

Active Recollection

Marvin J. Taylor in conversation with Julie Ault

Marvin J. Taylor, “the man who taught us how to file a leather jacket,” is an archiving activist and the director of the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University since 1993, where he founded the Downtown Collection the following year.

The Downtown Collection comprises individual and collaborative collections that document New York City’s multidisciplinary, multiform Downtown arts scene from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s, as “both a geographic and a metaphorical space,” and as a set of contexts marked by burgeoning creative production that in myriad and diverse ways redressed cultural politics, transforming accepted notions of possible functions and definitions of art and its distribution.

Taylor’s activist archiving methods have ignited the archiving field. The Downtown Collection is a revolutionary archive, demonstrating the actionability of both archive and history.

Taylor’s practice has been infinitely influential on my thinking and work. Our exchange began nearly a decade ago. The following conversation, generated as a part of my contribution to the *2014 Whitney Biennial*, articulates some key aspects of that dialogue.

Impetus

J. Ault: In a previous interview you said, “An archive is nothing but the fossil evidence of experience. For the most time, disembodied evidence. The question I’m fascinated with is, what is the relationship of the archive to the body? The archive as a stand-in for the absent body, because then you could talk about the fetish of the archival object, etc.”¹ On another occasion you noted, “Trauma leads to collecting.”² You’ve said that you believe starting the Downtown Collection was a response to the trauma you experienced in New York during the AIDS crisis. Would you speak further about the link between material traces and the body, and the connection between trauma and archiving, specifically in relation to the Downtown Collection?

1 Emily Colucci, “The Dirty Scene of Downtown New York,” *Hyperallergic*, *Sensitive to Art & Its Discontents*, August 10, 2012, accessed by JA on January 9, 2014, <http://hyperallergic.com/55469/the-dirty-scene-of-downtown-new-york>.

2 Betty Ming Liu, “Fales Library & its director Marvin Taylor are special,” April 28, 2011, accessed by JA on January 9, 2014, <http://bettymingliu.com/2011/04/fales-library-its-director-marvin-taylor-are-special/>.

M. Taylor: The first two repositories I worked in were the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Columbia University and the Lilly Library at Indiana University, which are very different kinds of places. They're traditional archives that seem almost like mausoleums; in the case of the Lilly, the building even looks like a mausoleum with its lack of windows on the front and its boxy architecture. These repositories were built as places to protect materials from the rest of the world and, sometimes even, to keep them away from people. This isn't exactly fair for me to say—I do think they're both amazing collections with devoted staffs that help scholars use their materials for research all the time. I learned the basics of my profession in these institutions. But there was a kind of hoarding mentality in both when I worked there. It was part of how special collections saw themselves at that time.

NYU is a very different place. Our mission wasn't to be a museum of the written word. It was more about academic use of materials. I inherited a large print collection that looked very traditional and that nobody used. The scant archives we had at that time were newer 19th and 20th century material. For whatever reason, I decided that I should be documenting the Downtown scene. I knew about what was going on in New York during the '70s and '80s because I hung out with artists all the time when I was in college and took a lot of art history classes—a lot of my friends were studio artists. We kept up on what was happening as best we could. Friends came back from New York with magazines, chapbooks, and records, which were our only way of finding out about the scene. I remember in 1982 or so, my boyfriend gave me my first Laurie Anderson pamphlet, which was from a series of chapbooks of women writers that came out of the Hallwalls bookstore in Buffalo. It was called *Words in Reverse*; I still have it.

JA: Where were you living before you came to New York? When did you move to New York?

MT: I was in Bloomington, Indiana. I did my undergraduate and library science degrees at Indiana University. I originally started at IU in the prestigious School of Music as an organ performance major. I was being trained classically, but I was also hanging out with the punks and artists. I developed an interest in comparative literature and eventually comparative arts, as we called it back in the early 1980s. I dropped out of the music school to pursue comparative arts, taking many courses on contemporary art and experimental literature. The most important mentor to me at that time was the late Mary Ellen Solt, a concrete poet, whose anthology of concretism is still unsurpassed as a guide to this early verbo-visual movement.

As I said, I was trying to keep up with what was going on in the Downtown art scene, but by the time I got to New York I realized that this whole

scene was disappearing. AIDS was ravaging the city and especially the Downtown art scene. I arrived in New York in '88 and ended up here at the Fales in '93. This period is hard to convey to students now because they're so much younger, but if you were diagnosed with HIV, chances are you would be dead within six months. If the virus actually took hold and you started to have problems, there was nothing they could do. It's not until '96 that the cocktail appears and that lengthened a lot of people's lives. You could actually mix a variety of drugs together with AZT and people were living longer. Before that, contracting HIV was a death sentence.

JA: Were you conscious of the connection between living through the trauma of those times and initiating the Collection?

MT: No. Not until many years later, perhaps as late as maybe six or seven years ago, for *Day Without Art* I had closed Fales's gallery and covered all the exhibition cases. I was screening Ira Sachs's film *Last Address*, which is a wonderful elegiac film showing the last physical places where about thirty artists lived—their apartments from the outside. Almost all of them were artists who were represented in the Downtown Collection. And I thought, "Oh, wow." I guess that one of the things I was doing was desperately trying to save a history of a place and people who at that point were dying. In some instances their papers were being thrown out.

JA: Archiving is in part a rescue mission; the threat of disappearance propels the thinking behind the archive. Instituting something in the archive removes it from jeopardy. The legitimacy of a subject—a person, place, event, practice, organization, community, or movement is designated as valuable, and positioned on the verge of becoming history. Instituting and inscribing into systems of history also means that the responsibility of memory gets consigned to the archive and its future use. So there's a liberatory dimension involved, as well as optimism. People, things, and events can seem to come to life in the archive.

MT: The scene had never been given as much credit as I thought it deserved, and to me, NYU needed to be the place to collect and preserve this important history. As I've said before, archives are the fossil remains of experience, because what disappears is the smell, the touch, all these other aspects of living that are hard to experience from written documents. What we're left with, basically, are things we can look at—at least in traditional archives. There are other objects that archives cannot collect, and the museums tend not to collect as well, that bring us closer to the person. And I've tried to include those objects as well within the Downtown Collection, because I think they have embodied

meaning. By embodied, I mean there is some physicality about them that your body or my body interacts with that tells us something we can't know in any other way. This is also especially true of physical spaces. Something I've become very interested in is how do you engage within a physical space and understand how bodies interact there. In some ways, the archive itself can't provide that, but only the physical space where actions took place can. And in other ways, perhaps, it can, if objects have enough aura.

Exemplification

JA: Did David Wojnarowicz's papers figure into your early formulation of the Downtown Collection in a significant way?

MT: They did. Wojnarowicz's collection is probably one of the most important for me, personally. I really love David's work. I love how fierce it is. I love how relentlessly queer it is in his sort of take-no-prisoners approach to the world. I love his writing, his understanding of the "pre-invented world," as he called it, of having to fit into social structures where you might not necessarily fit, and what damage was done to people by those kinds of structures.

It seemed to me that David was summing up a lot of theoretical and philosophical issues that Downtown artists had been addressing since the '60s, going back to Judson Memorial Church and the art that was produced there. David's work translated these ideas—ones that I tend to think of as postmodern—into the vernacular. These ideas were and remain very important to me as well.

I sought out David's papers—I wasn't quite sure how to go about finding them. And luckily it turned out that a graduate student, Robert Sember, who was working on Wojnarowicz for his dissertation, came in to use some materials in Fales because I had put together a really good set of printed material of Wojnarowicz's work, which no one else had. I ended up talking with Robert and it turned out that he had been working with Tom Rauffenbart, who was David's partner and who is the executor of Wojnarowicz's estate. Robert had been allowed access to David's papers, which were in storage on 17th and the West Side Highway. He put me in touch with Tom. I went and looked at the collection and it was just, oh my god, so amazing. I knew we had to have David's papers. He was a touchstone for so many artists not only because of the power of his theoretical writings and his work itself, but also because of how he lived his life with artistic integrity.

I also thought, this is important to have because studying David's work and life leads you into so many other aspects of what was going on Downtown. He crosses over SoHo into the Lower East Side, the East Village scene. He

works in multiple media; he collaborates with a lot of different people. It seemed to me like he was representative of some of the most interesting stuff that was going on in the period. That's why I sought out the collection.

