Moran, Lo (ed.) - The Art and Social Practice Archive: Doing Things Differently, Challenging Structures from Within and the Queerness of Archives. In: Reclaim your Archive! Online article series on reclaim.hypotheses.org, published by Art Doc Archive, Berlin March 2023.

Abstract

The Art + Social Practice Archive was founded in 2018 by Shoshana Gugenheim Kedem, Roshani Thakore, Lo Moran and Harrell Fletcher, and with the help of Cristine Paschild and Marti Clemmons from Portland State University's (PSU) Special Collections and University Archives, to mark the 10th anniversary of PSU's Art and Social Practice MFA program. Located in the Portland State University Library Special Collections, the Art + Social Practice Archive is the first public archive dedicated to socially engaged art ephemera. The ASPA houses both physical and digital materials including posters, publications, flyers, zines, videos, sketches and other project documentation from past and ongoing artist projects. Lo Moran and Marti Clemmons continue to develop the project with the assistance of many student collaborators, including BB Andersson, Bri Graw, Caryn Aasness, Olivia DelGandio, Rebecca Copper, Jake Barber, Emily Pappas, and Eniko Banyasz. The growing collection documents social, collaborative and community-based artwork coming from artists connected to the PSU Art and Social Practice MFA program and local, national and international artist projects. The approach to growing the ASPA reflects our intention to collect stories of socially engaged artworks from all over the world while organizing programming and projects that support opportunities for engagement with students, artists, researchers, and the public. The original accession of the archive focused on work related to artists who have graduated, taught in, or who are currently students in the PSU Art and Social Practice MFA program. In 2020 the ASPA built and launched its digital component on PDXScholar. Globally accessible online, it includes digitized publications and digital ephemera by invited artists. You can view the most recent finding aid with a list of artists and projects in the physical archive here.

Author

Lo Moran creates interdisciplinary projects that are often participatory, collaborative, and co-authored. They aim to experiment with and question the systems in which we're all embedded by organizing situations of connection, openness, and nonhierarchical learning. Lo desires to develop sites for accessibility, and reimagined ways of being together. They are currently living and working in Berlin, Germany.

art doc archive

Art Doc Archive is developing a prototype for the centralized archiving of the materials self-documented by Berlin-based artists on websites and in social media. The "Reclaim your Archive!" series of articles accompanies the project and is edited by Bianca Ludewig. All texts can be found on the project's blog: reclaim.hypotheses.org

Art Doc Archive was funded by:

Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Europa | BERLIN

The Art and Social Practice Archive: Doing Things Differently, Challenging Structures from Within and the Queerness of Archives

Lo Moran in conversation with Marti Clemmons, Olivia DelGandio and Caryn Aasness
Edited by Lo Moran

Biographies of interviewees

Marti Clemmons is an Archives Technician at Portland State University's Special Collections and University Archives. They are interested in using archival work as a means of activism, especially through a Queers lens.

Caryn Aasness is a queer disabled artist from Long Beach, California living in Portland, Oregon. Caryn wants to invite you into their brain. In it we explore mental illness, and the folk art of coping mechanisms. We investigate queerness and how it forms and severs multiple selves. We look to language and learn how to cheat at it.

Olivia DelGandio is a mixed media artist interested in human connection, what it means to be tender, and the joy/sorrow dichotomy. She finds solace in creating through and for grief and is currently thinking about how grieving can become more of a community practice.

Defining social practice art is an emergent process

Lo Moran: I was thinking we could all introduce ourselves and start with the basics. I'm Lo Moran. I'm an alumni of the Art and Social Practice MFA program at Portland State University. I've been working on projects with the Art and Social Practice Archive since we founded it in 2018. Now it's 2023, I just realized it's been five years of building this archive.

Marti Clemmons: That's really cool. I'm Marti Clemmons. I am the technician of the archive at Portland State University Special Collections. I've been here since 2012 and have been working with our Art + Social Practice Archive since 2019.

Olivia DelGandio: I'm Olivia. I'm a second-year student in the Art and Social Practice MFA program. I've been working on this archive since the beginning of this year. It's my first official archiving experience, but in my art practice I'm interested in histories and collecting stories, and the idea of archiving.

Caryn Aasness: I'm Caryn Aasness. It's my third year in the Art and Social Practice program. I've also been working on this project since fall 2022.

Lo Moran: Alright, so my first set of questions, to start broadly; what is the field of social practice art? And how does this archive fit into that, with it being the first archive of social practice art ephemera? Olivia and Caryn since you are both deep in the MFA program right now, maybe you can answer.

