. The forthcoming conditions of the destruction of archives and the degeneration of archival and archivological practices could be envisaged almost in terms of an archival *ruin value* of sorts, by considering not solely the circumstances of archives in the future as they continue in time, but also their forms and practices when they ultimately do not do so.

But these are no Delphic futures that demand to be venerated with messianic devotion. They are very palpable, very real, very of the moment. Futures that, however crystallized, can still very much be grasped and shaped today. Hito Steyerl quite effectively illustrates this future, borrowing from the French term of *future perfect* utilized "to describe an event that will have happened in the future."[18] Visualizing a scenario in the year 2666, Steyerl suggests that we consider the future in terms of *layers* of history, and that we begin thinking *today* about the ways we want to design these layers:

We also need to plan for a surgical cut through all the layers that accumulate until 2666. What will this cut look like? What will it reveal? If it is to be interesting, we better design it properly now. If it is going to be as stunning as, say, a dinosaur claw emerging form the dust of prehistoric oblivion, we have to strategically embed it for further excavation now. We have to plan our future perfect as an amazing archaeological site, revealing surprising finds at every moment.[19]

By acknowledging these future layers of history in conjunction with the layers of the archive, we are offered a plethora of opportunities and possibilities for the design not only of its future layers, but also of its future readings. If *reading the archive* stems from the principle that "archives rarely speak for themselves, but always have to be read in

their context," *living the archive* then would fundamentally mean that archives would have to be *lived* in their context.[20] This simply underlines the fact that, by considering future archives today, we are able to determine the ways they will be read and lived, as well as how they will potentially inform future archival (and anarchival) taxonomies, topologies, and imaginaries.

The prospective for the design of future layers, and concurrently, the design of future archives, has only monumentally increased with the advent of digital technologies. Digital archival practices have facilitated alternative modes of preservation and conservation through digitization; the organization of this *new* material in digital archives and online databases has inevitably culminated in *new* quantities and qualities of memory, and in the formulation of *new* systems of knowledge production and forms of knowledge.

The emergence of these digital archival practices has fostered collaborative attitudes and constituted unprecedented interactions, which have simultaneously stimulated a whole novel array of alternative archaeological, curatorial, and museological practices. They have bridged distances—spatial, temporal, and logistical—and have allowed for the birth of taxonomical fluidities that had previously been rendered impossible. But where we have seen artists, historians, theorists, archaeologists, curators, and collectors exhaustively catching *le mal d'archive* down endless archival rabbit holes, we have not yet encountered the same momentum and motivations when it comes to archival explorations in digital spheres—let alone the consideration or reimagination of its future forms.[21] That is not to belittle, in any way, early expeditions that, however rudimentary, are still fairly comprehensive, but rather to shed light on the fact that digital archives and online databases still remain as *terrae incognitae* that demand to be discovered and conquered.

The immensity of digital realms, and of the possibilities they provide in terms of time and speed, memory and storage, and accessibility and availability, can give a false sense infinity and continuity. Even if they will not necessarily be consumed in the flames of raging fires, digital artifacts, archives, and practices are not exempt from falling victim to the logic of entropy, decay, and time. The continuous threat of digital degradation is inherently embedded in the nature of the material, both in terms of hardware and software alike, which require the constant maintenance and active improvement of the platforms that contain them:

The Internet suggests permanence by using terms such as "autoarchiving," but this is an illusion. The material needs to be actively captured and preserved. Archives that survive must inevitably be kept in some kind of houses of memory, whether real or virtual. The act of remembering involves both storing and retrieving: it is not a passive process, especially in the digital age.[22]

The degeneration of these digital monuments and documents, which concludes in their digital obsolescence, derives from the meteoric pace at which technologies grow, and contrasts dramatically to the decay of their material counterparts, as physical monuments and documents have

stood in place for centuries, and have superseded countless cycles of construction-dissolution. *All* matter—material and digital alike—is bound to disappear, and so their existence plays on the delay (or prolongation) of these processes of containment and dispersal while living (in) archives.