And of course, along with it came the Magic Box, which perhaps more than anything changed how I think about what archives do, because traditionally, archives don't take objects, or if they do, they take a few of them and they call them *realia*, which is a term I don't really know the meaning of; I don't like it very much. But the Magic Box is clearly related to David's practice; even though we don't know a lot about it, I felt that it was important. C. Carr said in her outstanding biography of David that he tended to keep different parts of his life very separate and encapsulated from one another. So nobody really knew about the Magic Box. Tom Rauffenbart told me that David used to take it out and play with it once in a while, but he never really talked with him about it.

The Magic Box is an orange crate that has Magic Box written on it in David's hand. It contains about eighty or so physical items. There's a monkey skull painted International Klein Blue. There are ants in amber. There's a hand-sewn snake. There's a little globe. There's a little hyper-masculine guy. There's a little plastic dog, that when you squeeze it, is supposed to bark. They're physical representations of David's metaphors. The ones he uses in painting, photography, film, and his writing. To me it seemed like something really essential about his practice that mirrors into this physical object. And I didn't quite know what it was, but I thought, "Hmm—I'd better take it." And of course, then it became an exemplar of what we do in Fales in trying to rethink what has significance as archival documentation. This box in some ways has more significance than some correspondence or other things might have. We just have to figure out exactly how to read it. Its very presence has changed the way we look at all things that we bring into the library.

JA: I wanted to look at David's papers for years, but without a directed project, it's difficult to make the time. Then I thought, why not consult an archive in the spirit of visiting a museum, with no specific research goal in mind? When I finally did that last spring, I intuitively gravitated to the Magic Box. As you know, it will be included in my installation for the Biennial, *Afterlife: a constellation*, of which this conversation is a part. *Afterlife* unites artworks, artifacts, and texts as equivalent participants that activate the archive and signify disappearance and recollection. The Magic Box can't be read specifically but it reveals something otherwise unknown of David's ways of being. It speaks on visual and somatic levels and is concentrated with meaning. But in the absence of narration, its meaning is dependent on its larger context, on being part of his papers, and on knowledge of his practice.

MT: That's certainly true. I think it's also to see David as a symbolist, or, perhaps better, to see him within the symbolist tradition. Sometimes people like to lump him with surrealists, but I think he's more of a symbolist. His work is not so easily limited to the trappings of psychoanalysis. It has more in common with the symbolist artists at the end of the 19th century. In particular, I'm thinking of how his symbols signify in very personal ways for him, how he doesn't explain them with metaphor, and how they don't always signify in the same way from work to work.

His symbols remind me of reading Mallarmé. They're very personal, and we either get it or we don't get it. It's not the artist's problem. A case in point might help illustrate this: I think there should be a lot more scholarship about David's Catholicism. People just assume that he hated the church, because he certainly hated Cardinal O'Connor and he hated a lot of things about the dogma and actions of the church. Actually, I think David was deeply religious in many ways. He certainly had a very refined sense of the spiritual and he tended to use Catholic imagery and nature to depict it. I think that the Magic Box is the key to beginning to understand his Catholicism—there are so many Christian and, specifically, Catholic references within it.

JA: David's work is so specific and so uniquely his, yet it is compelling how it opens out onto so much. His methods and passions were exceptionally wide. Looking through David's papers and material in the archive clarifies his utter belief in the symbolic. Of course we knew that from his work, but realizing this from his daily traces and remains of process is something else. Anyone who hates the Catholic Church but has it nested inside of him usually loves it too; that has to be a contradictory relationship.

MT: David hated anything that became rote or doctrinaire, but his love of ceremonies and religious ceremonies in Mexico, where I think he saw the Mexican church as somehow closer to something he could believe in—are really fascinating. It's not the bureaucratic church of Rome or the bureaucratic church of the United States to him. There's something more elemental, and perhaps in his mind, more natural—not of the “pre-invented world”—about the experiences that he had there. His film footage from Mexico is so lovingly shot, especially when he's documenting religious rituals.

JA: David's spiritual search for sincerity in Mexico and in religious rituals is very moving. I think David's practice is one of the rare, compelling, and effective combinations of a spiritual and political and personal practice.

MT: I think that's true. He was searching for the authentic again and again and again. And he was quick to denounce anything that was structured and

existed only to support its own structure. His obsession with archaeology and with bones and things seems to speak to that.

JA: David's papers enable a deeper understanding of his work; they're riveting. Correspondence and journals reveal an abundance of profound friendships and relationships. There were a lot of conflicts, but one can see how loved he was. And there are David's notes during the period that Nan Goldin's show at Artists Space, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, came into dispute with NEA chairman John Frohnmyer, largely because of David's essay for the catalog that railed against Cardinal O'Connor and Senator Jesse Helms et al. for obstructing safe-sex education that would help prevent the spread of AIDS. Those files evidence his ever-deepening politicization and the evolution of his public responses during the controversy.³ We see evidence of his process, his emotional machinations, and his daily lived experience. There's documentation of his legal battle with Rev. Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association, answering-machine tapes of important messages, manuscripts, contact sheets and photographs, and ideas that never saw fruition.

The Wojnarowicz papers form an unusually rich collection. I love learning how it came to the Fales—an organic process of one thing leading to another: an informal conversation connects you with someone who connects you with someone else, and an opportunity gets revealed. Downtown arts culture was organic, and the building of the Collection seems to be aptly congruent. I doubt you're sitting in your office making lists of collections that you want.

MT: No, that is not what happened.

JA: What kind of independence and guidelines did you enter into when you took the position of Director at the Fales?

MT: It's interesting that I became head of Fales at all. The previous director had been in place for eighteen years. The search committee was sure they had to have someone with a PhD in English Literature for the job because they wanted to reconnect Fales to the Department of English. I applied even though the job listing said "PhD preferred." Instead of interviewing me outright, the chair of the committee and I had a screening interview over a beer in New Orleans during the annual library conference in the summer of

3 David Wojnarowicz, "Post Cards from America: X-Rays from Hell," in *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, exh. cat. (New York: Artists Space, 1989).

1993. I was flush with ideas about what to do if I came to Fales. Virtually no one knew much about the collection because it had become a backwater of the rare book and archives world. Long story short, I was interviewed by the committee and offered the job.

Given that Fales was not a part of the national rare book and archives world, I pretty much had free reign to rethink the whole library. I worked closely with Evelyn Ehrlich, to whom I reported, and we reconceived what Fales should be to support NYU. The timing of my arrival was very important: NYU was making great strides to become a research institution. We were hiring new PhDs in area studies and rethinking what we provided nationally as an academic institution. I was part of the wave of hires that saw the growth of American Studies, Gender Studies, Performance Studies, etc., at NYU. I had intrepid new colleagues who were using libraries and archives in very different ways. I had the support of my library administration to try new ideas and build new collections. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Direction and scope

JA: I regard you as the author of the Downtown Collection. I've read the boilerplate description of what constitutes the Collection, but I'm longing for a kind of director's cut about your intentions, purposes, and conceptual framing, and discussion of the implicit as well as the explicit criteria you used to both formulate and shape the Collection. Do you consider yourself the author of the Collection?

MT: For me, it's been a project: how can we take a scene that was deeply invested in institutional critique and document that scene in an institution without letting the institution completely take over and do all the things that institutions do once they get hold of material that is in some way critical of their very existence. Most repositories would just bring the materials in, catalog then in the traditional ways, and the collections' energies and spirit would die the death of cataloguing, just like dried butterflies.

I chose not to do that. Instead, I chose to modify what archivists call the "documentary strategy" as much as possible rather than adopt the "connoisseurship strategy." I try to keep alive as much of the transgressive nature of Downtown work as possible. (Transgressive is a word many people don't like, but the materials we have ask constantly, "why are you doing this?" "What structure is informing how this is done?") I guess I would like to be thought of as the author who questions his authorial intent while actually building the collection; to be very conscious at every step of the kind of decisions I am making and the implications of those decisions.

Perhaps perversely, one thing that helped me in the beginning was that everybody thought I was crazy for caring about Downtown material at all. I can't tell you how many people said, "Why are you wasting your time on this?" including administrators, who said, "This is never going to be important." And I said, "Well, I happen to think it is." Critics viewed the Downtown scene in one of two ways: either it was just a lot of kids playing a lot of loud music and doing drugs, or was a lot of dirty pictures and a lot of rampant sexuality that shouldn't be shown, period. (Of course, that's what the culture wars were more or less about and they were fought over Downtown art.) The predominating narrative had to be that this work wasn't important. This narrative slowed the monetization of some Downtown work. Once the seed for the Downtown Collection was sown, look what's happened.

