

# 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 for 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 the 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.



Carolina Cueva, Cuentos Retablados: Kindling, 2019

## Objectives

- How can we reposition archives that have traditionally operated as sites of privilege, to record the creative contributions of communities who have been left out of the historical record?
- How can we re-examine archival practices and offer access points through multiple pathways that increase visibility for cultural practitioners through dynamic archival programs?



Artist Charo Oquet at Dimensions Variable, Miami, 2020

## 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

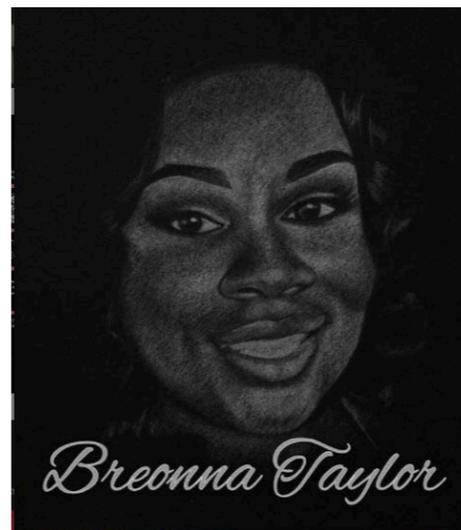
The principles of radicality and collaboration are the underlying foundations of WAAM. Radicality in this context is defined as a theoretical framework that allows for expansion, innovation and a reformulation of traditional processing methods. It also frames the practice of archiving as a form of activism 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. <sup>1</sup>

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. <sup>2</sup>

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. <sup>3</sup>

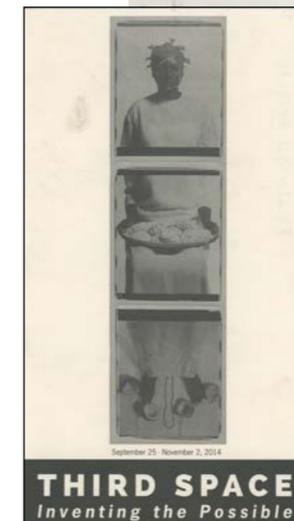
Community building also involves learning and taking note of how artists are responding to social justice issues in society. Cultural producers have often taken the lead in creating alternative platforms to document public memory that is vulnerable. From Chitra Ganesh & Mariam Ghani's *Index of the Disappeared*, 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.



Chire Regans, Breonna Taylor from The Memorial Mural Project, 2020, Chire Regans Studio Archive

“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.*



## Social Practice - Artist as Archivist

*The Memorial Portrait Project: Addressing the Effects of Gun Violence* is a living archive in Miami that honors the victims of gun violence. After six year old King Carter was shot and killed in Miami in February 2016, artist Chire Regans began drawing portraits of those who were killed by gun violence in Florida as a way of raising awareness about an epidemic that affects so many communities. Four years later, this memorial archive has over two thousand portraits of victims of gun violence, police and domestic abuse. This growing archive is dedicated to the act of remembrance and ensures that the individual legacies of those lost to violence are not erased in public memory. In the artist as archivist paradigm, artists take on the task of memory work as a form of political & social activism and become agents of cultural empowerment.

## 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.

### In-Between Worlds: Selections from the Studio Archives of Charo Oquet

January 25 - March 31, 2020

Documents the art practice and activities of Dominican-born, Miami based artist, curator, organizer, educator and gallery owner Charo Oquet. Her multidisciplinary art practice spans over thirty years, across three continents, and explores the intricate and underlying parameters of cultural migration, identity, and ritual traditions that encompass the socio-cultural landscape of the Dominican Republic. In-Between Worlds presents printed material including exhibition announcements, brochures, flyers, catalogs, publications and posters, video documentation, objects and materials from the artist's studio.