Caryn Aasness: I think we end up talking about this a lot and it feels like we should have a more concrete answer, but I like that we don't. It feels like everyone who is doing social practice art has a different answer to this question. It's always kind of a conversation, which feels very appropriate to the field. Social practice is working with people, making art with people that's not necessarily object-based, but more experience-centered. So, it's interesting to be creating an ephemera archive, collecting all the printed materials and props as evidence of social practice projects to tell the stories of the projects themselves, which are mostly impermanent or event-based. There are actually a lot of objects involved. It doesn't necessarily make the work object-based, but it's interesting to see the projects through the lens of those objects.

Olivia DelGandio: I think socially engaged art is collaborative in nature. It's not about what you make on your own in a studio. Many things can be made "social practice" by positioning the framework of the interaction as the project instead of objects being in the center of the project. Without this archive it might be easy for social practice projects to get lost in the ether. Ephemera coming out of social practice artwork is so weird and can be so unique. There are chicken cutouts and cooking aprons.

Display from *Loose Body: A Survey of Ephemera from the Art and Social Practice Archive,* an exhibition in the PSU Library in 2022.

1. *Use your hands, use your eyes, use your heart, use your brain,* risograph poster
David Wilson, 2020.
http://www.davidwilsonandribbons.com/
2. *Cafeteria Staff Exchange Program* apron and placemat
Salty Xi Jie Ng and Spencer Byrne-Seres, featuring Laura Booth, Monique Lopez and Irene Prasad from the Native American Youth & Family Center, and Ruby Sims-Suell and Virginia Mulbey from Martin Luther King, Jr. School, 2017, http://www.saltythunder.net/
3. *Orchards of 82nd Art Plan*
Roshani Thakore, 2018,
https://www.roshanithakore.com/
4. *82nd and Beyond: A Living Archive* map
Roshani Thakore and contributors, 2018,
https://www.roshanithakore.com/
5. *The Music That Makes Us* posters
PSU Art & Social Practice Program, 2016,
http://psusocialpractice.org/the-music-that-makes-us/
6. *Public Annex* shirt, postcards and chicken cutout

It's important there's a place for it to go, and that people can be inspired by it. It's hard to find inspiration for social practice projects from other social practice artists because it's such a small and

distinctive field. If you search on the internet 'social practice art', you'll get some stuff, but you have to really dig for what you want. You can search for 'painters' and get a million results. I think it's great that there's a place like this archive where materials can all be housed and made accessible.

Lo Moran: Marti, how do you see social practice art from an archivist perspective? And how does it fit within the other archives you work with?

Marti Clemmons: I didn't know what art and social practice was when I first started working with this archive. It was very in the clouds for me, I couldn't understand what y'all do. Through working with the materials, I've come to realize it's exactly what I believe art should be. Community engagement and activism and radical thought. It makes sense to me now. In relation to what archives historically look like, the Art + Social Practice Archive is one of a kind. It's extremely different from other collections that we have because it is active and continually growing. But at the same time, it is a lot like our other collections because it is used by the public and by students to inspire their own creative works. And to learn about themselves. I could answer this in so many different ways. We have plenty of radical community group archives here that have the same kind of flyers to showcase how to get involved and how to make your community better. And I think I see a lot of similarities with the art that's produced through social practice.

Artwork by Salty Xi Jie Ng, Eric Olson, Fred Louis Jr., Li Ying Jian, Zeph Fishlyn, Lo Moran, Lexa Walsh, Chitra Ganesh, Roz Crews and students at UMass Dartmouth, CRCI Comedy Night participants, Open Engagement and CCA's Social Practice MFA program

Olivia DelGandio: We love a social practice convert.

Marti Clemmons: Yeah, I really enjoy having the collection here. It's just opened my mind to how I think about archives and community archives, especially as a more open practice of collaboration. Having people use archives in a way that influences and inspires communities to think about place and their community. It's been a pretty inspiring process for me as an archivist.

Olivia DelGandio: I have a question that relates to that. Because social practice is very non-traditional and follows different rules of making art, do you think the Art + Social Practice Archive needs to follow traditional archiving rules to be seen as an archive?

Marti Clemmons: I don't. There's a couple of things there. I think it should be its own thing and influential in what it's doing. I think I just asked you two last week, how do you think we should organize this? It's an ongoing conversation and I don't know if the traditional way is the right way. The Art + Social Practice Archive is the most used collection that we have, so I don't think the way that it's been organized or processed is holding it back in any way. I think it's actually increasing usage.

Lo Moran: From visiting different archives I've learned some of them have a totally ad hoc approach of collecting things. When I met with the documenta archive last year to see how they were working with materials from the socially engaged art in documenta 15, I learned they just send people around to grab what they can from events and happenings. I was surprised to learn that the approach was so loose and similar to my approach. It made me feel better about my methods (laughs).

Marti Clemmons: Do you know how many people work there?