The art world was totally transformed because of the work that happened in the '70s and '80s. *The Downtown Show: The New York Art Scene 1974–1984*, which Fales organized with the NYU's Grey Art Gallery in 2006, marked a turning point for the reception of the Downtown Collection. It gave critics a reason to look back at this period and go, "Oh, wait a minute—this is really amazing. Look what was going on there." Of course, with that comes the commodification of the work, and more and more people want to sell me things at outrageous prices, when just twenty years ago they wouldn't have touched flyers from CBGB or from Danceteria.

- JA: The Downtown Collection in fact consolidates the Downtown milieu as a coherent context for posterity, which it wasn't really.
- MT: It wasn't at all, no. One of the things I'm worried about is I don't want people to think that I'm trying to make a coherent narrative out of it. What I'm trying to do is provide materials so that people can understand the complexity of it. Bourdieu is instructive here. Anytime cultural capital—which the Downtown scene excelled in creating—moves out of its subculture into mainstream culture, it turns into monetary capital. I watch with great diligence. I try to stop the worst excesses by telling dealers when they're suggesting absurd prices for archival documents, but there's little I can really do. The scene is hot and people want to sell their stuff.
- JA: I would love for you to elaborate on the specificity of the Collection's framework. For instance, your conception of "the Downtown scene as both a geographic and a metaphorical space." And, you adhere to "original provenance." Would you explain what that entails? Cross-referencing is inherent in how you've structured the Collection as a set of overlapping collections. Another apparent principle at work lies in your embrace of a wide range of media, formats, and modality in the Collection.

MT: I've always been interested in scenes. Early in my education I learned just how collaborative Byron and Mary and Percy Shelley were on works we traditionally consider "Byron." Questioning the "artistic genius" became a part of my bag of critical tools. As I read more theory, especially Foucault, Bourdieu, etc., I grew to question many kinds of cultural structures. Some of my earliest serious work was on Richard Wagner, perhaps the über Romantic genius whose works could not be staged without collaborating with hundreds of others. I was especially interested in how he borrowed and sometimes stole ideas and musical motifs from others. I spent time studying the symbolists, Wilde and the 1890s, modernism in Paris and New York, Berlin in the 1920s. Each of these scenes had a very specific flavor based on time and physical locale.

As for the phrase "geographical and metaphorical space," I came to describe the Downtown Collection in that way because of the "institutional critique" that was part of so much Downtown work. How could I build a collection about Downtown New York by applying the traditional methodologies? Great names. Most reviewed. Most sold. Most museum exhibitions, etc. It would not reflect the scene and would be anathema to the spirit of the work as I understood it.

I heard Steven Watson give a brilliant lecture about his book *Strange Bedfellows*, which is a history of the New York avant-garde scene in the 1920s. Steven was a psychoanalyst by training and worked with sociograms to plot out patients' lives. He used this same technique for his research on the avant-garde scene. This seemed to me a very interesting way to get around "taste and technique"—as book collectors call it—and to forge new ways of building archives. I chose to use geography—below 14th Street—as one of the criteria for building the Collection. Of course, not everyone who was important to the scene lived below 14th Street, so I also posited the possibility of a "metaphorical" Downtown scene. I was riffing off Lacan's notion of the "*aha Erlebniss*" and Hakim Bey's Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ). This became a flexible and useful rubric under which to construct the Collection. Add, too, the sociograms, physical venues, a loose sense of chronology, and I had a new methodology that still works today. What I have created is a modified "documentary strategy," to use the correct archival term.

You've asked about "provenance" or "original order." These terms are the mantras of American archival practice. We believe that the way a creator organized his or her materials (or their materials in the case of an organization) is sacrosanct. We may not be able always to discern what that order is, but we try to preserve it when "processing," i.e., organizing and describing a collection for use. Only in very rare cases do we ever impose order on materials. This happens where there is clearly no organizational principle

or when a collection has clearly been tampered with by someone other than the creator, but the original order is comprehensible.

Downtown artists worked in all kinds of media. For our collection to reflect the scene, we have to collect all those media. I am especially interested in the explosion of electronic media—video, audio, born digital—downtown. Fales holds over 96,000 media elements in the Downtown Collection. When NYU made the decision to create a program to train archivists who will process and preserve media, one of the major impetuses was Fales's collecting of these media. I'm not currently very interested in digitizing paper. We have a crisis situation with electronic media that we must solve immediately or we stand to lose the incunabular period of these media. Most of the paper can wait another fifty years to be digitized, if it needs to be digitized at all.

JA: I've witnessed the Downtown Collection growing over the years. It generates tremendous interest and multiplies engagement and historical representation, which add to the complexity of how Downtown culture is apprehended and understood. The Collection's framing makes us consider whatever we study within it as part of a larger context of social forces. It clarifies art as social process. And it's the frame and the cross-referencing possibility built into the Collection that accomplishes this. Context is not put forward in a heavy-handed way. The Collection continues to shape and reshape our conceptions of Downtown culture. For me, this is a brilliant model of activist archiving, because during the twenty years that it has been in existence, the Collection demonstrates so clearly the power of the archive and its relation to producing history.

It's important to emphasize you as the Collection's author because archiving is yet another one of those fields that has, to some degree, come out of the closet to understand itself as a form of creation and production imbued with subjectivity rather than an objective bureaucratic practice. You mentioned that the method of the Downtown Collection uses a documentary strategy, and of course we know that documentary is always invested with its maker's perspective and investments.

MT: Right, absolutely. I'd be a fool to say that I wasn't the author, because I came up with the idea of collecting it in the beginning. Where it goes from there, though, I'm willing to have it be very porous and very open-ended. I have other people help us bring in things. One thing that is fascinating for me is how, when one collection comes in, it can shift the way we look at every other collection. That happened recently with the Johnny Science papers.

Johnny Science was a transsexual who engaged with different parts of the scene in really interesting ways. When his papers came to Fales they heightened much larger issues of gender nonconformity that existed in the

Collection. Some of these issues we didn't even know were represented in our collections. That's really wonderful and amazing. This one collection came in and suddenly everything shifted just a little bit. In this case it's extremely important because gender nonconformity and trans issues are so often overwritten or overlooked.

Time frames

JA: The dynamic, constantly changing aspect of the Collection is a major strength; it is porous and growing, which in turn extends its context. History has been effective at eclipsing what is omitted, but as you say, this one collection of material enters the picture, and can throw boundary and stasis we associate with the traditional archive into question. Larger questions emerge: Why wasn't that there before? What else is there that could change our understanding, not only of archiving, but also of a particular milieu, or a time period? Where does the archive end?

I'm wondering about your thinking in relation to the time-based foundation of the Downtown Collection and your relationship to periodizing. How do you delimit where a collection ends or begins chronologically? Can the Collection account for continuities and discontinuities in time? I'm struck that the Downtown Collection is sometimes described as embodying the period between 1975 and the early '90s, and sometimes it's listed as encompassing 1975 to the present. If the early '90s is the cut-off point, does that then signal the end of one era and the beginning of another?

MT: I like to keep it fuzzy for a variety of reasons, including that time is a very subjective thing anyway. Oddly enough, it's one of the issues I think Wojnarowicz was working on that he never quite finished because he died so soon. If you look at his work as a whole, however, time was something that he was really obsessed with—the fact that time doesn't really exist, in the way that maps don't really exist and are just lines on paper. All those divisions of earth don't exist—those are the kinds of things he deconstructed.

Lyotard says that the postmodern predates the modern. He goes on to say that the postmodern always signals a moment of expansion, the breakdown of genre. He has a list of things that he equates with the postmodern. Conversely, he sees modernism as a return to rule, structure, and form. And he sees these two conditions expanding and contracting, expanding and contracting in different periods within Western culture. In this way, he says that the postmodern can predate the modern.

I've always felt that the Downtown scene was a postmodern moment, not unlike how the end of the 19th century was a postmodern moment, before

the reification of modernism. Postmodern moments are always moments that modernism and its critics tend to look back on as suspect, because it appears that there's nothing really going on. Everything is dispersed and not terribly interesting. Of course, to minds requiring structure, flux and creative slipperiness is a sure sign of weakness. My "downtown" certainly had precedents in the 1960s, but it also looks back to the 1870s and '80s. I'd like to keep the beginning and ending dates open.

