

(MIS) INTERPRET
(MIS) USE
(MIS) REPRESENT

THE

ARCHIVE
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Curriculum Development

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INTRODUCTION

Early this year, I read an article by Wendi Maloney (2020) that has forever changed the way I look at archives. The article describes how the Library of Congress is collecting photographs of Camilo José Vergara as part of their ongoing efforts to document the current pandemic. According to Sasha Dowdy (2020) Vergara's photos were collected and archived because of his "commitment to realism", which shows the "raw truths of the people living through pandemics". In addition to Vergara, other artists like Toni Lane have also had their work collected. Dowdy notes Lane's work is "emotionally honest", which she implies is the reason for her work being collected. Dowdy believes this documentation is important, she explains:

Documenting our lives is how we can find solace in shared experiences, reflect and process emotions, remember the people who share our lives, and express hope for a lighter future. If we don't record where we are right now, who will? If we forget what we wore, what we ate, and what we saw on the street outside of our windows, who will retrieve those memories?

Maloney's (2020) article does more than report on Vergara's photographs, it provides a glimpse into the process of acquisition and archiving used by the Library of Congress. Joe Puccio, the library's collection development officer, said the mission of the library staff is to "determine what's the most important material to acquire and what a researcher in a hundred years will need to see from what is being produced today" (Maloney, 2020). The various departments in the library make proposals for what materials should be collected and added to the library's archives. These various recommenders are tasked with documenting the ephemeral and ever-changing world. The library has been collecting digital content from the web, physical content like books, newspapers, and records, as well as

photographs. The Library of Congress's site claims to be the largest library in the world and is estimated to be adding 10,000 new items to its collection every day (Library of Congress).

These articles prompted me to begin to question the subjective nature of the archival process. Looking more critically a different narrative begins to emerge. I began to notice there were words or statements that make it clear that collecting is a choice, and with choice, immense power and influence. Take Puccio's comment, he uses words like "determine", "most important", and "what will need to be seen". How does one determine what to collect? What is deemed to be most important? Whose history gets represented and who does not?

Along this line, the subjective nature is not just in what is collected but how it is presented and accessed by the public. Look at this quote from Maloney's article, Abbie Grotke, head of the web archiving team in the Digital Services Directorate of Library Services, is quoted saying, "At this point, our focus is on collecting and making sure we're preserving, *how we present it to the public may evolve*" (Maloney, 2020). Again, it is apparent decisions are being made about what is preserved and how those collections are being presented to the public.

Any archival institution is faced with the same challenge of determining what is collected, how it is preserved, and how it is presented. Puccio illustrates the challenge of making collections for future research, "our problem, is that there is just so much content about this situation [Covid 19]. But I think in the end – like in 10 years – we're going to look back and say, wow, we did a heck of a job collecting back then" (Maloney, 2020).

As I read Maloney's article, I began to look at archives in a way I never had before. These institutions are all around us and are part of everyday life. Up to this point I have overlooked the power and influence archives have in shaping the collective memory of

the past. The process is not neutral, as Maloney and others show, but are full of subjectivities.

This curriculum invites participants to engage with archives as sites of knowledge and learning, to question and examine the practices of collecting and preserving, and consider what these sites offer educationally, artistically, and politically. The next section will give a more in depth look at archives, after which, I share the curricular framework I used to create a series of ideas for how to artistically engage with archives. These can be found at the end of this curriculum.



“Screen capturing the in-between”. 2020. Taken from the the free domain archive of the New York Public Library

ARCHIVES

There are two narratives being told about archives. The first narrative paints the archive as the collective history of the public, built from a vast collection of primary sources, a place where the objective truths of the past can be found. The other narrative sees the archive as a space where only certain people's history is stored, only certain memories can be found and where power and privilege are being used to shape a view of the past that benefits only a select few.

Archive in a traditional sense means to file or collect records or documents (Ketelar, 2001). The archive though, is often considered to be more than just records or dusty collections. The National Archive UK interviewed several archivists and asked them what archives means to them. Based on these responses, archives are seen as memory, memory of individuals, memory of families, memory of nations, and memories of social movements; archives are heritage; archives are stories. The Tate Museum similarly produced their own video discussing what archives are. For them, archives are where memories are stored, it is a democratic history, a repository of knowledge and first-hand accounts that witness the thoughts, accounts, and cultures of the past. One significant aspect the Tate emphasizes is the way archives are meant to be open and accessible to the public.

