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Archives of women's media

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Abstract:

Against the grain of the traditional archive conceived of as the locus of (masculine/patriarchal) authority, women's archives remain a powerful tool for displacing and decentring authoritative discourses. This entry engages with physical and online spaces for archiving, mediating and commemorating women's media. It critically retraces the historical emergence and endurance of women's archives and surveys some of the main women's archives and libraries, from tangible to digital, online environments. How are feminist activist practices materialised and articulated in media objects and ephemera (such as fanzines and pamphlets)? How do these primarily ephemeral objects get collected, archived, and curated? What happens when women's alternative media become institutionalised, entering a form of official and corporate culture? What kind of memory work takes place? This entry pays attention to the often precarious conditions of existence/survival of women's archives and to the enduring relationship that they bear to contemporary feminist practices. It engages with the centrality of materiality and material autonomy for the articulation and production of feminist identities and sensibilities in – and beyond – the male-biased corporate media industry.

Keywords: archive, memory, materiality, media, feminism, digitisation, fanzine, history

Women's archives, which are a late 19th-century and 20th-century phenomenon, have attracted strikingly little scholarly attention so far (notable exceptions include Withers, 2015; Eichorn, 2013; Zanish-Belcher & Voss, 2013). And yet, the archive has long been an implicitly *gendered* site. The establishment and conservation of official archives cannot be separated from the rise of a patriarchal nation-state ideology and a male-centred construction of history (Ernst, 2016; Featherstone, 2006). As such, there exists a continuous friction or dissonance between women and the archive, where the latter is understood as a primitive locus of power, an exemplary *patrimonial* and patriarchal site.

For centuries, women's lives and productions were excluded from official 'authoritative' archival records. Women however developed a variety of alternative and often radical proto-archival projects. In the US and Europe, the earliest attempts made by women at reclaiming, recording and archiving their heritage started in cloisters as early as the 7th century A.D. (Lerner, 1994, p. 249). We can cite works and projects as heterogeneous (in shape, scale and intent) as the 'sister-books' of the 15th century written by nuns or Christine de Pizan's *Book of the City of the Ladies* (1410) through to feminist historian Mary Ritter Beard's lifelong struggle towards creating a World Center for Women's Archives or artist Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party* installation (1974-1979). The diversity of these projects draws our attention to the multiplicity of meanings and shapes that a women's archive may assume. Women's archives have traditionally existed – and continue to exist – as voluntarily loose ventures, stemming from individuals or communities of individuals, seeking to acknowledge and inhabit the gaps left by official discourses. It follows that women's will for an *archive of their own* remains inseparable from the will to be recognised as full – yet differentiated – political subjects, a programme which crystallised in the 19th-century Suffrage movement.

Before the twentieth century, women's attempts at preserving their own history were almost systematically thwarted for lack of a sustainable circuit of knowledge transmission: 'women's creations sank soundlessly into the sea, leaving barely a ripple, and succeeding generations of women were left to cover the same ground others had already covered before them' (Lerner, 1994, p. 220). At the turn of the 1950s, Simone de Beauvoir would still deplore that 'Women lack concrete means for organizing themselves into a unit which can stand face to face with the correlative unit. They have no past, no history' (de Beauvoir, 1953, p. xix). Lacking access to legal rights and networks (such as the ones afforded by universities), pre-20th century women had to create and sustain their own 'affinity clusters' (Lerner, 1994, p. 229) or communities, which constituted the initial environments for thinking

The Suffrage movement

In the 19th century, 'the self-consciousness of women as a group, their awareness of the value of their work in communities and organizations' (Lerner, 1994, p. 268) came to the fore, culminating in the Woman Suffrage movement in the UK and across Europe. New, progressive ideas were materialised in a profusion of (alternative) mediatic formats: newspapers, pamphlets, ephemera, drawings, photographs, painted or embroidered flags and banners, badges, postcards, to cite but the main ones. The creative use and reinterpretation of a multiplicity of media formats, many of them characteristically associated with traditional female roles (such as sewing, see Parker 1984) denoted a strong self-reflexivity of women, a deliberate attempt to subvert more conventional mediatic frames. The Suffragettes fashioned a materially alternative site of expression and self-expression which would, conversely, re-fashion what political expression and commitment might mean – and, effectively, *do.*

