

ABSTRACT

This project interrogates what kind of desire(s) archival material relating to traumatic historical events can embody for us contemporarily. I want to ask what the implications of these desire(s) are for how we understand and negotiate citizenship in the present. Its object of enquiry is the albums of “known and suspected activists” produced by the apartheid-era Security Branch. They allow us to consider the role of desire in the archive, but also how that desire might be shifted. In concert, they allow us to consider methods employed within the archive and methods that might usefully intervene in them. Various artistic works and the practical iterations of this project serve as vital touchstones in developing these arguments. Lacanian psychoanalysis and Peircian semiotics are key to understanding desire in relation to signification and indexicality in particular. By elucidating the differences between facial images and facial biometrics, photography becomes a space of rupture in the archive. I furthermore want to propose that the interface can lend itself to the work of critical historiography by way of its capacity for semiotic and discursive intervention, and in this instance particularly, give concrete form to a desire for the post-apartheid. I will advance the idea that digital Facial Averaging, based on the facial photograph, is useful in interventions into archives of facial imagery: on the one hand, for how it makes it possible to fulfil the desire for the images to be conducive to public consideration without revealing personal information of those imaged in the archive; on the other hand, how it allows us to think desire in relation to ethics. Here Facial Averaging as a method can usefully be interpreted through both Lacanian psychoanalysis and Levinasian ethics.

Keywords: desire, citizenship, index, biometric, face, photography, interface.