It's clear, however, to me that something happened in New York in the late '60s and early '70s that signified a shift away from what was then the prevailing notion about art's commodification: who could make art and who could display art. What followed was a critique of the art world that grew out of women's art, feminist art, artist collectives, etc. One of the reasons why the Judson Memorial Church archive is at Fales and is so important is that these ideas were embryonic at Judson.

Somewhere around '79 or '80 there's a bit of a geographical shift from SoHo to the East Village, though I'd like to keep that rather fluid, too, because we know that in fact people were living in both spaces, and there's not a distinct break between SoHo and the East Village scenes. But something shifted a little further away from conceptual work, and perhaps a little more toward neo-representation, etc., around this time. Performance took off. Installation took off. Both in slightly different ways than they had in the '70s.

Over time, I've begun to see the early '90s as a slowing down of the scene. There are reasons for this. Nineteen ninety-two is an interesting year. The Internet is born right around then. The political situation changes; for the first time in years we don't have a radical right Republican in office. The analog world begins to shift over toward the digital world. The world of tech starts to become much more a world of visual imagery rather than text.

By the early '90s AIDS had decimated the Downtown scene. Something had to change. Artists started to move to Brooklyn, to Williamsburg, upstate, and eventually to Berlin. As happens with artistic scenes, they rise up, burn hot, then move on because of a vast, complicated nexus of issues including cultural capital, gentrification, commodification, marriage, parenting, and just plain generational shift.

Younger artists are indebted to all this work, but they may not even know the earlier work. I find that often is the case. The best of them do, because they've done their homework and they understand why they are able to make a film and do a painting in a performance space, and that's perfectly acceptable. They understand you don't have to just make sculptures that look like one another so you can make money.

JA: Well, people have taken it in by osmosis somehow.

MT: Carlo McCormick is fond of saying, “The kids are okay,” which I really like as a statement, because I don’t want to become nostalgic about things. I think that’s one of the most dangerous things people—especially right now with all the memoirs and things that are coming out, they want to become nostalgic about the scene, and that will just kill criticism.

JA: Yes, but it’s still a generative situation. When I look at anything in the Downtown Collection, I’m looking for affinities, and that’s not primarily about nostalgia. It’s about the present.

MT: There’s a statistic that’s really fascinating. Four years ago when my senior archivist, Lisa Darms, started we had about 300 patrons for the Downtown Collection that year. This year, we had something like 1,200. There’s an incredible increase in the number of people who are doing work. It’s unheard of, actually.

JA: The people that made up the environment of Downtown culture were relocating and many people had died, and so the context changed because the individuals and the structures for working and building community and dissemination were going elsewhere. I’m struck that wherever I look in the Downtown Collection I see evidence of an underlying subject terrain—gentrification. Portal after portal into the cultural lives of many who were living in poverty or struggling with material hardship to do their work. Reading some of Peter Hujar’s papers nested inside of the Wojnarowicz papers—Hujar’s will, for instance, or the list he made of his personal belongings in preparation for death that registers the fact that he couldn’t afford to make prints for his friends even though he wanted to, so he stipulated that friends could have two photographs of their choice for reduced price after he died. Prominent artists and writers couldn’t afford to pay their \$300 or \$400 monthly rents. The Collection shines a light on material distress and medical hardships and such that are not often invoked and certainly not foregrounded in the narratives of renowned Downtown artists.

MT: People paid a price for standing outside of culture in that way. And they paid a price not only in their health and by living in poverty, but also there was a psychological price that was paid by many, especially for a lot of women who had to think themselves out of first-wave feminism, out of second-wave feminism, into third-wave feminism. It took a toll on people: a very real one.

This is what happened to Oscar Wilde; when you stand outside of culture in a way that is highly critical of that culture, culture makes you pay. Interestingly, however, the other side of this is something that Harvey Moloch, who teaches Metropolitan Studies here at NYU, has said: “artists create

capital, but their cultural capital gets monetized by somebody else”—or at least it used to. These days it seems that some artists are doing a pretty good job of monetizing their cultural capital—Damien Hirst comes to mind. But it was artists who made something desirable so that gentrification happened, and of course they got priced out almost instantly.

Institutional critique

JA: You mentioned institutional critique being a strong dimension of Downtown culture of the '70s and '80s. Sydney Brownstone wrote, “If anything, ‘institutional critique’ is the unifying idea behind Fales’ Downtown Collection.”⁴ Is that an apt speculation?

Secondly, in regards to gathering alternative, contestational, ephemeral, punk, and peripheral interventions and practices into one collection, is there a danger of that becoming an alternative canon, a kind of anti-grand narrative that in spite of its critical design can readily function as a history of dissent?

MT: Yeah, there’s a real concern that it can become an alternative canon, and I already can see that happening. The way I judge how quickly that’s happening is how stuff gets monetized in the market. So certain things are pulled up higher than others. It’s not necessarily the case that the monetization reflects how important items were in their time, either. I see it all the time with book dealers. It used to be maybe there was one book dealer who dealt, for instance, in punk-related materials. Now everybody’s doing it.

I recently saw somebody offering a set of about 1,000 punk band flyers from Los Angeles for something like \$17,000. I said, “You can just photocopy stuff. There’s no way you can authenticate that they’re the real thing.” And the dealer said, “Well, it doesn’t matter if they’re authentic or not.” “Well, then why am I not paying the cost to photocopy them instead of paying \$17,000 for them—which I wouldn’t pay—it’s an outrageous price?” I don’t know if they sold.

But it is interesting to see that it’s happening. There’s probably nothing I can do about it—it’s going to happen, because that’s how culture functions. I can still try here to make sure that things are contextualized as best as possible. But the whole process of scholarship is to decontextualize something, and then re-contextualize it.

4 Sydney Brownstone, “Fales’ Downtown Collection isn’t just another brick in the walls of the Bobst Library,” November 11, 2010, accessed by JA January 6, 2014, <http://brownst0ned.blogspot.com/2010/11/fales-and-downtown-collection-not-just.html>.

I don't know if you saw Stephan Blair's letter to the editor in *The New Yorker* a couple weeks ago.⁵ There was an interesting article about the recent political unrest in Egypt and the effect it's had on archaeological digs far up the Nile. The author who'd written it had said some things about history that Blair took dissent with, and it was interesting because he said the author had sort of dissed the postmodern approach to history. Blair, who's the head of classics at Princeton, said that postmodernism taught us not to trust the narrative. Narratives are clean and logical. Events are messy. All history tries to do is take certain things that happened in an event and write a story that might teach us something, but there's no truth there. So rather than looking for the truth, we should actually be looking for the best narrative. His remarks seemed to speak to what we're discussing here. I'm going to be giving them to students from now on. Events are messy. Time periods are messy. Archives are messy. Narratives are not true.

What ends up in the archive, what ends up in scholarship, has been selected in some way, and you have to question who did it, and what criteria were used. Why did they select this, and why didn't they select that? I try to do that in my own practice, to be the one to question myself all the time when I'm doing that, but it's probably a losing battle.

As far as the Downtown Collection being held together primarily by institutional critique, we have a lot of material that questions structures. I think people might be trying to limit "institutional critique" to just critiquing museums and galleries. I want it to be a much larger notion of critique as an exploration of how meaning gets structured, and who has the power to say that something is meaningful. In that sense, I think institutional critique without scare quotes was a concern that a lot of Downtown authors and artists shared. Well, maybe it's just the work that I'm most interested in. I want institutional critique to be a trope of larger culture instead of a mode of artists' being.

Inclusion and exclusion

- JA: The archive is not history but history writing emerges from there. Given that Downtown culture has been instituted as an authority-endowing institution, I'm wondering about the tacit criteria for something to be incorporated into the Downtown Collection. How judgment plays into the archive at the doorway of acquisition. Are there things that you reject?

5 Blair, Stephen, "Narrating History," *The Mail*, *The New Yorker*, January 6, 2014, http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/letters/2014/01/06/140106mama_mail.