Attempts at preserving and gathering the rich material culture of the Suffrage movement, which often 'survived in various places' (Smith, 1998, p. 182), took forms as varied as the International Archive for the Women's Movement in the Netherlands (founded in 1935), the Fawcett Library's collection in London (originally established in 1926, later renamed the Women's Library), la

Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand (Paris, 1932) as well as niche, amateur archives of the 1930s (including Marie-Louise Bouglé's pioneering women's library in Paris). The Suffrage Movement's archives constitute the first large-scale, more systematic women's media archives and libraries. They were, from their inception, entwined with the creation and maintenance of feminist (historical) consciousness. Against the grain of the traditional archive conceived of as the locus of (masculine) authority, they remained a powerful tool for displacing and decentring authoritative discourses.

The Suffrage movement – which remained accessible through archival remains – was to leave a deep impression upon all of the feminist movements of the twentieth century. The rich, poly-centred Women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960s through to the 1980s was similarly and partially realised, activated, and fought for, in media materialities, notably through the creation of a sustainable and critical constellation of documents. Its growth was supported by an independent women's press, women's publishing houses and women's record labels – resonating with Lerner's argument that women 'must organize for themselves and in their own interests before they can fully think their way out of patriarchy' (Lerner, 1994, p. 246). We must underline the vital importance of materiality and material autonomy for the articulation and production of feminist identities and sensibilities in – and beyond – the male-biased corporate media industry. Media objects act, reciprocally, as a means of transmitting and as a means of reflecting upon individual and collective achievements and struggles: rather than a still 'mirror', they offer a transformative means. To control the means of production and produce alternative media may lead to the effective reshaping of the direct environment.

Women's archives are necessarily scattered: their diversity itself participates into and reaffirms the multi-layered, dynamic, decentred or poly-centred bias of the female historiographical project. This explains the attention given to personal narratives and oral histories; the British Library for instance hosts the 'Sisterhood and After' archive related to the Women's Liberation Movement, containing audio recordings of women's histories, personal productions, magazines, ephemera – with contents available at the Library and online, acknowledging the fragmented and multi-media aesthetics of women's production. In addition to this, most of contemporary women's archives should preserve homemade artefacts such as banners or embroidery samples, which reveal alternative forms of self-affirmation and expression. It follows that the syntax and structure ('logos') of women's archives should be understood as profoundly different from that of the traditional patriarchal archive, a point which has been left unexamined by most archive theorists (for a corrective and refreshing perspective see Zanish-Belcher and Voss, 2013). In the words of Featherstone, women's archives may be seen as constituting a potent 'counter-image of the archive: the archive as the repository of material which has only been loosely classified, material whose status is as yet indeterminate and stands between rubbish, junk and significance; material which has not been read and researched' (2006, 594).

Amateurism and the archive

Judy Chicago, reminiscing about her attempt to open a pioneering women's art programme in Fresno in 1970 associated the creative and self-fashioning impulse with archival knowledge, and described the organic process of making a women's art archive: 'I felt that it was important for the women [the students of the Fresno programme] to learn about the work of the women of the past, identify with their lives, and use their achievements to extend their own. [...] We quickly discovered that there was an enormous amount of information about women artists that had never been collated – [...] I felt deprived of my rightful heritage. We resolved to put together the bits and pieces that we found and to make an archive at Cal Arts' (1982[1975], p. 86). Chicago's project was to partially inspire the creation of Glasgow Women's Library (1990) as well as many other feminist archives throughout the world. Women's archives had a 'diasporic relationship to the official archival enterprise of the nineteenth century' (Smith, 1998, p. 182) and it is relatively recently, in the second half of the 20th century, that official institutions

such as the British Library have begun to conserve women's media. Amongst the main international and independent women's archives to have emerged in the second half of the 20th century we can cite the Women's History Archive (Gothenburg, 1958), the London Feminist Library (1975) and the Lesbian Herstory Archives (New York, 1974). However, because women's archives often remain grassroot and unofficial ventures, listing every women's archive – and thereby closing or petrifying the archival project – is as impossible as it is undesirable. This is because the aims of the women's archive are as much to conserve the past as they are to *change life*, in and for the present.

