Gatekeeping and Accessing the Archive, Wednesday 18th November, 5-6.30pm

Jennifer Bajorek, 'Decolonising the Archive: The View from West Africa', *Aperture*, (2013)
Achille Mbembe, 'The Power of the Archive and its Limits' from *Refiguring the Archive*, (2002)

'Digitization—which, it was widely thought, would make possible new modes of preservation, even if it cannot ensure a photograph's survival—has offered few solutions here [West Africa]. International digital archival standards, explicitly imposed by Northern and Western grant makers, stipulate that archival masters should be produced from negatives [many have been destroyed], and that prints should be included only if they provide "contextual information" (writing on the verso, a name, date, or caption)—thereby disregarding concerns with both the ephemerality and materiality of photographs as objects that are central to African histories. The equipment essential to local management of a digital archive (servers, backup systems, and the generators needed to run them in the absence of a reliable electricity supply) is considered to be "infrastructure" by these same grant makers—and therefore not covered under their funding guidelines.
These guidelines are based on a utopian vision of industrial modernity that is, at best, irrelevant to contemporary African realities. […] What archive, analog or digital, in existence or imaginable today has the protocols of preservation, the equipment, and indeed the infrastructure in place that would allow us to valorize ephemerality, transience, and decay in a way that would be faithful to this photograph? How do we archive a photograph that in turn archives the progress of its own decay, and that chronicles a quintessentially photographic experience of ephemerality and loss?' (Bajorek, p.68)

*****

'No archive can be the depository of the entire history of a society, of all that has happened in that society. Through archived documents, we are presented with pieces of time to be assembled, fragments of life to be placed in order, one after the other, in an attempt to formulate a story that acquires its coherence through the ability to craft links between the beginning and the end. A montage of fragments thus creates an illusion of totality and continuity. In this way, just like the architectural process, the time woven together by the archive is the product of a composition. This time has a political dimension resulting from the alchemy of the archive: it is supposed to belong to everyone. The community of time, the feeling according to which we would all be heirs to a time over which we might exercise the rights of collective ownership: this is the imaginary that the archive seeks to disseminate.
This time of co-ownership, however, rests on a fundamental event: death. Death to the extent that the archived document *par excellence* is, generally a document whose author is dead and which, obviously, has been closed for the required period before it can be accessed. The test represented by this closure, this extension of the period of time and the resulting distance from the immediate present, adds to the archive content of the document. Other than in exceptional cases, it is only at the end of this period of closure that the archived document is as if woken from sleep and returned to life. It can, from then on, be 'consulted'. The term 'consulted' shows clearly that we are no longer talking about just any document, but of this particular document, which has the power, because of a legal designation, to enlighten those who are engaged in an 'inquiry' into time inherited in co-ownership.' (Mbembe, p.21)