The archive has been considered both object of desire and subject of contestation. It has continuously been scrutinized, dissected, and juiced to its core, in order to push and stretch out its limits and possibilities. Archives have been analyzed in a myriad of different ways: in relation to questions of history, historicity, authenticity, and truth, based on its position as documentary and monumental apparatus, apropos authoritative power manifested in anti-archival turns, focused on its organizational and logical limits and contingency, confronting time-based archival structures and temporalities, and following anarchival (and anarchaeological) impulses; always responding to archival laws and prescriptive restrictions.[23] And when these impediments once existed as barricades manifested in all forms of confinement—logical, systematic, infrastructural, institutional, or cultural, that is—these boundaries now come as productive opportunities for the critical assessment of the archive and the (re)expansion of archivo-museological fields and practices.

The archive has thus become vessel and generative apparatus, all at once; a means of culture and knowledge production. This has consequently diverged the understanding of the archive as a *monolithic whole* to its now ruling form as *constellationary system*—becoming both the cathedral and the bazaar. The nature of the archive is not fixed, but rather continuously in flux, and it stands at the intersection between the documentary and the monumental, the found and the constructed, the factual and the fictive, and the public and the private.[24] It is in the fantastic and its impossibilities that the potential of the archive is stretched out, as the imaginary does not come in opposition to reality, but rather vis-à-vis the very real, in a place far beyond its walls.

Museu Imaginário

Circling back to the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, it was originally envisioned as a means to address and resolve the governing fragility and vulnerability of the world's gene banks. It exists as a backup storage facility of sorts— a *backup of backups* (fig. 5). It mimics similar principles to that of a bank's safe deposit box, where each country or institution holds total ownership and control over the seeds they have deposited, which can only be accessed and withdrawn by the depositors themselves. The seeds are stored and sealed in custom-made, three-ply foil packages, which are concurrently secured inside bespoke boxes and organized on shelves inside a vault kept at a set temperature of -18ºC at all times. The Seed Vault's remote location further reinforces its inaccessibility, both temporally and spatially, as the vault rooms are situated 100 meters into the mountain, entirely surrounded by permafrost. Its fail-safe methods guarantee the continuous preservation and

conservation of the seeds even if (and after) all systems fail.[25] That is to say that the archive itself is designed so as *not* to be accessed, ensuring that when the seeds enter the archive, they remain intact until *after* episodes of mass destruction, once they are needed again.

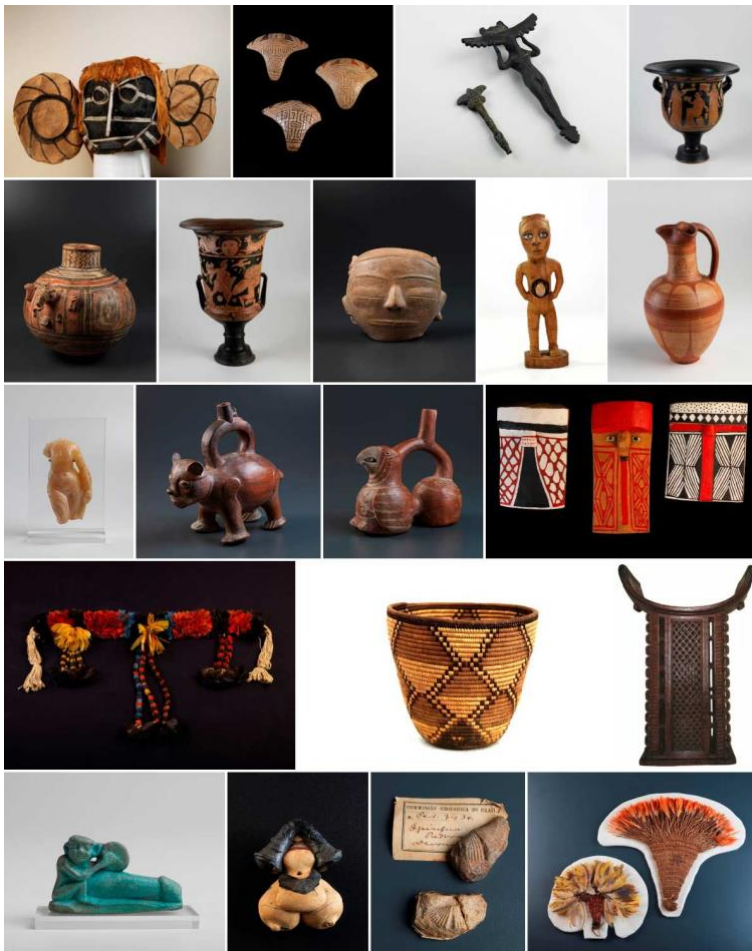*Fig. 5a. Backup of Backups. Image credit: Anna Filipova/Reuters/ Newscom.*

Fig. 5b. Backup of Backups. Image credit: Google Arts and Culture.