MT: I've got two examples. I was offered—with money to process it—a collection of scores and tape and videos of contemporary serial chamber operas, by serial I mean as in Schoenberg's twelve-tone-row serial music. Schoenberg's nephew lives in the West Village, and he and his wife, at least since the '60s, have been promoting the creation of serial music in the chamber opera format. This really doesn't have anything to do with music downtown. We're collecting Downtown music, not just popular music—not just punk and stuff like that, but we are collecting the SoHo graphic score composers—Malcolm Goldstein, Daniel Goode, people like that—scores that didn't use musical notation or that didn't exclusively use musical notation. What Schoenberg's nephew was doing with the serial composition chamber operas really belongs someplace where people are studying serialism and Schoenberg.

And so I turned that collection down, even though technically, it is experimental work, and it is below 14th Street, but it didn't fit into my purview of what I think the scene I'm documenting is. Even though within the timeline, it's perfect, it didn't make sense for me. Perhaps Lincoln Center would be the place. Maybe not. Maybe there's someplace where they're interested in serial chamber opera. Now, I happen to like serialism; I think it's really wonderful. It just wasn't right for us.

Many years ago now, I was asked if I was interested in the archive of a Downtown magazine, and of course I was because the magazine was one of the major magazines of SoHo. It was really, really important—very interesting and very influential. They were seeking to sell the collection so they could continue publishing the magazine, which is a perfectly reasonable thing to do. There were many completed works of art in the collection, which were priced at art market prices. These were not something I could afford or house correctly. They were not really archival material.

I suggested that they consider selling off the art and using that to help to continue the organization. Then I would take a look at the archive and see what was left. If there was something of interest, we could discuss a purchase. I should say here that most of the Downtown collections have been donated. There have been a few purchases when funding is available and they're strategic purchases. By that I mean “Well, if we get this collection, it will help us to build this whole area of Downtown” because there are other materials that might come as donations that would be related. And purchasing this collection would add to the intertextuality, if you will, between collections. When the magazine owners came back to me after selling the art, what they had were the tapes of all the interviews conducted for the magazine, which were great, and editorial correspondence. But when I looked at it—and I guess this is what I do for a profession, or for a living—I made the call that there wasn't enough that was new, that hadn't made it into the magazine, for me to acquire the archive.

This is the kind of decision that my staff and I make all the time. We tend to do it jointly, because two of us or three of us will go look at something, and then we'll sit down and talk it through. To be of interest, collections really have to have a lot of unique, quality material in them. The truth is with this magazine archive, it's a great archive, but for our purposes, having the complete run of the magazine is probably going to be okay, which is often the case with magazine archives. There's not always that much left in the archive that's useful.

There's an example of something that everybody would agree should be dead center of what we're doing, but when it came right down to it, there wasn't enough there. I tend to look at collections like that and say, "Okay, how many dissertations in the next ten years are we going to get out of that material," because I have to have some criteria. And one of them here has to be that it can be used for study, and that it will promote learning and knowledge. And sometimes there's not enough in a collection for that to happen.

JA: Your responsibility as the Collection's curator encompasses inviting people to come and research and spend time with certain materials and subjects. It would be irresponsible to house collections you don't believe have the potential to generate and impart insight.

MT: I think the most painful part of that for me is that it really is about time and money. Storage space is very limited, and people don't understand how long it takes to process things. You don't want to bring things in and have them sit for twenty years unprocessed; you want to bring them in and make them accessible, and that's always a hard call. It's the hardest part of my job.

Curatorial care

JA: In the same blog I mentioned earlier, Brownstone said, "Taylor handles the DIY punk assembling books with the care one might use in handling the shell of a robin's egg."⁶ I've witnessed you with material going from one sector in the archive to look at an early edition of a book of Oscar Wilde's where you exuberantly deconstructed the symbolic aspects of its graphic design and its embedded messages, and then picking up something totally different—different time period and material status, etc.—and showing commensurate affection for and knowledge of both. You seem to love the material you work with, and your interests are wide, so that's fair enough, but I wonder where you

6 Ibid.

locate this reverence for objects in your own formation. I'm also curious about your personal saving habits and archival tendencies.

MT: One of the things I tell students when they come to work for us is that we have everything from second century papyri to zines produced yesterday, and it's a level playing field for me. They're all cultural objects. They're all important, because they tell us something about someone who was in this place at this time and did this. We may not have the great medieval manuscripts the Morgan Library has, but I want everything to be held with the same amount of care. We're here to protect and to preserve the past so we can learn from it.

To be brutally honest, the reason I do what I do comes from the fact that my grandmother loved books. She taught me to read before I went to kindergarten, so I grew up from very early childhood with a reverence for books. Also, I grew up next to an antique store. When my mom needed somebody to babysit, she would take me next door and Dee Ross, the shop owner, would watch me. I grew up around lots of old things that I was taught to have a lot of reverence for. I can still smell that store, especially the old kid gloves and umbrellas. I can feel the prickle of horsehair upholstered chairs on my bare legs when I wore shorts. Those are embodied experiences for me, deeply engrained from the time when I was like three, four, five years old.

I just love to take care of things. It's really a very big part of my personality. I'm a curator in that sense of its very meaning to take care of or take care for. And as far as my own personal collecting, I have a lot of stuff. I have a lot of really great works that artists have given me that are wonderful, and I try to always display things. I don't collect my own papers, my own correspondence, but everything here at the office is kept, because that's the history of the collections here, so that's meticulously organized. But I'm not very sentimental. I have maybe six or eight inches of documents that are important to me. I tend to read letters and cards and things and throw them away.

JA: Wow—I'm shocked.

MT: I read other people's mail for a living.

JA: But I'm totally shocked—I guess because I would've imagined that archiving consciousness infected you to the point where it would be hard to throw things out. And beyond sentimental value, just—I don't know—one gets addicted, in a sense, to managing one's own traces.

MT: Well, I have way too many objects in my house, and a lot of people come in and they say, "Oh, this is really wonderful; it looks like a museum," and I go,

“Oh, no.” It looks like a 1910 house. Most of the furniture is from 1870 to 1910, 1915, and I don’t know, we probably have somewhere around six thousand books or something. And I love ceramics. I have a lot of stuff, but I don’t have a lot of paper.

JA: Six to eight inches of important documents is not very much. It’s an interesting contradiction and makes sense that you aren’t fetishizing every postcard you get.

MT: My tax documents far outshine the stuff that I have that’s personal correspondence. And I’m even methodical about that—every July I take a day, and I go through all the back files, and I shred anything that’s more than seven years old.

JA: So you actively destroy things. It’s not just like, “Okay, that’s going in the circular file.” You shred.

MT: Well, I shred for a reason, because I compost. It’s easy to get green stuff in your compost, but the hardest thing is getting brown in your compost, and shredded paper is perfect. I garden. I remove the staples and shred checks and crap like that, so that’s what it is, and old bank statements that I no longer need, and it just all gets shredded and goes in the compost.

JA: You should have a couple big buckets, one that says Compost and another that says Archives.

MT: Most of the important correspondence that I have is here in the Fales. Correspondence from my siblings—there isn’t any. Old Christmas cards—something that I wish that I could throw out when they come in a collection—because you usually just find one name, and “Hey, who’s that?” I’m not sentimental about that stuff. I love it that people send them. I send a card back to them and then it’s off to the compost.

JA: That’s funny. I struggle with things like Christmas cards, because they’re fairly banal, right? But I get them and send them. I’ve gone through purges over and over from living within New York for decades and moving many times in the city, as well as moving elsewhere, and I threw out all the most beautiful old-fashioned Christmas and birthday cards that my great-aunt, who died in 1971, sent me, or my grandmother sent me. And I wish I had those now, or at least a couple examples, just to look at the handwriting, to fetishize them. I’m pissed at myself for various purges—that being a minor one, so now I err on the side of saving things.

MT: I've never regretted throwing anything away. I'll regret something that wasn't kept, that wasn't even mine, that I wanted. Like my mother wrote my father a note before she died—I really would love to have that, but I think he destroyed it. People are sort of stunned when I tell them about how little I save, but it's how I keep from living at home in tons and piles of paper.

Academic use

JA: My friend Amy Zion once described you as “the man who taught us how to file a leather jacket,” which sounds like an act of love—both the filing and the teaching. For those of us invested in archiving, we talk about mobilizing the present for the archive, and I know this is something you see in action. Would you share an experience or two of witnessing researchers at work—those moments when they gain insight and find affinity?

MT: I can think of two examples; they're both students, which probably is really appropriate. One happened recently. I was talking to the class as they came in—it was my colleague, Karen Karbiener, who teaches a course on early narratives worldwide. So it's Gilgamesh. It's the Bible, the Iliad, or the Odyssey, depending, and a couple of other texts of that age.