The archival process centers on the collection of primary source documents or objects. Often archives are meant to collect indiscriminately, to provide an unbiased and objective record of history (Schwartz and Cook, 2002). Weaver (1938) notes the archival process can be challenging because history is always being written, the world changes, and there is ever more that could be collected. Because there is so much that could be collected and not everything can be collected, archivists must determine what is

worth keeping permanently, what has value, what will benefit future research, and what is excluded. Here lies the problem with archives.

Dominique Luster (2018) gave a TEDx talk regarding the power archives have to boost marginalized voices. She began her talk by asking the listeners to imagine what it would be like if your history, your stories, your heritage, was never written down or what it would feel like to have someone else tell your history from their perspective instead of your own. For many marginalized groups this is a reality. Archives are full of what she calls “strategically curated decisions” that uplift some and silence others. Who makes the decisions? Who is included or excluded? What history is being told or not told? Luster argues, these are essential questions because we implicitly trust the evidence that exists in the archive, but we do not question who is represented there and who is not.

Luster is not the only one looking at archives with a critical eye, Schwartz and Cook (2002) have questioned and challenged the erroneous idea that archives are merely boxes in a dusty basement. For them, archives are much bigger and important to our society, “archives validate our experiences, our perceptions, our narratives, our stories. Archives are our memories” (p. 18). In addition, Schwartz and Cook argue these spaces are “about power—about maintaining power, about the power present to control what is, and will be, known about the past, about the power of remembering over forgetting” (p. 3). But the biggest problem they see is the lack of questioning regarding archives:

What goes on in the archives remains remarkably unknown. Users of archives (historians and others) and shapers of archives (records creators, records managers, and archivists) add layers of meaning, layers which become naturalized, internalized, and unquestioned (p. 18). This lack of questioning is dangerous because it implicitly supports the archival myth of neutrality and objectivity, and thus sanctions the already strong predilection

of archives and archivists to document primarily mainstream culture and powerful records creators (p. 18).

Maybe the lack of questioning is a result of the way power is often deeply embedded in systems in such a way that render it difficult to see. Because of the way racism is embedded with everyday structures, Dianne Harris (2007) in “Race, Space and the Destabilization of Practice, argues the built environment must also be considered as an active agent in the formation of ideas about race, identity, belonging, exclusion, and minoritization” (P. 2).

Another reason for the lack of questioning may lie with the systems of power themselves. James Haywood Rolling, Jr. (2020) in the article, “Black Lives Matter: An Open Letter to Art Educators on Constructing an Anti-Racist Agenda” makes the point that systems are not designed to question or disrupt their own power. Rolling using the definition from Donella Meadows, argues “a system is a set of things—people, cells, molecules, or whatever—interconnected in such a way that they produce their own pattern of behavior over time” (p. 2). Which, Rolling argues, means each system is designed to perpetuate and sustain itself. The maintaining of behaviors, structures, relationships, power, and beliefs embedded in these systems will inherently reproduce and sustain themselves unless there is some kind of change made.

All of these reasons reinforce the point that Schwartz and Cook (2002) are trying to make regarding the power behind these institutions and the danger that comes from not questioning this power. In their own words, they argue, “when power is denied, overlooked, or unchallenged, it is misleading at best and dangerous at worst. Power recognized becomes power that can be questioned, made accountable, and opened to transparent dialogue and enriched understanding (p. 2).

In the journal, *Archival Science*, Ketelar (2001) argues that a critical questioning of traditional archival practices “opens

up a world of possibilities” that can look beyond the current boundaries and discover “new perspectives” (p. 1). Similarly, Allen Kaprow (1993) used his artistic practice to question and play, which he argued created a “space to speculate about alternative power dynamics and systems of order” (p. 100). As an artist and educator, I see Kaprow and Ketelar’s remarks as a sort of invitation to examine and play with the notion of archives to look for “new perspectives” and contemplate alternative power dynamics.”