The *archive of archives*—the archive that exhaustively contains *all* the material needed to reconstruct *all* archives after they are destroyed—would then follow similar steps; understanding that once something enters the walls of such an archive, it is to be kept in a fixed, static, unalterable form. This would ultimately mean that what is preserved and conserved is merely *one* out of infinite versions of the archive. Apropos the preservation of artworks and artifacts in a museum, Christian Boltanski stated:

Preventing forgetfulness, stopping the disappearance of things and beings seemed to me a noble goal, but I quickly realized that this ambition was bound to fail, for as soon as we try to preserve something, we fix it. We can preserve things only by stopping life's course. If I put my glasses in a vitrine, they will never break, but will they still be considered glasses? […] Once glasses are part of a museum's collection, they forget their function; they are then only an image of glasses. In a vitrine, my glasses will have lost their reason for being, but they will also have lost their identity.[26]

Both the physical and virtual worlds have unavoidably set forth forms of (unproductive) *containment*, whether material, temporal, spatial, conceptual, or institutional. We are often bound to the confinements of the fixed, indivisible, and complete. But archives are no longer repositories of *dead things*, for the grave has become the engine.[27] And so the archive of archives would proclaim the early and unjust death of the collections it encompasses, by distilling and freezing them in time and space.

Even the promise of survival and continuation offered in the place within its walls does not liberate the archive from yielding to the demands of change; whether positive forms of change in terms of growth and expansion, or negative forms, facing decay and degradation. Archives, with their fevers, allures, and impulses, have become living organisms, shifting and fluctuating in perpetuity. The living archive, that is, the archive that is very much alive, replicates the *binding*and *boundless* possibilities of the Borgesian library.[28] It is a vessel that is continuously being filled, extended, and reshaped. And even if some elements of the archive are bound to disappear—and they will irrevocably do so—they will still exist as gaps, lacunae, and voids, always within the periphery of the archive that contains them.

How do we then contain an archive that cannot (and maybe even, should not) be contained? How do we protect, preserve, and conserve that which begs not to be protected, preserved, and conserved in the first place? Terrestrial impermanence should not be understood as a threat, but rather as a pledge of survival. Equally, the promise of continuation should not come in terms of the absolute preservation and the timeless conservation of the material and the immaterial, as repositories of culture and knowledge are not exempt from the traces of fire(s). It is in this obedience to the logic of entropy, decay, and time, which is inherently embedded in the livelihood of all things, that material fragmentation and digital degradation become part of the matter and space themselves, and thus part of its histories, topographies, and archaeologies.

When we once were confronted with the physical and material limitations of archives in the earthly realm, we have found their prolongation with the genesis of digital archives and online databases, as these virtual spaces have allowed for the emancipation of the *archive without walls* from the singular and one-directional into the regenerative, rhizomatic, and open-ended.[29] Material and digital archival practices, however disparate, manage to find one another in a productive juncture in the realm of the imaginary; it is in this moment of collision that we are able to (re)imagine the limits, possibilities, and layers of the archive—past, present, and future.

The future of *all* collections is contingent upon the hands of every single individual who has and will wander the earth—*pearl divers* who will plant seeds and unearth fragments deemed long-lost in all layers of the future, perfect and imperfect alike.[30] Let us then (re)imagine what the reconstruction of the Museu Nacional as a living archive would have been:

