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Art-makers as Record-Keepers: alternative ideas for arrangement

Often seen by the world as our greatest cultural commentators and icons for social empathy, what have visual artists found within the archives when using documents and records the likes of which are the material of the archives themselves? Images are often the gateway into understanding what is held within record repositories. Not often do individuals consider the miles of shelving holding textual records as archives, for this kind of collection it is usually a library that is thought of. Within the archives is where we hope to find artifacts and the more ephemeral substances that photographs often are associated with. The connotations of creation and culture are associated with the separation from the "official" worlds of records and record keeping that many think of as objectification of human existence. As the authoritative source on *Art and Culture,* Clement Greenberg reckons that "Five thousand years of civilization have separated these areas of activity from one another and specialized them in terms of their verifiable results, so that we now have culture and art for their own sake…and the work for the sake of practical ends."[1] Practice can be defined within the true sense of the word as practical towards a "making" of something (consider the making of art or the making of record). Looking at the photographic works of artist, Sarah Charlesworth as a starting point for the redefinition of the arrangement of archival material to show how a serial typology becomes its own archival series; I will compare the works of visual artists whose creative results and practice of making examine, exploit, and manipulate records with the scholarly definitions of "record-keeping" and "the archives" themselves while asking: How can looking at artists, like Charlesworth, through an archival lens expand record-keeping strategies through art-making practices?

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[1] Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* p. 22

There are two series of Charlesworth's work which I will examine for the purpose of finding ways in which they may aid future archival models. The first works are from the series entitled, *Stills* and the second are diverse and robust groups of sub-works titled under the super-title, *Modern History*. In these collections of photographs, Charlesworth has successfully created two of her own kinds of typology and indices. In making the works for *Modern History*, Charlesworth drops all the text blocks from the front pages of newspapers, sometimes keeping the name of the publication at the top. What remains are only images — photographs which are illustrative of the articles they precede or interrupt. These photos were prioritized by the publication even before Charlesworth made an artistic decision to strike out all of the text. It is like Vilém Flusser states in his *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, " It is not the article that explains the photograph but the photograph that illustrates the article."[2] By removing the written word — which is where we can assume the truly "gripping" content is found — Charlesworth had made the assertion for the photographic image being the thing which is of highest importance on the page. With her extrapolation of the content from the word to the picture, the images are now obviously (and, arguably, were already) where the most "gripping" content can be found and has become the content which the readers will read and retain, even after being stripped of text.

If smoke is indexical of fire and the footprint is indexical of "the other"[3] we can see that "The symbol is related to its object by convention, the icon by resemblance…"[4] and in creating a photographic index, the photographer (as creator) has much, if not all, of the power to decide where things are placed and to assign value to them before, during, or after they've been arranged within the frame. Once the photo is sent to publish in physical or digital media it takes on indexical power of a new kind (and influence, importance) as the newspapers, books, or journals strategically design text blocks to be broken by images which attach a deeper meaning into the text through their literal visualization of it. The images are interruptions in the reading. Their

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[2] Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* p. 60

[3] notes from in-class lecture on Frohmann, UCLA IS211 with Johanna Drucker, PhD.

[4] Bernd Frohmann, *The documentality of Mme. Briet's antelope*, p.179

Sarah Charlesworth, ***April 21, 1978 (detail)***
from Modern History, 1978
45 black-and-white direct positive prints
Varying sizes, approx. 22 x 16" each, edition of 3

size relationship to the stories which they illustrate (and distract from, during readings of the stories which they do not illustrate) beg for the reader's attention. And the larger an image appears in print, the more easily readable it is, more detail is shown, more shapes formed. High contrast of black & white newspaper printing for large print runs make an image less legible and the inverse is true of a lower contrast image. Legibility plays a role in how powerful the image can become, and through this even the difficult to decipher and the clearly shot and edited photo can gain similar kinds of inscribed power.