“Archival Strata”. 2020. Taken from the the free domain archive of the New York Public Library

CURRICULAR FRAMEWORK

Borrowing from Pablo Helguera (2010), I used the actions of (mis)interpretation, (mis)representation, and (mis)use, to create a series of “seedlings”, which Jorge Lucero (2020) describes as being different than a seed because a seedling is already active and sprouting (p. 11). I have intentionally placed parentheses around the terms (mis)interpretation, (mis)representation, and (mis)use. In the same way that archives are built on subjective choices, I want to offer a choice: to either interpret, represent, or use archives in a more traditional sense or challenge the tradition by misinterpreting, misrepresenting, or misusing the traditional notion of archive. My “seedlings”, which are meant to provoke, prompt, or invite action, came from me (mis)interpreting, (mis)representing, and (mis)using the archive. But, without action the seedlings will not ever be fully formed.

I invite you to also (mis)interpret, (mis)represent, and (mis)use my seedlings to engage in some way with the notion of archive. In “Notes Toward a Transpedagogy”, Helguera (2010) suggest this sort of action might allow us to stand in “tentative locations” and “interstices” resulting in new understanding, new hybridities, and discovery of “new questions”(p. 112). I hope we might become more aware of the archives and institution of memory that exist all around us; I hope we might question the power of these institutions; to ask who is included?; who is excluded?; How are these institutions shaping our past, present, and future?; I hope we might begin to redefine archive to be a more decolonized space that is more inclusive. Ultimately, the invitation I am making is an invitation to engage the archive as an artistic medium to test its pliability.

The seedlings will follow in the next section, if you want to contribute your own seedling or share results from acting on one my seedlings, send me an email at kalebostraff@gmail.com.



“Combined Archival Images #1”. 2020. Taken from the the free domain archive of the New York Public Library

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SEEDLINGS

FOR

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THE

ARCHIVE

1 AMEND THE ARCHIVE

Write, create, fabricate the documents, objects, or photographs that are missing, non-existent, never were collected, or are represented poorly or erroneously.

2 RELOCATE THE ARCHIVE

Place the archive into a new context or return the archive to its original location.

For example, check out how Jon Rubin used recordings of extinct birds and a radio station to place the sounds of birds in their original habitat. See <http://www.jonrubin.net/#/1029-sounds-you-never-hear/>

3 REVEAL THE UNSEEN

Look for evidence of human preference, the hand of the archivist, and the unseen-unspoken preferences that are inherent to the archive process. Find a way to engage and reveal these preferences.

Check out the work of Richard Pell, at the Center for PostNatural History, See <https://www.postnatural.org> and his lecture at UIUC: https://mediaspace.illinois.edu/media/t/1_y4d5ax3t/182656591

4 RETROACTIVE ARCHIVE

Using hindsight make an archive by making or recreating the documents, objects, and photographs that represent significant events, but were not preserved.

For example, the movie tickets from the first movie you went to with your significant other.

Also, see Jorge Lucero's Barack Obama Presidential Library
<https://www.jorgelucero.com/work#/new-page/>

5 INFILTRATE THE ARCHIVE

Visit an archive, covertly hide your artwork, don't be seen.

6 CORRUPT THE ARCHIVES

Find ways to play with and alter the archival algorithms, especially those used on the web.

See Ben Grosser's projects, Instagram demetricator, twitter demetricator, go rando, and not for you.
<https://bengrosser.com/projects/>

7 CONFRONT THE POWER AND HISTORY IN THE ARCHIVE

Reveal how the archives were collected, use the archives to show the narratives, the power, and privilege that is not usually talked about.

See the exhibition, “Empire Through the Lens”, https://exhibitions.bristolmuseums.org.uk/empire-through-the-lens/?utm_source=referral&utm_medium=event&utm_campaign=empire

8 GET COLLECTED. GET ARCHIVED

Discover what the acquisition process is for an institution of your choice and use that knowledge to get your work collected. Post on social media everyday for a year, using the hashtags of your desired institutions. Call attention to yourself. By the end of the year you will have an mini archive of 365 attempts to get collected.

Check out how the Library of Congress is acquiring photographs about Covid-19 <https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2020/09/library-seeks-pictures-of-pandemic-experiences/>

9 CREATE A SELF-DESTRUCTING ARCHIVE

Archives are traditionally meant to preserve, to last for a long time, if not forever. Instead, create an archive that is meant to decay, to self-destruct overtime.