The reconstruction of the Museu Nacional would have included all forms of the building, that is, the one in its previous state of disrepair, the one that was consumed in flames, and the one that will be rebuilt from the ruins. It would have housed a collection of artifacts that survived in their physical forms, along with the ones that were preserved online as digital surrogates. This collection would have also incorporated all the fossils and remnants that would have been found on the museum-turned-archaeological-site, the ones scattered through all corners of the virtual realm, and the ones that will continue to emerge in time. It would have preserved the ruins, dust, and residue. The reconstruction of the Museu Nacional would have instituted a generative, ever-expanding archive. One that would have included the material found in the archives at the Museu Nacional and the Federal University of Rio De Janeiro, and in Google Arts and Culture, Wikipedia, and WikiCommons. This new archive would have also integrated all the ad hoc archives that emerged subsequently.[31] The reconstruction of the Museu Nacional would have assimilated all documents, records, evidence, and testimonies generated prior to the fire, and all the ones that consequently were produced after.[32] It would have embraced all artistic and cultural manifestations, renderings, and reinterpretations that materialized as mnemonic apparatuses of resistance.[33] The reconstruction of the Museu Nacional would have not attempted to bridge gaps, complete lacunae, or fill any voids; it would have existed and continued in the comprehensive amalgamation of fragments. It would have designed the layers of the museum in the future, in all of its infinite forms. For things exist as long as they are remembered, and the Museu Nacional shall go on in this crystallized form, forever as tropical fantasia.

APPENDIX

In the context of this article, the concept of *tropical fantasia* is understood as frame of reference rather than as subject matter or line of inquiry; thus, the exclusion of any in-

depth assessment of this concept throughout the article is a deliberate intention. Notwithstanding, this almost "intangible" idea stems from very real, very tangible circumstances, and so I believe that it would be crucial to contextualize the conditions to which the concept adheres.

The notion of *tropical* is understood in terms of the Tropics, the Global South, the territories that fall under the balmy belt of the Equator—more often than not, territories that were (and still indirectly are) subdued by colonial and imperial power(s). Territories that were shaped and molded following Eurocentric ideals, canons, and conventions, which extend to the fields of cultural institutions and repositories of knowledge, and concurrently, to their established archaeologies, taxonomies, and topographies. The notion of tropical*,* then, comes in direct opposition to these imperatives, reacting against underlying colonialist taxonomical and institutional systems of order. Tropical also alludes to *tropicália,* paying homage to a movement and discourse of critical resistance and sociopolitical struggle that, equally as much as the Museu Nacional, is quintessentially Brazilian.

The idea of *fantasia* is directly derived from Michel Foucault's understanding of the imaginary, not necessarily formed in opposition to reality (or the "real") as its denial or compensation, as elaborated in his "Fantasia of the Library":

The fantastic is no longer a property of the heart, nor is it found among the incongruities of nature; it evolves from the accuracy of knowledge, and its treasures lie dormant in documents. Dreams are no longer summoned with closed eyes, but in reading; and a true image is now product of learning: it derives from words spoken in the past, exact recensions, the amassing of minute facts, moments reduced to infinitesimal fragments, and reproductions of reproductions. In the modern experience, these elements contain the power of the impossible.[34]

The idea of fantasia revisited, understood as a visionary experience mediated by infinitesimal fragments of tangible and virtual matter, and the images of images of the past now lost in the present, which dictate the (re)imagination of the future. The fantastic—or the imaginary—not in opposition to historiographical realities, but as achronological signs growing from the sum of fragments, remnants, and dust, lost in the intervals, the gaps, the deserts, and the lacunae, and found in these incongruities; in these instances of infinite possibilities.

Tropical fantasia comes as a potential productive opportunity for reformation, reorganization, liberation, and critical emancipation.

Biography

Ana Helena Arévalo is a Venezuelan art historian and design researcher currently living and working in London. Her research/practice often meets at the intersection(s)

between archivo-museology and the curatorial, cultural criticism and speculative fiction, and editorial design and critical publishing.

In 2017 she completed a BFA in Art History, Theory, and Criticism at the Paris College of Art, and in 2019 she obtained her MA in Graphic Communication Design from Central Saint Martins, London. Her work has been published in a series of cultural journals and publications, most recently including contributions for Utca & Karrier, UQ Unknown Quantities, and CARMA Journal.

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[1] The introductory paragraph is my own, and was written specifically for this article.

[2] CropTrust, "Svalbard Global Seed Vault," (n.d.), accessed August 21, 2019, https://www.croptrust.org/our-work/svalbard-global-seed-vault.

[3] In the context of this article, "fragments" (and "fragmentation") alludes to Walter Benjamin's *Excavation and Memory* and *Arcades Project,* "remnants" to Michel Foucault's *Archaeology of Knowledge,* and "dust" to Carolyn Kay Steedman's *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*.

[4] Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *OCTOBER* 110 (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004): 5.

