

A PREAMBLE:

Uniqueness is rarely, if ever, argued about when describing the holdings of an archival collection. What is more often challenging to agree upon is *value*. A collector must ask herself: How will she be able to to define what is of value within the collection itself? How might the collection be used “best” now & into the future? Who might be looking to discover that value from the collection? This kind of questioning will likely occur not only at the outset but also during reflexive points of her task in order to assign what she will define as valuable.

Upon beginning to answer these kinds of questions, a collection will be sculpted into exactly what the collector (or institutional body as collector) wants it to be. This is where much of a collection’s true value lies; how it is *positioned*, and how it then is *perceived*.

At the beginning of December 2018, the Women’s Studio Workshop (WSW) in Kingston, NY hosted a consortium of a diverse group of professionals from the archives, special collections, and libraries fields — after spending two days within this group, it became clear that asking & answering the questions surrounding *value* for the WSW collections will be of utmost importance when determining the path stakeholders choose to take for the future stewardship and repository of this especially unique collection.

To state within simple and finite terms, three paths (which were more or less agreed upon, amongst the group, to hold potential success for decisions surrounding the collections’ physicality) arose:

1. keep everything
2. divide the collections
3. give everything

Additionally, to provide as much insight from our personal experience/professional greenness, we have elected to include a few alternative paths from our individual perspectives subsequent to the three “main” paths.

What follows will be the written result of my (l.molina) observations from attendance at the December consortium paired with the outcomes of engaging discussion between myself and two fellow students of the Information Studies graduate program at the University of California, Los Angeles — Micaela Rodgers and Dianne Weinthal. The three authors of this document have been chosen by Dr. Johanna Drucker to develop an elongated (as well as reflexive) “pros & cons”-type list for paths to determine the best repository decisions to be made by stakeholders at WSW. In addendum to the document, a brief biography for each named author has been provided.

Our perspective on each of these paths comes not only from our experience as students and researchers in the archival & special collections fields, but also as subversive individuals who have a differing relationships to institutions (versus those who have spent their careers working in them). From our perspective, accessibility is not solely a question of physical availability. Accessibility needs to be a continued, critical discussion of the interaction between an environment and its patrons.

THE PATHS:

- **PATH 1 - keep everything**

One of the most valuable parts of keeping the collections at WSW is that WSW will retain a greater kind of control; the flexibility of “who” controls and the decisions made out of such control can be expected to always be in the best interest of WSW & its mission statement. Here’s why:

- “keeping everything” implies spending money in the short term, but with the potential to develop archives related programming, funding, fellowships, research, etc. that could provide significant value (monetary and otherwise) for WSW’s future.
- ...implies dedicating time, space, and resources to archival collection *with control* over the timeline and processes required for these implications.
- ...as a student and potential researcher, the locality of WSW in Kingston, NY *feels* immediately inaccessible. Despite its welcoming environment, the distance and the associated travel cost to get there may deter someone from visiting/using/inquiring about the collections; but integrity of original order and context has immense research value.
- ...the spirit of WSW independence remains intact, but without the benefit of institutional resources (ie conservation, full time archival staff, research funding)
- ...the collections could decide to recognise itself as a “special collections”, assigning a title which has many implications and is a field begging for greater diversity. Within the special collections and rare books collections realms, women and their work have been largely under-collected & undervalued. Early collecting libraries included few works by women, even in centuries when published works written by women vastly outnumbered — and outsold — works by men. While this has slightly changed in many repositories, it is important to note that by creating a special collections by, for, and about women would be an amazing and much-needed act which will reflect the values and spirit of WSW. Further developing the identity of WSW’s collections as a special collections would, hopefully, make people think more in-depth about the remaining exclusivity of special collections (particularly if a robust mission statement was written including support for why WSW made the decision to be a special collections).
- ...WSW may elect to develop programming for scholarship which will result in archives assessment & description (an idea deemed an “archivist(s) in residence” program, during the WSW archivists/libraries/special collections consortium). This programming would provide the opportunity to: encourage artists to learn about the information studies fields & the potential relevance it has on their work; promote scholarship & relationships with “iSchools” and their faculty & students; draw attention to the way an archivist views a collection with materials like those at WSW, further generating respect & recognition for the collections.

- **PATH 2 - divide the collections**

In order to discover new kinds of value within the collections which can bring continued interest in support of WSW, the collection may split its institutional records from its artists book, photographic, ephemera, and fine art print collections. Division of the collections allows for transmission of power, and value will inherently be decided by way of contracts and other legal documentation. Some thoughts:

- ...division implies fracturing an intact whole with the potential benefit of keeping the parts of the collections that WSW deems of most value. *When* the decision to divide will further determine how the value is defined. The temporal aspect of decision making for the WSW collections seems especially important to outline. As external perspectives on art practice, feminism, the book, archives, etc. change over time, how will WSW continue to present the value of the materials within their collections in a way that might attract visitors/users/artists to their collections? Or, the institution to which part of the collections is given to will mean that the perspectives for the other institution will become something for that institution to capitalise on, continually redefine, or define with language different from that of WSW's (with or without respect to the original intent & value of the collections creation & creators).
- ...values change over time. No single librarian/archivist can predict how institutional (WSW and "other") values will change. What may be found most valuable to a future user should be taken into serious consideration — to avoid the loss of critical pieces to remain at the on-site collection for which it will have the most respective value.
- ...if to be considered a special collections, there will be specific protocols and procedures which may not align with WSW values. For example, it is unlikely that the items given to a repository would remain together. Items in rare books/special collections are processed, described, catalogued, and shelved according to the catalogue information. Though organization is absolutely necessary to any of the paths outlined here, if WSW relinquishes control over that organization, they would likely relinquish intellectual control. What is most worrisome, perhaps, is the description and cataloguing of the items. The cataloguer will likely not consider what the artist, what WSW, what anyone except the Library of Congress thinks the item is. They will make the decision of description and therefore the decision of how users will experience each item. This is a problem which *could* be solved with pre-donation negotiation. This concern applies to all options which include external institutional library or archive partnership.
- ...implies dedicating some time, space, and resources to archival collection at WSW, but with ability to limit scope based on available time, space, and resources available in the studio (i.e. WSW can keep whatever fits in the space and donate what there isn't sufficient room or conservation effort for).
- ...location will determine usership. Potential frustration may arise when users/visitors/artists are trying to find something, or take a single research trip. Dividing between locations across the nation, the state, or even the county may impact the ability of users/visitors/artists to find all the items they are searching for in a single place. Alternatively, division of the collections may make it possible for users/visitors/artists to access the collection via the "other" institutions proximity to them, larger budget to host an online database, more labor to create more detailed or innovative finding-aids for the entire collections as whole despite their division.

- **PATH 3 - give**

The notion of giving away an entire collection to a collecting "other" may be equally challenging as it could be liberating. To donate or sell the collections at WSW would need to involve experienced legal writers to develop contacts which will reflect the values for WSW and negotiate for WSW's best interests & longevity for the collections. Giving away the collections:

- ...implies potentially making some money in the short term, though WSW will lose some control over the materials.

- ...will create space at WSW, allowing for expansion or additions to practice and living spaces.
- ...means that materials will lose their contextual, “in-situ”, value
- ...will add value via the other institution’s resources (monetary, long term storage, conservation, location, notoriety, etc.), but institutional oversight might not match the spirit of WSW’s independent creation, radical feminist perspectives, liberal attitudes.
- ...makes the collection more available to some, but not all — based on the environment of the institution and the populations it has served in the past, currently serves, and may serve in the future.

- **ALTERNATIVE PATH**

- *Institutional Partnership* — potentially allows WSW to keep the best elements of each of these above paths by seeking a reciprocal relationship with an institution or organization that fits its needs.
 - Reciprocity. For example, if digitization were important to WSW, might there be an institution interested in taking on the project, while allowing WSW to keep the physical material and IP rights? Or vice versa, might there be an institution interested in the physical collection, who would be willing to give WSW a copy of all files once digitized?
 - Precedent of this model can be seen at Stanford’s Andy Warhol Photography Collection — AW Foundation negotiated a very specific set of guidelines for the materials based on their ideal conditions for the collection, its digitization, its ownership, and its research potential moving forward post-ingestion into Stanford’s repository.
 - Another model can be seen with the Miss Moviola collection at the Getty Research Institute — Miranda July originally donated the physical collection to Bard College, where it was developed into its own, independent archival repository, Joanie 4 Jackie; Getty’s acquisition statement specifically mentions that Joanie 4 Jackie will continue to grow independently, and that the Getty will add its digitized video to the site. An interesting comment made during WSW consortium was that these additions can be monetized i.e. the institution will need to buy every subsequent artists’ book added to the collection — ephemera and other records may be arranged to be acquired for a price as well (this may be already “commonplace” for some of the potential institutional partners, and will provide continued support for WSW into their future).
 - Many models of institutional partnership exist for various collections — by identifying all the desired outcomes in each path as “pros” for a “pros-cons” list as conditions with which to move forward, WSW could draft a call to begin conversations for reciprocal partnership,

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS:

Ultimately, our hope is that laying out some of the points to be considered with each path will aid WSW in seeing its potential & evaluate what its vision for the collections is. This vision need not be limited by any single path and may result in a combination of two or more paths to best suit WSW's needs.

Upon defining value according to its mission, WSW can assign its own value to this collection. The materials at WSW have a great deal of value for many professional fields of practice, for the past/present/future individuals involved with WSW, and the creative & curious mind.

AUTHOR BIOS:

Dianne Weinthal is an archivist and book artist in her first year of the MLIS program at UCLA. She makes photographs, stays up late on self-publishing projects, works towards equitable access, and aims to unite all of those initiatives.

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lauren molina is currently engaged in information studies at UCLA and managing digital assets for the Hammer museum. Her tendencies to create visual art out of the urge to collect, arrange, (re)present and display have been translated into her professional practice to find, maintain, and provide access to digital collections.

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Micaela Rodgers is currently a second year MLIS student at UCLA focusing on rare books and Special Collections, and is interested in expanding the kinds of things which are found in Special Collections. She is also a literary scholar, intermittent maker of knit/printed/sewn things, and an avid baker keen to reclaim "traditional female work/arts" as modern feminist acts.

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