10 CREATE A PUBLIC ARCHIVE

Use the collective knowledge and memory of the public to create an archive or get access to various public groups to organize their own archive or exhibition. Imagine an archive built by four year olds, what would they deem worth preserving.

Check out the projects Myseum is doing: <https://www.museumnext.com/article/building-city-museum-without-walls-community-collaboration/>
<http://www.myseumoftoronto.com>

11 DOCUMENT THE ARCHIVE

Go to a physical archive, document everything, but the actual documents, objects, or specimens. Pay attention to the structures, practices, and spaces.

12 USE THE FREE AND REUSE COLLECTIONS

Many archives and museums are providing collections that are public access materials, meaning they are public domain. Use these collections as your medium.

See the following sites for open-domain collections:

<https://www.nypl.org/research/collections/digital-collections/public-domain>

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/usnationalarchives/sets/>

<https://www.archives.gov/research/catalog>

<https://www.ars.usda.gov/oc/images/image-gallery/>

<https://www.loc.gov/free-to-use/>

13 JUXTAPOSE THE ARCHIVE

Create new meanings by juxtaposing the archive with something new. Combine your personal archive with a public archive.

See Bea Nettles exhibition at the Krannert Art Museum <https://kam.illinois.edu/exhibition/bea-nettles-harvest-memory>

14 CREATE AN ARBITRARY ARCHIVE

In the Library of Congress's free to use and reuse archive, there is a collection of images titled "this is not an ostrich". It is a random collection of images that are not ostriches. Create your own "this is not an ostrich" archive.

See <https://www.loc.gov/free-to-use/not-an-ostrich/>

15 MINE AN ARCHIVE

Look through archives to find patterns, interests, and gems to respond to in art. Consider your own archives, browsing histories, call records as well.

16 CREATE AN ALTERNATIVE ARCHIVE

If archives are the collection of collective memory and history, then how could this be extended to include things not traditionally considered archives? Bodies? Trees? Strata?

18 ARCHIVE EVERYTHING YOU KNOW

Attempt to make an archive of everything you know and exists only in your mind.

19 PERFORM THE ARCHIVE

Imagine what an archive would look like if you were a child, homeless, from a different culture. What would that space look like? Turn it into a performance. Present an archive that represents someone besides you.

See <https://www.museumnext.com/article/indigenising-and-decolonising-the-museum/>
<https://www.sdmx.no/en/sami-daida-museum>

20 CREATE A SYSTEM FOR CATALOGING

One of the basic practices of archives is to use a system of organization and classification. Create your own system to engage with archives or create an archive by using a system you made up.

21 REORGANIZE OR RE-THEME THE ARCHIVE

Reorganize an archive by using themes or categories you have created, which make more sense, are more accurate, or improve on the themes an existing archive uses.

22 CREATE A DUAL ARCHIVE

Create an archive that presents two conflicting histories simultaneously.

See the installation *Walter Hood* created for Princeton University addressing the complex history of Woodrow Wilson. Another installation of *Hood's* to consider is the proposal for the reflection pools at the International African American Museum. The images of bodies, referencing enslaved Africans, emerge when the tidal waters recede.

23 CRITIQUE THE ARCHIVE

Create a way to productively critique archives and give suggestions to those in charge.

See how Alice Procter has approached this here <https://www.theexhibitionist.org/merch/card-digital>

24 AUGMENT THE ARCHIVE

Use augmented reality technology to provide your own alternate or augmented experience to an existing archive.

25 CREATE A PARALLEL ARCHIVE

This idea originated from Joe Ostraff.

Archives are defined by what is included and what is excluded. What is deemed worth of paying attention to and what is not.

Find significant dates from an archive. Find what else happened on that day. Present these objects or events that occurred on the same date as a parallel archive.

26 BE A TOUR GUIDE

Lead a tour of an archive. Talk about the things you think are important, regardless of what others say, especially the “authorities.

See Alice Procter’s uncomfortable art tours: <https://www.theexhibitionist.org> or Andrea Fraser’s performance: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/fraser-museum-highlights-a-gallery-talk-t13715>