Making Artists’ Archives Accessible

Radicality & Collaboration in the Miami Women Artists Archive

Abstract

How can community archives serve visual artists in the documentation of their creative legacies and position themselves as spaces that are truly accessible and equitable? This poster illustrates how the Women Artists Archive Miami (WAAM) is building a post-custodial and participatory platform by foregrounding the theoretical framework of radicality and prioritizing collaborative methods to assist cultural producers in their legacy preservation initiatives.

Introduction

WAAM is dedicated to preserving and documenting the artist archives of women and female-identifying artists in Miami. The project is a response to a growing need to build an archival presence in Miami to record the artistic production that has taken place here since the 1980s and beyond. In particular, this project will provide a space for women artists who are marginalized, those who do not have access to mainstream art resources and artists who are underrepresented.

Why are Artists’ Archives Important?

- Contain valuable primary source material for researchers, educators, students, historians & the community.
- Archives provide a window into an artists' creative process and provide critical contextual and historical information.
- Archives preserve different methods artists use to record process: sketches, notebooks, drawings, letters, photos, clippings, digital images & documents, sound recordings, etc.

Radicality & Collaboration as Inspiration

The principles of radicality and collaboration are the underlying foundations of WAAM. Radicality in this context is defined as a theoretical framework that allows for expansion, innovation and a reformulation of traditional processing methods. It also frames the practice of archiving as a form of activism and rejects the role of the archivist as gatekeeper.

Archivist Michelle Caswell uses the term “symbolic annihilation” to describe how marginalized communities experience a sense of dislocation and invisibility caused by a lack of inclusion and representation in mainstream archives. She argues that community archives have the power to combat the alienation caused by these failures.

WAAM embraces a collaborative archiving model. In order to build a just and inclusive cultural space, it is essential to actively listen, build networks of trust and strong connections with creators.

Post-custodial and participatory approaches reject a proprietary approach and instead focus on collaborative processing methods, decentralizing traditional models of archiving and honor the creator's knowledge and decision-making in how they wish to share their cultural production.

Community building also involves learning and taking note of how artists are responding to social justice issues in society. Cultural producers have often taken the lead in creating alternative platforms to document public memory that is vulnerable. From Chitra Ganesh & Mariam Ghani’s Index of the Disappeared, Olaronke Akinmowo’s Free Black Women’s Library to artist Chloe Bass’ Department of Local Affairs, artists are reacting to an urgency to preserve public memory in critical ways by challenging ideas of what is deemed “official”, “historical”, “valuable” and reinforcing the idea that archival frameworks should record the lives and experiences of everyday people.

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“Within complex and ever shifting realms of power relations, do we position ourselves on the side of the colonizing mentality? Or do we continue to stand in political resistance with the oppressed, ready to offer our ways of seeing and theorizing, or making culture, towards that revolutionary effort which seeks to create space where there is unlimited access to the pleasure of power of knowing, where transformation is possible?”

Bell Hooks, “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness”, Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics.
WAAM promotes the discovery and preservation of artists’ archives through multiple trajectories.

**PHYSICAL**
- Organizing 3 to 4 physical exhibitions a year featuring artist studio archives to encourage audience engagement.
- Work closely with artist to select materials.
- Include ephemera, postcards, flyers, interviews, photographs, video archives, essays, objects, artwork, books, catalogs, etc.
- Materials are digitized post exhibition & migrated to digital collections.

**DIGITAL**
- Publicly accessible database.
- Online exhibitions.
- Activating artists’ archives through social media platforms.
- Crowdsourcing initiatives to engage artists of all career stages and backgrounds.

Research & Outreach
WAAM began in 2018 as a research project to understand how an independent archive can effectively and meaningfully serve women and female-identifying artists in the Miami. The Research & Outreach phase offered a crucial opportunity to speak with women artists across all career stages to gain insight into how artists are dealing with the challenges of career documentation.

Women artists in particular suffer from a lack of representation in both mainstream museums and galleries. A recent study in 2019 conducted by ArtNet indicated that out of a total of 260,470 works acquired by 26 museums’ permanent collections since 2008, only 29,247 were by women. Disparities also exist in the scholarship surrounding women artists. “A recent study of Yale School of Art students found that even after graduation rates reached parity in the early 1980s, female alumni were written about in books and scholarly publications two to three times less frequently than their male peers.”

In order to create an effective archival platform whose ultimate objective is to create a space for inclusion and representation, it was imperative to assess the need for such a space amongst artists and how impactful it could be for creative communities in Miami. The Toolkit developed by Michelle Caswell and the UCLA Community Archives Lab was particularly helpful in structuring the survey. The outreach phase consisted of conducting studio visits with thirty artists to understand:

- How would artists like to participate in a community archive?
- What are their individual legacy needs and how do artists perceive and relate to archival institutions?
- What are the barriers that artists experience with regard to access and representation in the art world?
- How does identifying specific barriers then lead to a better understanding of the ways in which archival spaces can promote visibility for cultural producers?
- And ultimately, how does generating community histories help to create a sense of belonging for artists who have been traditionally left out of mainstream art narratives?

Findings
1. At present there is no publicly accessible online platform to access information about Miami based women and female-identifying art practitioners in South Florida.
2. The categories of emerging, mid-career and established are problematic as they assume that artists undergo a seamless transition from one stage to the next.
3. Archival material belonging to the studio archives of mature artists offers a rich historic insight into the art activity of the last few decades.
4. Among mature artists, there is a feeling that opportunities diminish with age so despite having worked as a visual artist for twenty years and producing an extensive body of work and showing in local and national exhibitions, there aren’t enough opportunities to sustain engagement with the art world, which in turn inhibits visibility.
5. What are their individual legacy needs and how do artists perceive and relate to archival institutions?

Summary
1. From June 2020 to June 2021, WAAM will build the digital platform for the pilot project using Omeka Classic to process, arrange, catalog and share archival collections...
2. WAAM will continue to expand its database after the pilot year by collaborating with artists.
3. During the pilot program, WAAM will digitize ten collections, curate three online exhibitions and coordinate one crowdsourcing initiative.
4. The digital archive will fill a crucial gap in presenting collections of cultural producers who are underrepresented and will open up research into this important area.

Sources