

ARLIS/NA Conference 2009

Session: Where Libraries and Archives Converge: Artists Files

Date: Monday, April 20, 10:15 – 11:45am

Moderator: Jon Evans, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Title: *Artist Files: A Look Beyond the Drawer*

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I am here today to speak very briefly about the definition and history of artist files and perhaps a bit about the *concept* of “Artist Files” today. So as a preface before we go on to hear about several specific and current initiatives involving artist files I am going to try and contextualize the topic for you. With that goal in mind, I want to look at the following questions:

1. What the heck are artist files?
2. How are artist files used?
3. So what? How significant are artist files?

What *Are* Artist Files?

This might seem like a straightforward and easy question but in fact the answer is a bit muddled. Part of the problem is descriptive – there seems to be many variant terms that embody artist files and their usage depends on the individual institution. “Subject Files”, “Clippings File”, “Vertical Files”, and “Ephemera Files” are all used variously to refer in some degree to artist files. When artist files are grouped with ephemera collections they often take on the pejorative term “minor publications”, or “grey”, “miscellaneous”, and “local papers”.

My personal favorite is “fugitive literature”. I think that adds an element of danger that’s really missing in library work these days. This all points to the fact that librarians have had a hard time deciding what exactly these materials “are” and what to do with them. Setting aside the debate about a title, let’s focus on the types of materials that typically make up an artist file. The ARLIS/NA Artist Files Working Group has defined artist files as: *Collections of small or ephemeral documents relating to the visual arts that are collected and arranged for the purposes of research.*

That’s a great definition and quite inclusive. This group has also listed the types of materials that are often contained in artist files:

Announcements, architectural drawings, artists’ statements, artworks, auction catalogs, books, brochures, checklists, commercial gallery catalogs, clippings, cultural artifacts, diaries, digital files, exhibition catalogs...

-- I’m not going to read them all, but you get the idea – pretty much *anything* could end up in an artist file. In some ways it might be easier to define artist files by what they are *not* rather than what they *are*. John Johnson, the amasser of the eponymous ephemera collection now at the Bodleian Library at Oxford grappled with the same problem when trying to define “ephemera”. He wrote: “It is difficult to define except to say that it is everything which would normally go into the wastepaper basket after use, everything printed that is not actually a book”. Along those lines, I submit that artist files might well be broadly defined as: *“all those small bits of paper found in endless banks of grey file cabinets that only librarians know about”*. OK, maybe that’s not a great definition but it is that image of rows of file cabinets spanning remote library corners that typifies artist files for many librarians.

Perhaps the most useful way to conceive of artist files is to think about *what they represent*. Let me play the role of a harried art librarian for a moment (I think I can pull it off). I am looking frantically for any information about an early 20th century artist – anything at all. I have scoured the larger biographical print resources, have torn through several specific artist dictionaries, checked online biographical databases, and even queried our online auction results database. No luck. I posted a desperate plea on ARLIS-L, and I even resorted to a shameful Google search with no success. For the art librarian, the artist files often represent the *last hope* for any meaningful information about an artist. In many cases, the artist files will yield the only nuggets of information available about an artist working on the margins of success and recognition.

How Are Artist Files Used?

The use of artist files depends on the user. As we have seen, librarians often use them to mine obscure data about an artist. Many of the objects in the artist files at my library are simply postcards or pamphlets announcing the exhibition of an artist's work. When that single postcard represents the only source of information about an artist, then it becomes invaluable to the librarian and scholar. This postcard confirms the full name of the artist and the title of an exhibition, supplies a date that the artist was active, lists gallery or even museum representation, and simply allows us to fix an artist in a geographic location. The card I show here is a gold mine as it includes an exhibition history and a list of collections. Individually these pieces of information don't really add up to much, but each bit leads to new avenues of enquiry and collectively they represent at least *potential* for further information. In the Detroit Institute of Arts Research Library, where I was fortunate enough to work in the past, we had an extensive

vertical file of local Michigan artists, many of which contained folders stuffed with unpublished information. This resource (which was many decades in the making) was invaluable to us and it was even regularly requested by patrons regardless of the fact that we had not publicized its existence in any way. The Museum of Modern Art was an early leader in providing access to its ponderous collection of artist files, producing a microfiche facsimile all the way back in 1984.

But how do non-librarians use artist files? Scholars have long recognized the importance of ephemeral publications in their work. Researchers are drawn to the inherent ubiquity and utter lack of historical self consciousness that characterize these bits of paper that were never intended to last. The scraps of everyday material culture: tickets, brochures, pamphlets, and postcards, assume an importance beyond their modest appearance. As Asa Briggs, the British social historian, notes:

“In the reconstruction of the past everything is grist for the historian’s mill, and what was thrown away is at least as useful as what was deliberately preserved”.

Studies in Material Culture have at their very core, a dedication to drawing “evidence” from “artifacts” produced by man, including printed artifacts. Jules Prown, who pioneered the methodology of Material Culture enquiry, has written that “every work, high or low, embodies belief, consciously or unconsciously”. This basic assumption casts ephemeral collections to the forefront of primary resources.

How significant are Artist Files?

As I have said, scholars, particularly cultural and social historians, have long recognized the importance of ephemeral collections in primary research and the use of these types of materials is evident in literature reviews. To give just one example from close to home, The British art historian Giles Waterfield delivered the Paul Mellon Lectures at Yale in 2007. His topic, the creation of 19th century British regional museums and their publics utilized a vast trove of primary sources culled from museum ephemeral collections across Great Britain. This early trade card for the Agnew's Gallery in Manchester is but one example. Dr. Waterfield has been using ephemeral collections to help reconstruct 19th century Great Britain for decades.

If we base significance on the steady hum of publishing activity then we might conclude that “artist files” themselves are not all that important. There has been a smattering of important journal articles that look specifically at collections designated as “artist files” in the recent past, but in general, it has been the overarching category of ephemera collections (of which artist files represent an important subset) that has recently captured the publishing attention of librarians. If librarians have lagged behind somewhat in recognizing the research potential of their ephemera collections they are making up for it with a flurry of recent activity: In 2006, the *Art Libraries Journal* devoted an entire issue to ephemera resources in the art library. In 2007, The Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of ACRL staged a highly successful preconference which was devoted to ephemera resources in libraries, archives and museums. Also in 2007, the comprehensive *Art Museum Libraries and Librarianship* was published with three essays devoted to ephemeral publications in museum libraries.

Online resources for discovering and exploring individual artist file collections are popping up daily: *Art and Artist Files in the Smithsonian Libraries* compiles artist files from six art libraries including the American Art and the Hershorn Museums. The Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh now provides online access to their local artist and clippings files from their website. A search of OCLC's monolithic bibliographic database yields increasing amounts of artist file records from contributing libraries.

Closer to home for me, the online collections of Yale's Beinecke Library now include ephemeral collections such as the Western Silent Films Lobby Card Collection, and a World's Fair memorabilia collection.

So, in a nutshell, what does all this say about artist files? The history has certainly been one of isolation and under-funding at best. Even the largest and most visible collections have grown and evolved in a vacuum with very little aids to discovery. But what of the future? The current literature, and indeed the wonderful initiatives you are about to witness in a moment, point to the ascendancy of Artist files. As artist files lose some of their inherent mystery, what is gained is the recognition that these bits of waste paper are important primary sources, indeed, even assets to the Library, and more importantly, they are resources that can be shared and collaboratively grown.