#	NAME	TITLE	MEDIA
1	NAOMI BLANTON	*LOST PUR*	ASSEMBLAGE
2	CAROL DAVIDSON	*SANCTUARY*	WATER COLOR
3	BOBI DIMOND	*MY NEW T-SHIRT*	ETCHED POLYROID PHOTO
4	BOBI DIMOND	*GRANDMA'S CHAIR*	ETCHED POLYROID PHOTO
5	ROSA DOOLEY	*UNTITLED*	OIL PASTEL
6	SUSAN EMERY EISENBERG	*FIGURES, SUN & REEDS*	COMPUTER GENERATED/HAND
7	SUSAN EMERY EISENBERG	*MASK # 52-D*	ACRYLIC
8	SUSAN EMERY EISENBERG	*MASK # 65*	ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
9	ROSEMARY FINESBERG	*LITTLE ZIP*	ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
10	ROSEMARY FINESBERG	*ZIP 1 SERIES -3*	FIBER
11	DIANNE GREANEY	*RYA LANDSCAPE*	FOUND
12	HICKEL, MARGOT	*HONDA MAN*	FOUND
13	MARGOT HICKEL	*BUFFALO DANCE*	FOUND
14	ELLEN JACOBS	*UNTITLED- VASE*	GLASS
15	ELLEN JACOBS	*UNTITLED - SCULPTURE*	GLASS
16	PAT RIVERON LEE	*ROLLING ON*	COLLAGE
17	PAT RIVERON LEE	*MOON SNAILS*	COLLAGE
18	ALICE LEWIS	*THE MAN IN THE CAT'S HEAD*	OIL ON CANVAS
19	ALICE LEWIS	*ON HER KNEES*	OIL ON CANVAS
20	NORMA NEWMAN	*MANDALA*	STAINED GLASS
21	NORMA NEWMAN	*OVER THE BRIDGE*	STAINED GLASS
22	PHYLLIS PARKER	*CROTON*	OIL ON CANVAS
23	PHYLLIS PARKER	*SEALING WAX PALMS*	OIL ON CANVAS
24	CONSTANCE RENAUD	*WE ALL DID IT*	CANVAS CONSTRUCTION
25	CONSTANCE RENAUD	*UNTITLED*	CANVAS CONSTRUCTION
26	PAT ROSENSTEIN	*SELF PORTRAIT*	ACRYLIC ON CANVAS
27	KAREN RIFAS	*SMILING STICKS*	BRONZE & LEATHER
28	KAREN RIFAS	*UNTITLED*	MIXED
29	ALINE BELAIRE	*CELESTIAL HARMONY I*	INK
30	ALINE BELAIRE	*CELESTIAL HARMONY II*	INK
31	VIRGINIA THOMPSON	*FIRST SNOW*	WATER COLOR
32	VIRGINIA THOMPSON	*FILTERED LIGHT*	WATER COLOR
33	N.J. WILSON	*GALLINULE I*	WATERCOLOR
34	N.J. WILSON	*GALLINULE II*	WATERCOLOR
35	FREDA TSCHECHNY	*TRIPLE MASKS*	BRONZE
36	FREDA TSCHECHNY	*PARIS IS PARIS*	BRONZE

Women's Caucus for Art Newsletter, Karen Rifas Studio Archive, Miami.

### 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".<sup>4</sup>



Exhibition Catalogs, Yanira Collado Studio Archive, Miami.

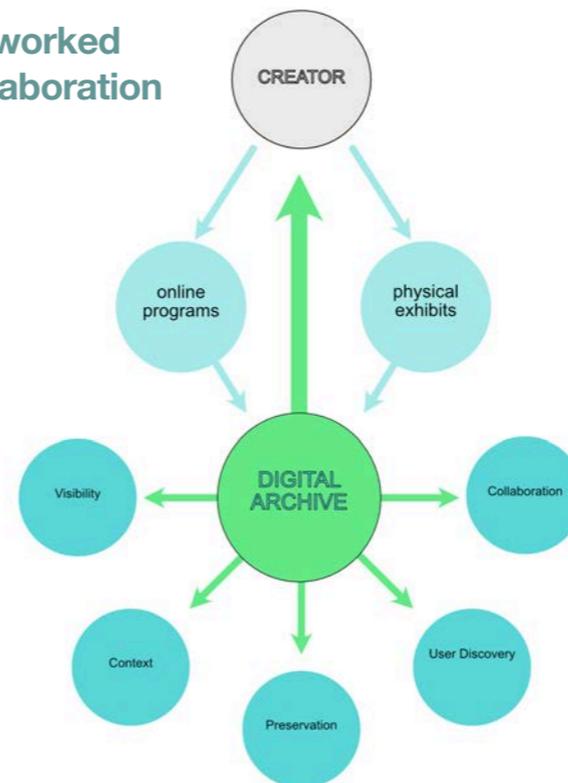
In order to create an effective archival platform whose ultimate objective is to create a space for inclusion and representation, it was imperative to assess the need for such a space amongst artists and how impactful it could be for creative communities in Miami. The Toolkit developed by Michelle Caswell 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

- At present there is no publicly accessible online platform to access information about Miami based women and female-identifying art practitioners in South Florida.
- 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.
- Archival material belonging to the studio archives of mature artists offers a rich historic insight into the art activity of the last few decades.
- 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.
- All of the artists interviewed expressed interest in participating in at least one of WAAM's archival programs.

### Networked Collaboration



Nathalie Alfonso, Anatomy, 2019

### Summary

- 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..
- WAAM will continue to expand its database after the pilot year by collaborating with artists.
- During the pilot program, WAAM will digitize ten collections, curate three online exhibitions and coordinate one crowdsourcing initiative.
- 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.



L-R: Artist Karen Rifas & Curator Tyler Emerson, WAAM Catalogs, Harumi Abe Studio Archive

### Sources

- Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, & Mario H. Ramirez. "To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing", *Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives*. The American Archivist: Spring/Summer 2016, Vol 79, No.1, pp 56-81
- Michelle Caswell & Marika Cifor. "From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in the Archives." *Archivaria*, vol. 81, 2016, p. 23-43. Project MUSE [muse.jhu.edu/article/687705](https://muse.jhu.edu/article/687705).
- Isto Huvila, "Participatory Archive: Towards Decentralised Curation, Radical User Orientation and Broader Contextualisation of Records Management." *Archival Science*, 2008, 8 (1), 15-36. (Springer)
- Julia Halperin & Charlotte Burns. "Museums Claim They're Paying More Attention to Female Artists. That's an Illusion." *Artnet*, Sept. 19, 2019.
- Images Courtesy of Harumi Abe, Nathalie Alfonso, Yanira Collado, Carolina Cueva, Charo Oquet, Chire Pegans & Karen Rifas Studio Archives.