She brings her class in and I show them the earliest examples of writing that we have in the Collection from cuneiform tablets to papyri. Each of our papyrus fragments has been encapsulated in Mylar, and then mounted in folders made out of acid-free board, so they're very stable. Because of this, I can give each student a fragment of papyrus to look at. Karen gives the students a series of ten questions that they have to answer based on what they can see on the fragment. Of course, none of them can read ancient Greek—I take that back—we did have one student once who was Greek who could sort of make it out, which was really fascinating.

In the most recent class, one of the students raised his hand for Karen and me to come over because he had a question. He said, “What is going on here? It looks like somebody's annotated this.” And sure enough—our papyri are mostly students' copies, because if you wanted to study a text, you had to copy it out—and somebody had written a line down the side of the text. They put an emphasis, we call it, denoting a certain passage in the text. These are papyri that are mostly from about 200 AD. They're from a find in Egypt, and they're mostly Greek—there're a few Aramaic and a few Arabic. So what we found there, it kind of hit everybody in the class, but this one student's eyes just got really big. He's like, “Oh my God, this is a student annotating the text they were reading.” I said, “Yes, that's exactly what you've got. 1,800 years ago, there was a student like you sitting with the text. That's his annotation—

that's a proof of reading 1,800 years ago. That's one of those moments when there's a connection with history—it was like, “Oh my God, there it is.” I really love that one. That one will stick with me for a very, very long time.

JA: That's a beautiful story of looking in a mirror across time. The potential for affinity in the archive seems to be in part due to the ground-level perspective of its material and the manageable human-scale relationships we can have to fragments and microhistories.

MT: The other example was a student of mine who was working on Dennis Cooper. He was an honor student, a senior who was reading through the George Miles novels. He had been working on Dennis's papers, looking at the structures of the novels and he found Dennis's drawing for the structure of *Period*. *Period* is a series of concentric circles, with the first and the last sentences being almost but not quite the same. At the center of the novel, everything goes retrograde. The names change so that Leon becomes Noel, etc., and the novel un-writes itself almost exactly the way it was written.

My student had been working on this idea and was close to understanding it, and then he actually found the smoking gun—a drawing of the novel's structure. In fact, yes, Cooper used geometric shapes as the structures for much of his fiction. My student comes running to the office, “Oh, I can't believe what I found.” Those moments are just amazing. The face lights up, followed by furious typing or scribbling. Something in the brain catches fire and washes over your body. It happens frequently in the reading room—I'll be walking through, and I'll see a patron's face light up.

I try to talk to most of the visiting scholars who use the Collection, at least to say hello and introduce myself, because I like to see what they're doing. We have so many now that I can't quite keep up, but I like their stories. That's what it's all about. When they find something, when they discover something.

JA: I've been there researching many times, and you're in and out, crossing the rooms where people sit and study material. The Fales' study room seems so vital to me. I've told you before that it's one of the most important spots to me now in New York. It's one of the cultural centers I am grounded by and rely on for community in some sense. I've lived in the area a long time, and having the Downtown Collection in proximity is a big plus to the neighborhood that has in many ways suffered from NYU's real estate practices of absorption and expansion.

Exhibiting the archive

JA: Although visiting the archive and looking and reading through material is largely a solo, one-on-one experience, the reading room is both a public place and a social space. I consider it—and the archive itself, —to be an interactive, constantly changing exhibition.

MT: I think that's really true, and I think it's because we're so busy that ours feels much more like that than a collection that's not as busy. We've had to institute a rule where we can only have a certain number of manuscript patrons at a time, because we just don't have enough facilities to handle the number of people who want to come in. We don't like to have to do that, but we have to take care of the materials.

There was a brilliant post-doc student here, Lissette Olivares, who cornered me one day—actually, she's a Performance Studies person. She said that all the class sessions that I do are actually impromptu exhibitions and performance pieces. And I was like, "Well, they kind of are." I like to think of them as exhibitions without vitrines.

JA: And without the formality. Do you have a philosophy of exhibiting the archives and conventions for presentation—how, literally, documents and artifacts are made present?

MT: I do. We do exhibitions for a few reasons, one of which is to show off the collections we have. Another is to promote new scholarship to go along with conferences and things like that. In the case of the current show, *Keith Haring: Languages*, curated by Andrew Blackley, we had a symposium. The exhibition shows materials from Haring's early years at SVA—materials that have never been displayed before. Who knew that Keith was working with semiotics? The development of the drawings in the subway and decisions regarding how many tiles to use, etc., in the subway are actually based on semiotics. It's brilliant stuff.

I'm very fussy about how archival materials are presented. I think that archival materials have their own agency, and they do not need to have other things added to them to try to make them hefty enough to be on display. For instance, I can't stand it when people fan out pieces of paper. There's not a tea cozy sitting next to them. An exhibition of archival materials isn't the opening of a film based on a Jane Austen novel. I hate that kind of Ken Burns-ian sort of tableau. The documents have their own agency. They can stand there alongside an artwork perfectly on their own—don't fuss it up.

This is so funny, because one of the first things that curators in the art world want to do is display documents in this way. I'm like, "No, you're not going to do that with my manuscripts."

JA: I completely understand being against decorative embellishments. I am for positioning artifacts on the level of communication that artworks are treated, and, to some extent, dislodging these categories of art and artifact. I've always felt intuitively that it's important to counteract the prototypical hierarchy within which art is separated from and privileged over artifacts and contextual materials.

MT: As I have watched over the past ten years archives being included more and more in art exhibitions, I find that most institutions don't know what to do with them. They tend to be add-ons, not even in the heart of an exhibition, often. They tend to be in vitrines and they tend to have these embellishments, as you say. They deserve more than that. Some places get it right, but I think more places get it wrong than get it right.

JA: I agree with that. What I'm often trying to do in practice is find light-touch ways, specifically visual and presentational and spatial solutions that further animate artifacts, and bring forward what I think they are communicating. Artifacts don't necessarily tell more than their physical facts although they have the capacity to speak. So it's kind of up to the artist or curator or historian who is presenting material to expose certain narratives over others, and reveal our own interpretive engagement. I'm interested in creative display solutions for artifacts and documents that avoid the traps you've mentioned and that are not rote—that can animate the past rather than present it as “history.”

MT: I completely agree, and it's not easy. Books are the hardest. You can have one page—and I don't think that digitizing is always the answer, because somehow, to digitize every page of a book and present it on the screen where it just keeps floating by is equally as bad. It's radically decontextualized. You don't even know that it was a book.

False Evidence

JA: Documents and artifacts are not intrinsically truth telling; they are fragmentary and often disconnected from context. Archives can mislead through omission. Essential pieces of information, which might answer questions and redirect research, are not necessarily tangible or archived.

Uncovered and rediscovered artifacts, such as a letter found in an abandoned basement, a manuscript that surfaces at a flea market, or a diary that suddenly comes to light, have the potential to radically alter historical narratives. The recovered document that no one knew existed

can provide crucial facts that close gaps and unlock mysteries, and possibly suggest alternative accounts of past events. In this way, the archive often feels like a minefield of latent surprises that can result in all degrees of misrepresentation.

You've referred to the archive as "false evidence." How can this square with getting things as right as possible in history writing? I mean it's not all subjective; there are degrees of accuracy and degrees of mythologizing.

- MT: I always tell students that "archives lie." They are by their very nature incomplete, fragmented, censored. Once again, I go back to Stephen Blair's comment about what postmodernism taught us about history, that events—and archives—are messy. History is linear and rational because it is a fabricated narrative. All we can do is agree on the most logical and well-argued narrative based on the "facts" we have. Archives exist, in the end, for citation verification. We may not have any "facts," but as long as we're all looking at the same documents, we can have a discourse about them. Cold comfort, I'm afraid.
- JA: How to make what is missing evident as layers of history? When I read Gary Indiana's notebooks I was struck by the number of blank pages each one contained, what the volume of empty space might mean in particular periods or places he wrote in. One can't help but speculate. If I were seeking to publish his notebooks I would want to include the blank pages.
- MT: That is the work of the scholar, to a large extent. Oral histories are another method that we've used. I hope to do more of this. And, of course, "the audience is the archive" idea is really important here.
- JA: That is a beautiful idea that rings true. What does this mean to you?
- MT: I've borrowed this phrase from Stuart Comer. Stuart was doing programs at the Tate Modern in which he would select nearly forgotten, but very important films and screen them. He would also bring together the director, actors, or others involved in making the film for a discussion about the film. Most of these films had little if any scholarship written about them, so the only way to learn about them was through the oral tradition. The audiences for these events became the next generation of storytellers. They will take away embodied memories of the event that will never be written down. They will be the archive of that performance. Of course, transcripts of these events and video of them were created, but that is only the fossil evidence of the event. The true archive resides with the audience members. I've presented this idea recently to my colleagues nationally. I hope others will help develop it

further. The idea of embodied practices is common in performance studies. Diana Taylor's and Ann Cvetkovich's work opened up the field. It's still new to archival practice. I see great possibilities for archives if we develop this idea.

