

"The Future Uncertain"

by Arnold Dreyblatt

The young artist may prefer not to be preoccupied with the weight of a future and may be primarily concerned with the production of new works. On the other hand, an older artist entering retirement may wish to sell one's entire collection to finance his or her last years. An artist friend whose practice exists principally as site-specific performative projects recently informed me that he only saves documentation, ideally with a resulting publication. Everything else is destroyed. "No one reimburses the storage costs of three-dimensional artifacts", he said." I might refer here to the carefully formulated conceptual statements, often accompanied by a black and white photo - which is all we have left of many performative and conceptual works from the sixties and early seventies.

The perspective of the individual artist on the preservation of one's own work is not necessarily aligned with its appraisal by the institutions and disciplines which society holds responsible for acquisition. My artistic practice considers the archive as a political category in which one is compelled to consider the hierarchical and temporal location and conditions of the decision-maker - where and when the determination is made about what is kept and will be preserved, or, in archival language, what is "accessioned" and what is "de-accessioned". (some archives do "regularly throw things out, collections do sell works to other collections, etc."). And finally, as every archivist is well-aware, we cannot keep it all, storage implies loss - there are factors beyond individual and collective control. We are confronted with the case of artworks which are - for all intents and purposes - "buried" and unseen in warehouses and collections, - rarely "excavated" to be revealed in the "light". I would rather not contemplate those works which circulate in the international "art market" to be taken out of "circulation" for private storage in tax-free warehouses in Asia and Switzerland.

As an alternative I would propose that the storage of artistic works and archival material would be coupled with active research facilities at educational institutions, a practice common in the US. Many large universities, private and public, have a "Special Collections and University Archives" program, often acquiring artistic estates which are thematically connected to a particular research and historical focus.

My artistic practice has included digital media and performative practices, and parallel to my object-based works are those which only exist in a relationship between hardware and software. In earlier times I conserved the historical computers on which the software had originally been installed, but this has not always been practical. These hard disks and much contemporary software will probably not be readable in 10 years and many of my own works can no longer be "activated", so that documentation as image and film, or the unreadable computer code and textual description are all that remains.

No artist wishes to remain as a corpus of incomprehensible fragments, and it is only as a “body of work” which is “actively USED” - that an ongoing coherency and a future “life” may be at all possible.

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