Most of the archives cited above were initially started as amateur or semi-amateur, community-led projects, receiving no or very little institutional support (despite being later housed or supported by Universities) and bearing little relationship to pre-established patrimonial sites. Rather than expressing a single, given logos, they were largely built from donations of heterogeneous personal collections. We move from patrimony (etymologically related to *pater*) to heritage; more than a simple semantic nuance, this indicates a performative difference – a shift from passive reception to creative reinventing. The majority of women's media archives continue to have a materially precarious existence, often relying on voluntary work and sporadic financial support. Without appropriate curation and material/financial/institutional support to sustain them, these archives are implicitly threatened by disappearance.

Contemporary archives: Between digitisation and rematerialisation

From the early twentieth century to the present day, the voices of women have been actively archived in an ever-increasing amount of tangible and/or online repositories, most of the latter being user-generated. New digital modes of collecting and sharing material have made it easier to excavate and disseminate women's media and to expand the concept of what an archive is. In a digital context, the term archive is increasingly and indifferently used as a metaphorical shortcut for any accessible collection of material from the past (YouTube for instance is often conceived of as an archive): we have moved from a paradigm of the archive as a cordoned, self-sufficient space to the archive as an increasingly digital, accessible, user-generated and real-time repository. Physical and liquid, digital archives however often communicate, with attempts at digitising physical collections. Contemporary digital archives are 'open' and, often, multisensory and multimedia. Such archives often contain a mobile assemblage of recorded sounds, photographs and moving images. In addition to the proliferation of multi-media archives, the past two decades have been marked by the emergence of increasingly specialised, topical, media-specific archives, devoted for instance to preserving women's films (Women's Film Projects, US), women's fanzines (the NY Riot Grrrl Collection at the Fales Library, New York), or women's music (the Women's Liberation Music Archive, UK). Some recent archival projects also focus on racial, geographical or social 'minorities.' Amongst these we can cite The Irma McClaurin Black Feminist Archive (Amherst, Massachusetts, 2016), Women's Archives of Wales, or Archives du Féminisme (Angers, France, 2000).

Online presence blurs or flattens differences between 'official' and user-generated endeavours, between academic and individual endeavours. Online archives are explicitly dynamic and mobile; user-generated archives often expand rapidly, in an entropic fashion. But digitisation and dematerialisation do not offer guarantees of permanence. The future and longevity of digital archives remain uncertain: it is not guaranteed for instance that the material will permanently remain available online. Every online archive constitutes a temporary world or niche of its own, loosely – if at all – connected to other women's archives, with no finished 'repertory' available or arguably possible (a useful resource however is the British Library's open-ended list of feminist archives).

In addition to the proliferation of digital repositories, feminist pasts are increasingly re-materialised, compiled, reissued and recirculated through physical objects such as books,

reprints of fanzines, music compilations, and so on (Darms, 2013). What we have is a largely disarticulated and decentred constellation of archival sites which become, simultaneously, consumable archives catering for pre-defined or self-categorised demographics of 'consumers'. Yet to monetize, industrialise and privately consume the archive or 'feminist knowledge' may endanger its potential to inform society as a whole, and mark a counterproductive return to a previous phase of restricted accessibility. Consumption is not transmission, and the material abundance of women's media archives does not mean that their contents are visible or effectively transmitted. As noted by Withers, archives and material traces alone are not enough to transmit knowledge: we must consider the operative importance of orality and acts of story-telling and creative re-cycling for the circulation of feminist identities (Withers, 2015; Eichorn, 2013). Contemporary archive theorists ask how the archive may survive – and continue to inspire alternative politics and futures – in a predominantly neoliberal digital context. For the archive to retain its potential to change people's lives, it is urgent that it remains open, independent and freely accessible to all.

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