Within the larger serial group, *Modern History,* Charlesworth has created indices through various smaller series of works using newspapers with images shared in common on their leading page.[5] The accumulation of these papers and the prioritizing of the images within them show how important the image is for control. It shows us what we want to see and how to see it. I can see an aggregate of photographic images, like Charlesworth's, as professor of art & aesthetics John Roberts defines it, a kind of widely distributed media operation in which, " … through a process of circular confirmation… the photographic referent is assumed, isomorphically, to be an index of the historical event or narrative that the photograph is taken to be an exemplary representation of. "[6] Apply this kind of cutting and pasting to the archive and many vetted professionals would fear chaos. But with the ability to move around assets within a collection, maybe to create collections based on prior use or hopeful to remediate for future kinds of use, could open the door to much greater understanding of what is held inside the places which are more difficult to use, whether they are difficult because of the amount of resources found inside or for the arrangement chosen for the resources. Conway imagines remediation as a collection "whereby viewers of digital surrogates are able to establish the same relationship with the image as they are able to have with the

Sarah Charlesworth, *Stills.*
" Source material for *Patricia Cawlings*, *Los Angeles* (pl. 10, in this catalogue) in its original form (*top*), and with Charlesworth's masking and notations (*bottom*).
AP Wirephoto, 1974. "

[5] Sarah Charlesworth *Modern History*

[6] John Roberts, *Photography after the Photograph : Event, Archive, and the Non-Symbolic* p.285

original."[7] To do this with respect to the power of the information held within the record, and in order to create order using images alone, the image must reflect what that power is with acknowledgement to the textual tethers it once had. The works Charlesworth created and their index of images with reference to power and/or their control over the reader is as clear as the black & white typeset of the newspapers themselves. The larger the image leads to more power it has over the reader. The higher frequency at which the image is seen (the image spanning different localities of print which can be understood in the paper's name on the heading - the only instance of text often left behind by Charlesworth) also leads to the creation of more or different kinds of power. To the 21st century reader of these works this may not seem a new concept nor "remediation" at all. But privileging the image will likely be the way (and for many, already is) in which younger generations read news, ingest information, and access a myriad of other kinds of both personal and public documents. And because of this we must discover and define new pathways for leading those looking to learn towards the knowledge that they seek.

Continuing onto Charlesworth's *Stills* series, the work offers a further zooming-in on the newspaper image. [8] Giving even more weight to the ability of the photographic image's power to define, to inform, and to explain. She has, in some instances, physically torn apart images from papers or requested enlarged duplicates made from microform film at New York Public Library, and, by again masking off the text from the reproductions, she reframed images which were then enlarged (again) and printed using photographic processing for a series of huge and even further reproduced photos (human-sized or larger) of once much smaller found-photos of people jumping and/or falling from buildings. The viewer of the works is never told which is the case, making for an interesting and elusive group of truly *formal* typographical symbol made out of the human body. For the few photos (one example illustrated above) of which were extracted from a series of sequential photographs, themselves, she always chose

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[7] Paul Conway, *Modes of Seeing : Digitized Photographic Archives and the Experienced User* p.429

[8] Sarah Charlesworth, *Stills.*

the image with a body “in flight”. This choice is in indicative of Charlesworth’s decision to create a provocative commentary on the image. Matthew Witkovsky, curator of the exhibition of this work at the Art Institute of Chicago, says that “the series shows the sober form…ordering parts familiar from art made around 1970, while in its mass-media themes and the privilege it accords to *image over language* — to image treated *as* language, emancipated from conventional referents”. [9]

Through this thought process, the photo series as a sequence of records can be imagined, not so much as information as they are indication of that which they have created a typology for and are, especially, indexical of. Thinking about the archival arrangement and the requirement of its keeper to maintain order in what is referred to as a “sanction” of the practice, the role of the art-maker would seem unfit to contribute and potentially damaging to the order created in these record collecting institutions. And it is with those single images plucked out from their original sequence that Charlesworth has disrupted the formal idea of sequencing. I would argue that much purpose can be found in the decision to split apart a sequence of photos for art’s sake — but it is also with this one detail that I grapple the most in application for the archives. However, if the requirement is part of the hierarchical importance of records, we can begin to honor the ways in which Charlesworth has maintained a respect for not only image-size and image-quality but also of image-provenance. Yeo posits that aggregates are commonly not born of the record-keepers but of those who have a third-party participation in the records. He likens the sequence of photos sent to friends and put together by the recipient to the organizer of the records (the archivist) merely due to “the interest and the means to do so.”[10] These are the considerations which must be taken in order to begin to imagine certain art-making processes, most noteworthy are those which use documents and records or are record creating by design (photography), as ways to conceptualize image-centric archival arrangements

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[9] Matthew S. Witkovsky, *Sarah Charlesworth Stills,* first emphasis added by myself, second emphasis from Witkovsky’s text, p. 11

[10] Geoffrey Yeo, *Bringing Things Together: Aggregate Records in a Digital Age,* p.46

for the ways in which images are performing, more than ever, as the source from which knowledge and understanding is drawn.