[5] For an in-depth analysis for the fire at the Museu Nacional, see Ana Helena Arévalo, "Deserts, Voids, and Disrepair," *CARMA Journal* ARMA (2019): 48–55.

[6] When scavenging the Museu Nacional's site a few days after the fire, Bendegó was found intact and fragments of Luzia were recovered. Soon after, a rescue team was rapidly assembled, conformed of diverse museum professionals and specialized practitioners, and led by deputy project coordinator Claudia Carvalho. A considerable number of artifacts and relics have been found since, and some collections have even been reassembled, including the museum's Egyptian collection, which has been retrieved almost in its entirety. The museum has already held two pop-up exhibitions with a selection of salvaged material at the CCBB (Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil) and the MAST (Museu de Astronomia e Ciências Afins). It has secured various loans, financial but also of artifacts that will form part of the museum's new permanent collection. It has also presented a series of lectures and panel discussions about the future of the museum and its collection to both national and international audiences and participants; most recently, *Rescue of Collections: Challenges and Achievements* in May 2020, held on the Museu Nacional's Instagram page as part of their *Museu Nacional LIVE* series.

[7] The notion of *digital surrogate* in the context of digital art and culture extends to all the digital copies, reproductions, replicas, renderings, and models of material objects (which are understood as physical representations of culture and

knowledge) that belong to the physical world as part of a cultural institution's collection, library, and/or archive. These digital surrogates often exist within virtual realms in online archives and databases, which are also dependent of, or connected to established institutions or organizations, and that are, for the most part, open and available to the public.

[8] There is an additional question, however, that unavoidably lingers in the air: what are the sociopolitical, economic, cultural, and even ethical implications of institutions from the North mediating the history, narrative, memory, and understanding of an institution of the Global South? It is of course impossible to overlook the connotations. The theme of the fire of the Museu Nacional can be dissected and examined through numerous lenses, especially vis-à-vis postcolonial and/or neoliberal discourses, but as clarified above, this article deliberately focuses on the idea of *reconstruction* solely in terms of archivo-museology.

[9] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 143.

[10] In the context of this article, the notion of *living archives* has been extracted from two different perspectives and meets at their intersection: *living archives* implying that archives are "open, collaborative, and creative," from Annet Dekker, ed., "What it Means to be Lost and Living (in) Archives," in *Lost and Living (in) Archives* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2017), 17. But also, *living archives* in the Broodthaerian sense, as living organisms that are continuously evolving, whether expanding or contracting, but always in flux. See Marcel Broodthaers, "Interview with Jürgen Harten and Katharina Schmidt (1972)," in *The Archive* (London: Whitechapel Gallert, 2006), 82–84.

[11] Dieter Roelstrate, "Field Notes," in *The Way of the Shovel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 25.

[12] Julia Moritz, "Institution, Critique, Archive, Production," in *The Archive as a Productive Space of Conflict* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 525.

[13] Christa Becker and Beatrice von Bismarck, "Positioning Difference: The Museological Archive," in *The Archive as a Productive Space of Conflict*, eds. Yann Chateigné and Markus Miessen (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 57.

[14] Siegfried Zielinski, "AnArchaeology for AnArchives: Why Do We Need—Especially for the Arts—A Complementary Concept to the Archive," *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* (2015): 116, accessed August 28, 2019, doi: 10.1558/jca.v2i1.27134.

[15] Moritz, "Institution, Critique, Archive, Production," 525.

[16] Mathieu Copeland elaborates on this idea of *reprise* "as a means to envisage how past realities (thus to say the archive/leftovers of what once was) are to be revisited and appropriated in the presentation of an entire bootleg of an exhibition. What remains of an exhibition, once it has run its course, is crystallized in its catalogue, the materials it generated, and the memories of those who experienced it." Matthieu Copeland and Kenneth Goldsmith, "Archiving the Immaterial: A Digital Ecosystem," in *The Archive as a*

Productive Space of Conflict, eds. Yann Chateigné and Markus Miessen (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 200.

[17] Stefan Heidenreich, "Unknown Knowns and the Law of What Can Be Said," in *The Archive as a Productive Space of Conflict*, eds. Yann Chateigné and Markus Miessen (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 386.

[18] Hito Steyerl, "Future Perfect," in *The Way of the Shovel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 222.

[19] Ibid., 223.

[20] Luciana Duranti and Patricia C. Franks, eds., *Encyclopedia of Archival Science* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2015), 55.

