



Role-Playing

by Ann Butler

For the past decade, the notion of what constitutes an archive and what role archives serve as sources of facts supporting larger historical narratives has been the source of extensive debate. The ways archives as repositories are built, filled with contents, organized, classified, and managed have also come into question, as well as the roles performed by archivists, scholars, and researchers, and the consequent impacts on the legibility of the material and the uses to which the interpretations of the archival materials are put.

What is often most accessible and visible within an archive are the collections that frame the public narratives that support the mission and identity of the repository. What are often hidden are the archival collections and materials that reflect the concealed narratives of the repository and its institutional history. How an archival repository defines itself influences what is acquired, and each archival acquisition in turn establishes an overall context that influences the reading and interpretation of the material.

Archives are usually comprised of groups and aggregates organized in a manner that reflects how they were developed, built, and used. Archives are intensely dependent on contextual and relational factors representing the visual, intellectual, and social influences embedded within a specific practice of art making or cultural production. Archives are inherently promiscuous; they are always in a state of flux.

In considering the ethics of the archive, Mariam Ghani notes that an

archive cannot be separated from its interpreters and past interpretations. They impose their orders upon the archive, and those orders bend the archive toward construction or destruction, preservation or projection, the vault or the network or sometimes, paradoxically, all these things at one. We cannot evaluate the materials in the archive along some sort of moral axis unless we take into account the structure through which we receive them, structures which have been produced by the archive's performers and performances.¹

Archives are inherently precarious in terms of their materiality and long-term sustainability. Whether they are built of bricks and mortar, digital repositories, or both, they are expensive to build and maintain. Partly because of the ubiquity of digital storage, there is an assumption that there are enough archival repositories to house all the archives and personal papers of cultural producers and

that all archives are worth keeping. In building an archival repository, does one adopt a connoisseurship model and build an archival collection from the top down, or from the bottom up, utilizing a more activist strategy that seeks to make visible the common material culture of the everyday? What is culturally significant and worth saving? Who makes these determinations?

Artists' Archives

Today there's a great deal of interest within the contemporary art world in the personal papers and archives of artists. This engagement stems from many developments that go hand in hand, including the post-conceptual art practices of the past fifty years and the concurrent downplay of the status of the art object, greater receptivity towards open-ended and process-based works, greater appreciation of documentation and the role archives can perform in communicating information about works of art, and increasing pressure to monetize all forms of artistic output as potential works of art.

These interests emanate from many quarters including artists who legitimately want greater say over the longevity of their artistic legacy, curators who see archives as another means to present a work of art, galleries who view archives as another product to potentially sell; and audiences who seem genuinely interested in seeing and knowing more about the decision-making, influences, and process of art making. Equally, artists are playing a greater role in the activities associated with building and maintaining their archives, and archivists are discovering that they need to modify and refine their methods to better meet the needs of artists' archives.

The discrepancy between archives and the art world is that archives adhere to a broader set of cultural values that do not always sit neatly within the structure of the art world. To place archives within the hierarchical structure of the art world often relegates the materials to a secondary status as contextual material, documentation, or ephemera. The structure of the archive, comprised of open-ended fragments and aggregates, counters the logic of the art world, which privileges works of art as finite and singular entities.

The market for art-related archives has exploded over the past decade, yet the financial logic of the art market often runs counter to the research value of archives. As forms of material culture are increasingly collected and valued for their cultural and historic research value, one finds that a high monetary value assigned to objects and artifacts does not always imply that the item has a high research value.

The discrepancy in value systems becomes more apparent with monetary appraisal. Historically works of art are entrenched within the logic of a unique, singular, and finite work that can be readily appraised against previous market sales records. Archives, comprised of complex aggregates with little to no previous sales records of similar objects, contradict and potentially short-circuit the logic of the market, often resisting monetary appraisal methods. And yet, as the market expands for artists' archives and they are increasingly collected, financial values have to be assigned for the purposes of sales transactions and insurance and tax valuation.

Role-Playing

At the Center for Curatorial Studies (CCS) at Bard College, we have been building the institutional and collecting components of the CCS Archives over the past several years. As part of that process, we question what roles comprise the curator today and what types of archives best support and sustain research and inquiry into curatorial practices. Our strategy is to collect from the margins and the centers the spaces where roles are less clearly defined and the curator is another player among many within the ecosystem of cultural production. We actively seek out the archives that shift and sometimes contradict assumptions about the roles of the curator, the artist, the collector, the commercial gallery, and museum; archives that speak to the forms of reciprocity and engagements between each of these players within the larger systems of exhibition-making and circulation. In short, we are collecting the archives that question the structure, logic, and expectations of the contemporary art world and also open up a reconsideration of what a work of art can be.

Mariam Ghani, "What we left unfinished: the artist and the archive" in *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East*, (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 52-53.

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