Conway's assertion that "Building collections of photographs is… a far more interesting and complex phenomenon than merely copying photographs from one medium to another." [11] seems highly accurate and appropriate for the argument to employ art-making practices alongside record-keeping strategies. Within the aggregations that archivists want to create, there can be, and should be, a level of artistry or design employed to build more spectacularly arranged and fluidly linked resources. This isn't a call for the "destruction of the fonds" by any means. I am, instead, begging for a review on the importance of the fonds to the user.

In order for an archival series to be thought well maintained, it is required to behave in specific ways and uphold common practices such as "respect des fonds". So, if we are to begin imagining new kinds of archival sequencing for the future, what do they look like for the user and how do they perform their usefulness while the keeper takes on the responsibility to maintain these sequences as a flooding stream of images are produced for consideration in their collections? Ketelaar describes the exploitation of archival materials on different "levels" of the materials as they need be exploited for the ease of the user. He explains how pre-text or non-textual documents, using the example of maps, require the exploitation of an individual document to successfully speak for itself, apart from any kind of hierarchical sequencing. The topography of a map creates the point at which the user accesses the document by its own kind of pathways from one map to the next, using location. And this exploitation at the "…document level, sometimes even disregarding any of the other levels" must occur with instances of records, like the map, in order for the archive to be useful. [12]

The diminishing use by younger generations of text-based-documents is clear. Clicking on video stories which only use text for quoting from primary textual reference,

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[11] Paul Conway, *Modes of Seeing : Digitized Photographic Archives and the Experienced Use,* p. 427

[12] Eric Ketelaar, *Exploitation of New Archival Material,* from *The Archival Image*. p. 70

interacting with motion graphic interfaces which use image as representation for difficult-to-read texts, scrolling through social media feeds with chains of ranting monologues, and bulking up "understanding" of important events or cultural figures by watching pulpy docudramas on streaming services online are now serving as the most normative modes of learning — even in schools. It can be troubling to think that these kinds of dissemination of information may lack the ability to find, and have little to no focus on, how the content has been created, who created it, or where it has originated from. In *Archiving the Unspeakable,* Professor Michelle Caswell restates the outlook on provenance from the view of archival scholar, Tom Nesmith. Nesmith views provenance as *process of* social inscription, transmission, contextualization, and interpretation. Out of this reconceptualization comes re-*contextualization.* And the resulting effect impacts the definition of provenance as it relates to creators, the subjects, the archivists, *and* the users — and further, the user constantly reinterprets the records and potentially can be seen as another keeper of the records in new arrangements created by and for them.[13]

Circling back to the idea of a serial typology and the persistence of the image in creating such bodies of records, I again invoke the thinking of Geoffrey Yeo. He defines what he calls the "occurrent" of the record as "temporal phenomena, such as activities, functions, processes, transactions, or events" and says that the records are created in service of the occurrent "in a persistent manner; the representation remains available after the conclusion of the occurrent that is represented."[14] This time-oriented aspect of the record can be crucial to creating the visualization of all records. Thinking of the occurrent as markings on a clock and the persistence of time coming back around again and again, hitting each occurrent as it makes its cyclical journey, the records serve to mark every important occurrent within their larger repository bodies. If each record can indicate (using the properties like the image-size, image-quality, and image-provenance of the newspaper photos found in Charlesworth's image-centric re-appropriated records) exactly what users have come to the repository to make use of,

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[13] Michelle Caswell, *Archiving the Unspeakable* p.19

[14] Yeo, p. 45

or what we can imagine will be the repository's duty to preform as their most important sub-categories within their aggregates - the user can easily navigate through the cycle again and again. And, supposing this model makes it worthwhile, within the largest image/occurrent, a spiral of clocks spin as they would begin to create a continuum of information which references itself again and again.