Publicizing privacy

JA: Tensions unfold in the archive, between past tense and present tense, between remembering and forgetting, between closure and exposure, continuance and completion, and between history for living and the continuity of transience.

I've been thinking about the ethics of exposure of private material. This came to the foreground especially when I was researching the book I organized on Felix Gonzalez-Torres. In the '80s, Felix lived in New York, and he corresponded by letter with his boyfriend, Ross Laycock, in Toronto. Ross died in 1991 and Felix retrieved the letters that he had sent him and joined them with the ones he'd received.

After Ross's death, Felix photographed fragments of some of those letters close-up, and the photographs became works. Marieluise Hessel, who is the benefactor of the Bard Center for Curatorial Studies, collected Felix's work, including some of those. At some point, she and Felix had a conversation about the actual letters, and she asked him to make the Center's library their permanent home.

Several years after Felix died, the executor of his estate, Andrea Rosen, sought to follow up on that informal agreement. I read all the correspondence at that time, about eight or ten years after Felix died, in search of insight into his thinking and work. I suppose I felt somewhat entitled to read the letters because I had been friends with Ross and had a close relationship with Felix. But once I read them, and I guess particularly because I did know them both, I was all the more uneasy that I had. I remember feeling that very little of their contents provides information into Felix's practice that adds to an understanding beyond what is accessible in the works themselves, or in his interviews and writings.

The letters are clearly written with privacy in mind. I thought about how neither Felix nor Ross could have guessed at the outset of their relationship, when Felix was a student, that others would read their intimate letters. After reading the correspondence, I wanted Andrea to reconsider making it accessible in the Curatorial Center's library, partly because there, they would be separate from his other correspondence and papers, stripped of their context. Andrea wanted to honor Felix's wishes as she understood them, though she established some stipulations for consulting the letters.

I've exposed lots of private things about myself and people I'm close to, as well as those I never met, in publication form and in various exhibitory

environments. But for some reason this situation troubled me. I wondered what are we doing here and does this contribute to the scholarship or the understanding of Felix's work?

And a more recent example: David Wojnarowicz's papers contain four pages of dense handwritten instructions (presumably Tom Rauffenbart's writing) explaining how to prepare medical treatments for various HIV-related opportunistic infections to be administered at home through the "red" and "white" ports implanted in David's body. These are simultaneously matter-of-fact and emotionally wrenching. And they speak volumes about the circumstances of people living with AIDS circa 1991. I considered requesting permission to show these in *Afterlife*, but decided against it because taking them out of the context of the archive and exposing them in the Biennial environment is loaded with complications that I'm not prepared to take on right now.

But these situations lead to a couple of questions. Is there anything, either in principle or in your experience, which you feel is too private to be saved and exposed, particularly to be exposed in the archive? Who can speak for the dead?

MT: Well, it comes up all the time and I have a standard approach to it. If I'm dealing with a living author or artist, I say, "You have the right to your own privacy, and to me, that means you have the right to have things archived that you feel are appropriate to archive. If there are things you don't feel are appropriate to archive, don't give them to me, because if you give them to me, I have an ethical responsibility to preserve them." So basically, I give people the opportunity to edit their own life as they choose.

I believe firmly that we're nothing more than the narratives we tell ourselves, so we have the ability to subtract from that narrative things that we don't think we want people to know in the future. Now, this will probably terrify many of my colleagues, because of course I want everything; I want the whole picture to be there. I don't want anything thrown away. But, people do have the right to write the narratives of their own lives.

There's also the possibility of restricting materials. I will often say: "If you can identify a certain group of materials that you want restricted for a certain period of time, then we can write a clause into the letter of agreement. We'll restrict access to the materials until a certain date, after which scholars can have access."

Now, in the case of someone, like Felix, who is gone, it's really up to the estate, so you have to think carefully about who's going to be in charge of your estate.

We had a situation where a donor, who was also a scholar very close to Thornton Wilder, gave us a large collection of letters by Wilder. In fact, he

was a sometimes-lover of Thornton Wilder—and of course, Wilder was deeply closeted his entire life. The donor gave these letters to the Collection before I got here with a restriction that was pretty much in place in perpetuity. They were closed and nobody could have access to them without the donor's permission. My first question: Why did we accept them? I don't like collections that have restrictions in general and I certainly wouldn't accept such an open-ended restriction. Restrictions have to be limited to a certain time period; otherwise I can't manage them.

Luckily, in this instance, the Wilder estate, which actually held the copyright to the letters, approached me when the official biography was being written and asked if we would break the restriction. Our donor had died and with the approval of his estate, we opened the letters so that the authorized biographer could look at them.

I'm for everything being as open as possible. After you're dead, you're dead. Recently, a student got really, really angry with me because I was showing Wojnarowicz's Magic Box. He felt, having read C. Carr's biography, since David didn't share the box with others, how dare I show it? I said, "David Wojnarowicz used his autobiography in nearly every one of his works. There was virtually nothing he held back." He documented his life extensively—for somebody who lived on the street, David managed to keep an awful lot of stuff. In fact, one way of looking at David's work is an extension of his documentary practice. I don't have a problem showing the Magic Box.

- JA: Of course, David's incorporation of autobiography in much of his work is very different than the way Felix's work embodies, and simultaneously withholds personal narratives. As I wrote in the preface to the 2006 monograph, "The points of contact and contradictions between private and public that Gonzalez-Torres used as a central subject of his practice are expressed through his seemingly paradoxical relationship to self-representation. Felix was reticent to speak about his own life in public...preferring that people focus on the work rather than him or his image. He never wanted to distract from his language as an artist, and frequently said, 'I am not the work.' On a personal level, Felix was usually discreet about his life stories and his health—many people in the communities he was part of did not know of his HIV-positive status until he died. Yet he would casually tell a stranger, in an elevator for instance, that he was HIV positive, or tell a taxi driver details about his original home in Cuba.... Witnessing these instances highlighted what his friend Mario Nunez termed Felix's 'interior dialectics.'"⁷

7 Julie Ault, ed., *Felix Gonzalez-Torres* (Göttingen and New York: Steidl/dangin, 2006), 6–7.

I think you can look to the person and their practice—what they put out there—to get clues and cues for how to act after the fact. But in the case of Felix, whose relationship to autobiography was at variance, things are not clear cut.

MT: And that's what really the executor is supposed to do. Tom Rauffenbart has been great about that because he really thinks he's doing what David wanted, which was to get the stuff out there.

JA: Andrea Rosen as well. She has a formidable responsibility as the executor of Felix's estate, particularly as she is also his gallerist, and because they had a very close and mutually formative relationship. As we discussed earlier, she made the decision in relation to the love letters based on what Felix said during his life, and on what she believes Felix would want.

Generally speaking, I'm uncertain that we can really know what anyone who has died would want after that fact, despite the indications provided by their words, work, and ways of being. Analyzing a situation in light of death, and at a specific moment in culture, with an eye to future use, requires subtle thinking and taking into account societal and technological shifts.

MT: My argument for making them accessible would be there could be something in those letters that we don't see, that in twenty-five years some graduate student is going to come and see and it's going to be related directly to the work, and we just don't quite understand what that is.

JA: I agree and I don't think that my initial inclination was correct; it's not something I stand by now. I won't say I'm glad the letters are there, but I don't really know.

Aftereffects

JA: What notable consequences have you observed from registering previously unhistoricized art field events and practices into enduring public records?