[21] Physical archives have been thoroughly dissected beyond the limits and possibilities of their inherent roles. They have also been exhaustively utilized as subject/object of exploration, as framework or methodology, and/or as critical practice. There are a myriad of examples of individuals going "deep into the archives," whether historically, such as Aby Warburg and Andre Derain, or more contemporarily, as in Jean-Luc Moulène, Hanne Darboven, Gerhard Richter, or Hans Ulrich Obrist and Markus Miessen—all of whom have dealt with tangible materials in the physical world. We have not yet seen this same momentum when it comes to digital archives and databases, that is, of individuals going "deep into the *digital*archives." These virtual repositories offer equally (if not plenty more) opportunities for these explorations, and their potential is yet to be fully developed.

[22] Sue Breakell, "Perspectives: Negotiating the Archive," *Tate Papers* 9 (Spring 2008), accessed September 3, 2019,https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/09/perspectives-negotiating-the-archive.

[23] Further reading (respectively): Dieter Roelstraete, "The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art," e-flux journal 4 (2009), accessed June 6, 2019, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/04/68582/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art; Sophie Berrebi, "Not-So-Transparent Things," in *The Way of the Shovel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 266–276; Charles Merewether, "Archival Limits," in *The Archive as a Productive Space of Conflict*, eds. Yann Chateigné and Markus Miessen (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 513–517; Lawrence Liang, "The Dominant, the Residual, and the Emergent in Archival Imagination," in *Autonomous Archiving* (Barcelona: dpr-barcelona, 2016), 97–113; Heidenreich, "Unknown Knowns and the Law of What Can Be Said"; Zielinksi, "AnArchaeology for AnArchives."

[24] Foster, "An Archival Impulse," 5.

[25] CropTrust, "Svalbard Global Seed Vault."

[26] Kynaston L. McShine, *The Museum as Muse: Artists Reflect* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 91.

[27] "Whoever follows the avant-garde is always on the right track. And the track of the avant-garde can be easily found: in the avant-garde museum—the museum that no longer conserves and exhibits, but stimulates. The grave has become the engine." Camiel van Winkel, *During the*

Exhibition the Gallery Will Be Closed: Contemporary Art and the Paradoxes of Conceptualism (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2012), 88–89.

[28] "Their name is execrated today, but those who grieve over the 'treasures' destroyed in that frenzy overlook two widely acknowledged facts: One, that the Library is so huge that any reduction by human hands must be infinitesimal. And two, that each book is unique and irreplaceable, but (since the Library is total) there are always several hundred thousand imperfect facsimiles—books that differ by no more than a single letter, or a comma." Jorge Luis Borges, "The Library of Babel," in *Fictions* (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 65–74.

[29] The conception of the *Musée Imaginaire*—literally translated to "imaginary museum," although broadly understood as the "museum without walls"—was coined by André Malraux as a means of solving the logical, systematic, and infrastructural conundrum that was the creation of a Total collection (understanding by Total, a collection that is absolute, infinite, and all-encompassing). Because there *physically* could not be a place that could house every single work of art ever produced, he found the ideal home for a compilation as such within the boundless realms of the imagination; spaces that could foster dialogues and juxtapositions that otherwise could never be.

[30] "Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface, this thinking delves into the depths of the past—but not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages. What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things 'suffer a sea-change' and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living—as 'thought fragments' as something 'rich and strange,' and perhaps even as everlasting." Hannah Arendt, ed., "Walter Benjamin: 1892–1940," in *Illuminations* (London: The Bodley Head, 2015), 54–55.

[31] Including the informal archive created by the students at UNIRIO as *memento mori,* which incorporates thousands of images of the museum and its collection and is considered its own virtual museum/memorial, and the Museu Nacional Library channel on are.na, which showcases seventy PDFs from the museum's library, in the form of an ad hoc online shelf.

[32] See *Arquivo Documentary*, a short documentary about the aftermath of the fire, its process of reconstruction, and the testimony of individuals that worked for or closely with the Museu Nacional.

[33] Pivotal examples of artists reacting to the fire at the Museu Nacional include Brazilian performance artist Rodrigo

Andreolli and Argentinian visual artist Matilde Marín, whose work comes both as monument and testimony.

[34] Michel Foucault, "Fantasia of the Library," in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 90–91.