

**BIPOLAR**  
KATHRYN YUSOFF, EDITOR

**TheArtsCatalyst**

*“As a wager [gageure]. The archive has always been a pledge, and like every pledge [gage], a token of the future. To put it more trivially: what is no longer archived in the same way is no longer lived in the same way... It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come.”*

Jacques Derrida

*“Memory is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre. It is the medium of past experience, as the ground is the medium in which dead cities lie interred... For the matter itself is only a deposit, a stratum, which yields only to the most meticulous examination what constitutes the real hidden within the earth....”*

Walter Benjamin

*“When an elder dies, a library burns”*

Alaskan Native Science



# ARCHIVE FEVER

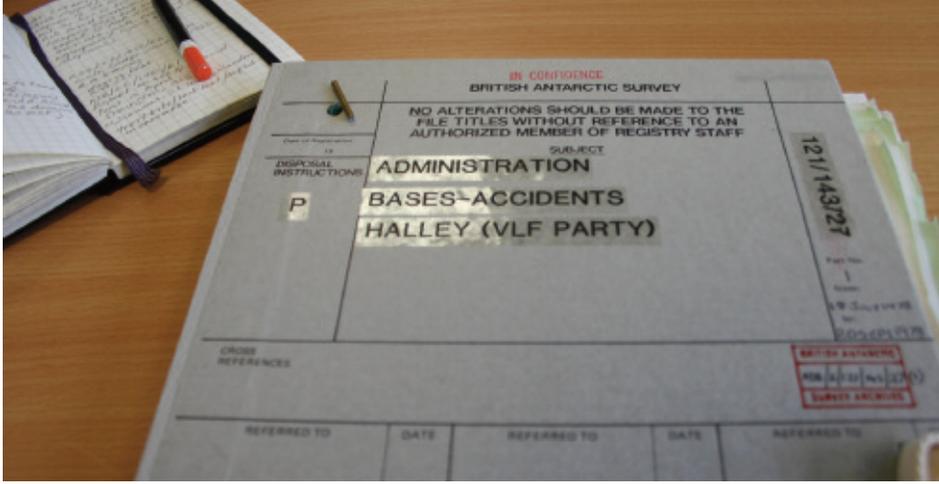
## KATHRYN YUSOFF

### UNIVERSITY OF EXETER

Working in British Antarctic Survey archives, looking at field notes and their “other” landscapes—writing clearly hampered by weather, uncertainty, pauses, accidents, loss of equipment, data, questioning... the precarious states of making knowledge in extreme environments—I was fascinated by how these scientific images generated other visual landscapes that exceeded their scientific purpose.

From this interest in the hidden and often overlooked histories of the archive, I wanted to find a way to mark the International Polar Year. The last IPY was in 1957, a collaborative international event that included the launch of Sputnik and many other scientific polar works, set within the political climate of the Cold War. This uneasy event was marked by military tensions and technoscientific brinkmanship, but actually produced some of the most crucial technologies and baseline data that we use in climate prediction today. The archive from the International Geophysical Year was both a gesture towards, and a technology of, future science. It is the basis of our present climate and polar knowledges. The archive, here, can be seen as a conceptual and physical technology that organises scientific ‘field’ knowledges: from the forms and structures of information (what data?) to the very ‘place’ of knowledge (who’s allowed to make knowledge in these spaces?). This mode of indexicality extends well beyond the structures of organisation that arrange artifacts and materials of the archive to the ‘fields’ of enquiry and to the practices of fieldwork. As such the archive is an expanded technology that conditions the practices of fieldwork and being in the field. Control of the archive amounts to control of the ‘fields’ of enquiry that structure what is deemed to be knowledge, if not memory, and the practice of writing history (in light of the archive).

Thinking ahead fifty years to the next IPY and the radically altered, and potentially unrecognisable Polar Regions, we might think about how the archive shapes the future? And as such, how command of the archive gives rise to a particular set of ideas about the permanence and ephemerality of different knowledges, the authority of different technologies of inscription, and topologies of absence. *What ‘objects’ will never make it into the archive, and what is the implication of these absences for an understanding of the history of places and practices?* As philosopher Jacques Derrida has argued, the archive is both a place and a process that is marked by a topology of privilege,<sup>1</sup> and questions of the politics of archival admittance are of permanent concern. The archive, then, is a metaphor for the organised processes of memory and forgetting that we institute into our structures of knowledge, and knowing places. We can imagine that if we changed the demands of the archive and the archivable we might get some very different artifacts and objects of knowledge. What knowledge becomes useful to us in a time of disorientating abrupt climatic change? How can we creatively *practice* towards such uncertainty?



To this end, we invited participants to do some experimental fieldwork in the concepts, assumptions, histories, materials and theories we use to characterise the polar field and the archive. The book brings together new research that suggests how an expanded consideration of archives can bring to light other registers of knowing, which these places might have to offer. These archives *act on our future*, they shape our perceptions and preoccupations. Thus, archives can be a basis on which we *remake worlds*. Archives place demands on us as scholars, scientists and artists to act on our knowledge, to think about what is *vital* in that knowledge – *vital* to our present work, and in a broader sense to the future, to the work *to come*. Not to “save the world” or demand art illustrate the concerns of politics or science, but a more provocative, intimate demand, *to open spaces of the imagination*, to tell stories of both our cultural lives and our biophysical world that engage with the *imagination is a way of seeing*, as well as being attentive to how our imagination, and how we act on that, affects others, with particular reference to the ‘Inhabited Arctic’. Stories guide us, and we base our stories on various archives; lived, catalogued, biological, chemical and many other material and immaterial orders besides. Part of our work here is to draw out the *resident narratives* of the biophysical world—of ice cores, climate models, the iconography of climate change, narratives of weather, histories of the environment, scientific and artistic practice—to unsettle self-evident truths, to problematise the easy configurations of naturalised histories, and to suggest other stories from the archive that enrich and extend our engagement with the polar regions and their effect on global environments.

In this archive, we shall see a range of scholars and artists at different stages in their careers, presenting work that may help us to practice towards uncertain futures, with creativity, knowledge and humour. Because now, more than ever, with the polar regions under increasing pressure, both environmentally and geopolitically, these archives assume their most potent role as the basis on which we imagine and shape the futures of both polar and global spaces.

The challenges we face involve the need to change policy and motivate social responsibility in the context of uncertainty, but it requires of us more urgently, that in the construction site of the imagination, we give space to what *moves us* in the world, with the hope, but not the expectation, that it will move us to other political futures.

i Derrida, J (1996) *Archive Fever* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London), p. 3.