MT: Commodification. Once we started collecting Downtown materials, doing exhibitions, holding events, and promoting scholarship on Downtown art, the art world began to pay attention. Just as gentrification of SoHo and the East Village followed the art scenes Downtown, so did the commodification of Downtown art follow Fales's imprimatur. I knew something had shifted when I was invited to a symposium at the Getty Center—the only librarian from outside—to help them determine how they should be collecting contemporary

art. Many of the scholars and curators from other organizations used the phrase “What I like about Fales....” The Getty has become one of my major competitors for Downtown archives.

JA: Commodification has serious consequences when wealthy institutions like the Getty vie for collections that in my view would greatly contribute to as well as benefit from the ideal context of the Downtown Collection. Financial compensation, digitization (which is a costly enterprise), management of usage and reproduction rights, and other qualities a well-endowed institution can offer are understandably appealing to organizations and individuals deciding where to locate their paper and image trails. I don’t know what the rationale was for the Guerrilla Girls or the Kitchen deciding on the Getty over the Fales for instance, but I imagine finances are not irrelevant. Honestly, I think those collections would make much more sense in the Downtown Collection, which might well have been the case in the absence of the commodification of Downtown practices.

MT: Another consequence has been a growing literature about how to archive artists’ materials. Similarly, questions of what materials are appropriate for archives are being discussed in the archival literature. I see a growing trend for the inclusion of archives in exhibitions. Fales loaned over four hundred objects to nineteen museums and galleries last year alone. I need a registrar to keep up with this level of activity. Personally, I’ve always wanted to see a fusion organization that is somewhere between a museum and an archive. Lynn Gumpert, director of NYU’s Grey Art Gallery, shares my vision. We’ve worked closely together on several exhibitions about Downtown art and artists. *The Downtown Show: The New York Art Scene 1974–1984* was one of the most heavily attended exhibitions the gallery has ever had on display. *The Downtown Book*, which Princeton University Press published, sold out the entire print run of 7,500 copies. Following that exhibition, Fales has been growing at the astronomical rate of about one thousand linear feet of archives each year. Seven of our last ten exhibitions in Fales have received *New York Times* reviews, even exhibitions that were not done jointly with the Grey Gallery. In short, just about everything in Fales has been radically altered by collecting Downtown materials. Just last month, a donor made a bequest to Fales of \$1.5 million to endow a curatorship for the Downtown Collection, assuring that the Collection will be cared for in perpetuity. It’s a career dream come true.

JA: What you’re doing with the Collection and with artists’ materials is changing the terms of archiving practice, especially when it comes to marginalized subjects (and objects) traditionally at risk of falling by the wayside. What

is gained and lost in the process of subjecting ephemeral activities to conservation, and inducting them into history?

MT: What is gained is easy: They are preserved for future generations to learn from. What is lost is more difficult. The spontaneity and ephemerality disappear. One of my projects has been to try to retain as much of that spontaneity as possible when bringing collections into a big organization like Fales. We've developed new modes of processing materials so that we don't let the structures of libraries and archives completely destroy the transgressive nature of some of the items we collect. It's another of the projects that inform the Downtown Collection. How do we conserve and preserve that which was not meant to be kept? It's an ongoing project for my staff.

JA: On more than one occasion you've trashed Derrida's *Archive Fever* and spoken of being influenced by Foucault's notion of archive—will you tell me what that entails?

MT: *Archive Fever* is one of the most pathetic things I've ever read. I read it, and I kept throwing it across the room, and I was just like, "This is utter bullshit." I did, literally—I mean I'm not using a literary device—literally throw it across the room. It's done more damage to the study of archives in the U.S. academy than anything else. I've been influenced very heavily by Foucault's writings about the archive. In fact, my reading of *Archive Fever* is that it is not Derrida's father or grandfather or Freud who is standing, looking over his back, but rather, it is Foucault, who is never mentioned in the book, but whose ideas are constantly engaged. Derridian deconstruction seems like a one-trick pony compared to Foucault's understanding of the archaeology of knowledge, the historical a priori, and their effects on the archive. The fragmentary structure of *Archive Fever* with its endless prefaces seems to me almost like Derrida stuttering in front of Foucault. Finally, Derrida's practice does not require the archive. It is more like the worst excesses of New Criticism. Foucault's work was always based on the archive. He had an intuitive understanding of archives that very few thinkers have ever had.

From analog to digital

JA: The positives of digitization and online access to archived material are obvious: unconstrained access is convenient and appears to be democratic. Geographic distances are overcome as information is widely circulated to remote users. The ability to access archives in a digital environment attracts non-traditional users, unlikely to visit an archive. The aura and

authority of the archive as the institutional foundation of legitimate record dematerializes. Digital archiving assumes the progressive role and the naysayers of unrestrained electronic distribution are largely considered conservative luddites.

Paradoxically, as historical material becomes nearer to its user the electronic delivery platform also produces disconnection between researcher and document. The “placelessness” of the web eclipses the experience of the archive as physical context. Papers are made immaterial in their converted electronic state. Documents and artifacts are flattened, the nuance of materiality is leveled, and texture is forfeited. The vital experience of conducting hands-on research in the archive potentially disappears, as does access to tangible detail and impression which looking and touching entails.

Do you have a stable position on digitization?

MT: I do. For all the reasons you cite, we should be digitizing materials and making them accessible. However, from my perspective, the radical decontextualization that digitization imposes of physical objects makes them incomprehensible. It privileges their textual and visual content over their tactile content. It eliminates embodied experience. It severely limits what kind of knowledge can be gained from archival materials. Take a look at the Wojnarowicz journals that we have put online. Sure, people can read them, but they’re not David’s journals anymore. They are images, not things.

I have been outspoken and critical about librarians’ and archivists’ narrative that everything will one day be digitized. We’ve lost an awful lot of who we are and what we do if we believe this. Who will support brick and mortar libraries if everything is going to be online? What role do we have as curators if everything is indiscriminately digitized? Why would we want to digitize every telephone bill in every archive? The notion of complete digitization is just stupid.

I have a better plan: put your efforts into preserving audio, video, and born digital materials first. We stand to lose huge amounts of vital information if we don’t solve these problems in the next five to ten years. The paper can wait. Maybe we’ll come to our senses about just what paper to digitize if we take our time. The media can’t wait. We have to act now.

JA: The tempo of archive use has traditionally been determined by cycles of requesting and reviewing material and consulting archivists and finding aids to ascertain what’s available and what’s next. There are few shortcuts to finding what you’re looking for without actually looking through sometimes-dense amounts of material. In such a scenario, research routes are customized at a relatively careful pace—researchers tend to inspect reasonably cohesive bodies of material. Electronic access profoundly

influences the pace of research. Internet speed permits, and to some degree encourages, a more restless and scattershot approach to recovering and discovering, resulting in irregular and labyrinthine paths of investigation. The web model of data organization and its instantaneity liberates information from traditional frameworks, but it also appears to short-circuit thought processes and instigate reorganization and even disorganization which isn't inherently good or bad. But for me the archive tends to be an extremely focusing context.

MT: Working with original materials is time consuming. I tell students, "You have to plunk your butt down in a chair and let the materials take you where they will." Scholarship is not about finding the right materials that support your thesis. That's writing an undergraduate term paper—and a not very good one at that. There is no substitute for taking the time to engage with archives and original materials of all kinds to truly create new knowledge. This probably makes me seem old-fashioned, but so be it. That said, my current work on fashion and pop culture is very much inflected by the Internet. I still, however, go into archives to verify everything I find digitally. The digital world is exceptionally messy and ephemeral.

JA: The ceremonial character of entering and deciphering the archive abruptly vanishes as archives are digitized and at every turn made available online. But does it stand to reason that the historian's authority gets dispersed equitably in one fell swoop as formality gives way to informality and analog yields to digital? Will historical representation and history writing per se—the mediation of annals and memory, the making and interpretation of meaning from the archive—be necessary if the archive is opened in such a way that anyone and everyone can contribute to it, access it, and construe it at any time or all the time?

MT: I question the notion that there was ever a continuous, authoritative "historian's authority," "history," or "historical representation." It is in constant flux and always has been. I know it's a cliché to block quote Foucault, but this passage from *The History of Sexuality* is apt, and one of the most important texts I know about history and about archives:

Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies. There is no binary division to be made between

what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.⁸

8 Michel Foucault. *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 27.

Some of Ault's thoughts herein are drawn from her doctoral research, "Remembering and Forgetting in the Archive," Malmö Lund University, Sweden, 2011.

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