And this is how Charlesworth's serial works in *Modern History* speak with each other. They are in constant dialogue in which each piece depends on the other to reference to the next piece put next to it. "The visual properties of a (digitized) photograph constitute a representation of a representation,"[15] and therefore the typological and indexical aggregate of images will be in reference to itself *ad nauseam*. So the focus, then, is to consider the ways in which careful placement, and arrangement, of the images can be created by the archivist or record-keeper. And yet it remains difficult to imagine what of the arrangement of pictures from *Stills,* their birth from pages torn out of their larger bodies, can offer to the archival practice?

Of course I wouldn't feel this anywhere near a sound argument to have until Sontag is to be cited, here in the discussion of photographs. Sontag neatly states in *On Photography* that the photograph changes dependent on the context in which it is seen; this is undeniable. The direct statement which follows holds heavy weight when applied to the archival field. If you can, begin to consider the word record or the word document as an alternative to the word photograph when Sontag explains that,

> " Because each photograph is only a fragment, its moral and emotional weight depends on where it is inserted." [16]

The fragmented nature of all archives will never be able to resolve itself but it is the missing pieces and the small pieces together which combine to bring deep

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[15] Conway, parenthetical de-emphasis of 'digitized' in hopes to regain the focus of the image and not just the digital record of the image. But it holds true that all photos are self-referential and reflect into an endless pool of the image itself. Although, for this future conceptualization, digital is still an important aspect of its nature.

[16] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* p.105

understanding to the collective whole. And, at times, archival bodies must become linked to one another. *Stills* offers this kind of moment. Each image representing a common formal shape or philosophical notion of the human *type.* The weight of each single instance of the body in the image is dependent on the body in the next and, furthermore, they are both indicative of each other so as to make a cohesive mass that not only accumulates images of like pictorial content but also create like emotional content.

Inside of the archive exist many records which do not "fit" into files and folders or even boxes or on shelves. McMurray calls these instances of the "archival excess" and asks what kinds of records really do belong within the archives, especially (but only really beginning with) in the case of things that are not flat and which are not recordable.[17] An easy way to answer this is, of course, with visual indicators to the record seen as "unarchivable" in the traditional sense. But, this would of course result in a loss for many users looking for an experience with the tangible artifact. How can archives successfully begin removal of out-dated, text heavy documents and create replacement with something that can represent what would be found inside those original texts? Is the "excessiveness" of collecting creating collections which are never able to be fully recorded, themselves? This is where I remember Ketelaar's maps (lacking any embedded hierarchies) and start thinking about the pathways between Charlesworth's *Stills* to the places, people, collections which they reference (lacking any text). Now, we can imagine an archival series as being condensed into something visually capable of holding all the weight of its repository, just like the weight Sontag sees found in an individual photo being pulled out of the context in which it is seen. The photos can eliminate excess and link between one another the most important aspects of the archive they belong to, together but also as the links are elongated with room for more than a single link forming the chains that create an entire fence within, and around, the archive itself - binding it together. Some over-looked records, growing like weeds through the links in this fence, take on new meaning and can harden into links themselves, McMurray calls them "boundary object" and says that they outline

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[17] Peter McMurray, *ARCHIVAL EXCESS : SENSATIONAL HISTORIES BEYOND THE AUDIOVISUAL* p.263

the “intellectual limits that serve as sites of contact and continuity between different discursive communities or disciplines.”[18]

Of course, Charlesworth is not the only visual artist to consider implicating instances of art-practice for reflection in the archives. Many artists create their own aggregations of reference to pull from for their original works. Like art filmmaker, Arthur Jafa, whose personal collection of reference material is organized inside plastic sleeves fitted into bulky three-ring binders.[19] Jafa often cannibalizes these collections in order to reference bits from older bindings next to pieces of more recent findings. This kind of haphazard arrangement seems entirely unfit for the archive, at first glance. Jafa, like Charlesworth, is creating indices for his own work. Where still images, collected from magazines, newspapers, and other print detritus become important records that are indicative of the gesture Jafa will make for his moving pictures and the narrative problems with social structures that he will address as he breaks through the spaces between his references.

Gerhard Richter, *Atlas (Atlas Sheet: 5)*
Zeitungs- & Albumfotos, Newspaper & Album Photos, 1962
51.7 cm x 66.7 cm

Similar to this practice, Gerhard Richter has been in the habit of making what he calls the *Atlas*, a comprehensive and exhaustive(?) record-keeping device for not only his life but his life’s work and the references used in order to maintain his thorough practices of making art. The snapshot album photos from Richter’s past, newspaper & book clippings, and photos taken for use in paintings share the same space between the pages of his *Atlas.*[20] Between each record in the archives exist similar pores like those spaces in the pages of both Jafa and Richter’s record-keeping. Pores that can be opened and information sent leaking into depths of the repository to drip onto the “boundary objects” and give them their place next to the records more often

Arthur Jafa, *Untitled*
Photograph by Elon Schoenholz.
Dimensions variable.

Zoe Leonard, *Survey* 2012.
Private collection, Italy.
Installation view at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; photography by Brian Forrest.

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[18] McMurray p.265

[19] Arthur Jafa, *Untitled*

[20] Gerhard Richer, *Atlas*

referenced which are found laying at the top of the surface or the kinds of records one would hope to find considering only the institutional name attached to the repository.

And for the truly excessive archivist, whose collection is bursting at seams with records and items (some not easily locatable but still impressive and impactful upon their larger body) like those mentioned by McMurray, the examination of true typographic works of Zoe Leonard are impressive. In her works, *Survey* and *You See I Am Here After All*, Leonard amasses thousands of postcards which depict the same locations, Niagara Falls. These works are exhaustive as far as Leonard has been capable to accumulate. In lecture she has reminisced on seeing boxes of prints in the first processing studio she went to as a teenager, her first time witnessing what she said she considered to be an archive. And that the "orthography" of photography came to her out of this understanding of capture and collect, by ways more obviously seen in other photographers works like street photos or mapmaking/aerial photography, because this is art before it is art and is itself a kind of language. [21]

As archival studies is becoming a field of interest, or potentially a field becoming greatly misunderstood, for the art-world and other creative outlets it is of great importance to study further the ways in which the archives have formed in ways which they remain useful. But, increasingly, the attention of the user is harder to capture. With this problem there can be many solution. The visual arts and their creative practices towards collecting are only one pair of lenses with which we can, and hopefully will, view the record-keeping structures that exist now. Imagining the impact that the aforementioned works may have on the arrangement of records for the archives is exciting but likely will be extremely difficult for many professionals to consider. And what about for collections which aren't as image saturated as say museum archives and the growing visual records within health & medical archives? Say, legal and corporate bodies? These areas will, no doubt, only become increasingly difficult for future generations to navigate if they continue to aggregate text-only, read-only, fill-in-the-blank kinds of formal documentation of the past.

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[21] from my notes during Zoe Leonard in conversation with Hamza Walker. November 11, 2017 at Hauser & Wirth, Los Angeles, CA

Additionally, is it possible to imagine creative, obsessive, and/or passionate ways of collecting being employed by those outside of the artists' private practice (the archivist, the researcher, the curious) to make the archives more accessible to wider (younger, differently abled, illiterate, aging) audiences? The question would require further investigation, not only into the practice of artists working within the archives but also within the modes of representation already used for archival material within in media daily accessed by those who may benefit from a more creative approach the most. It occurs, to me, that the privilege of the image can create more accessible archives in more than one definitive way. It is the *privilege* of the archivist to have the ability to consider new arrangements for accessibility and improvement on user experience — so why not begin to consider the difficult tasks of the archive as opportunities to creative better understandings of their purpose and their service to the user? By collaboration with creative thinkers, like visual artists using records for visual works, there must exist opportunities to re-conceptualize the purpose and arrangement of the, oft-seen “dusty”, archives.

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Assignment 2

Grade: 92

Analysis and critical reflection 20%	20
Relevance of the topic to the course 20%	20
Demonstrated mastery of archival and recordkeeping concepts 20%	18
Integration of relevant references from the archival literature and elsewhere 20%	16
Written quality 20%	18
Comments	This a really interesting exploration of works that rely on archival activation and reinterpretation, however, I think you could have delved more deeply into the archival literature to make your points. Specifically, how can the ways in which Charlesworth is working with photographs *build on* archival theory? You are getting there, but I think your reliance on scholarship primarily outside of archival studies should be complemented by more archival theory to deepen your argument.