Lo Moran: I think it was like 30 people.

Marti Clemmons: Here it's just me. I would love to accept all the materials, but in reality, we can't take everything.

Lo Moran: That's one advantage of having the digital archive, we can always focus more on collecting digital versions of work if we need to slow down with the paper archive.

Questioning the archivists' curatorial role

Caryn Aasness: A question that I was wondering about is – what is the archivists' curatorial role in this archive? How are we deciding what counts as social practice art and what should be there? Considering that this is the first social practice art ephemera archive, and because the field is still evolving. It seems like the things we decide go in this archive or where we find those things are going to define the field in some ways and shape it. What value judgments are we making about art and what belongs and what doesn't? Or definition judgments about what is social practice art and what's not? What do we think about social practice as a field and how does that affect what we choose to collect?

Marti Clemmons: Last week we had a high school class in from Jefferson High School, which is in a historically Black neighborhood. We were showing them the Rutherford collection, which is [the collection of] a Black family from Northeast Portland. A student approached the head archivist and

said, "Why are you the one that gets to do this?" And it was an incredible question because it's true. Like, why? Why do institutions like universities that have been historically exclusive and inaccessible to marginalized communities get to put these materials together and create this living archive for people to see? Are we able to work closely enough with communities to properly present these stories and make the materials accessible to those communities?
I didn't really know what the Art + Social Practice Archive was at first. I got a feeling of imposter syndrome when working on it because of this, even though I am an archivist. But I learn about it as I go. I felt like that was a healthy process because it just kind of made me step back and view the materials with a different lens. Not with an archivist lens, but just as someone who is learning about something. I sometimes put a little bit too much pressure on myself in this position as someone who processes and creates the way that the public will see these materials. It's better to have the patron or the student or the researcher come in and create their own needs and stories from the materials.

Lo Moran: This is very understandable as Portland is often called "the whitest city in America" and it has an extremely intense history of institutional racism within the city and there is a deep criticality of the history of how racist policies and institutions have shaped the city; so why should colonial institutions like universities hold and have the power to interpret the stories of materials from communities? This is crucial for us.
Lately, it's been making me pause a bit when I read our description, "the first social practice archive", because that statement feels like we are trying to claim something or there's some sense of authority in that. I don't see this project as an authoritative, defining collection. I see it as a natural process that happened when we formed the archive. We had all these materials and we started to partner with the library. We want to document the history of the Art and Social Practice program and all the artists connected to it and artists working locally in Portland. Then we kept finding and reaching out to other projects that are doing similar work in different parts of the world. Anyone could start a social practice art ephemera archive, and we should all connect and have a network of these archives. I recently discovered and reached out to a project out of the UK called Social Art Library that has similarities to our project. I've been thinking of it in a network sort of way. There is a lot of knowledge and ideas about the field of social practice that come from what we're creating. But it's also definitely not the only knowledge, and I want to work with the intention of bringing all the different knowledges together.

Marti Clemmons: I think it's a good point about how this archive could possibly set the tone for how others perceive the field of socially engaged art.

Caryn Aasness: It's interesting to think about how, at least in our program, there's so much emphasis on social practice art being self-initiated. So, someone might be more visible in the archive by sending more stuff. And that messes with the normal channels of how that kind of representation would typically work. There are barriers to who has time and resources to organize their materials and submit them.

Lo Moran: So true, we should be in constant conversation about how to make submitting materials more accessible, like how we can support mailing costs etc. I've noticed the people that really want to participate so far are also people who find it useful for themselves to have their work stored somewhere and made accessible. For example, when I think of artists we have in the collection like Jeff Kasper and Christine Wong Yap, they didn't have any connection to the PSU Art and Social Practice program, but I think they found it useful to have a place to archive the publications and other materials that have accompanied their projects.

Marti Clemmons: Chistine Wong Yap's work is some of my favorite work in the archive. Shout out!

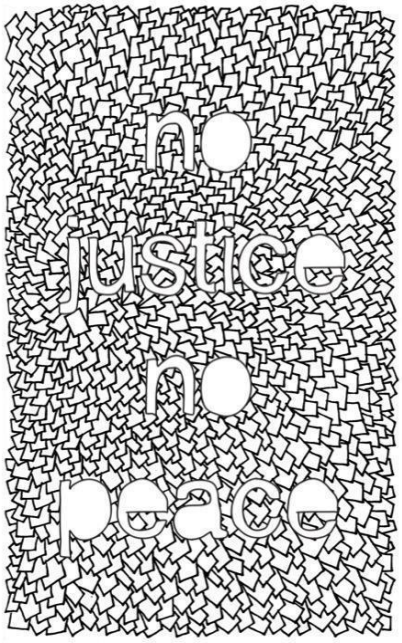
Olivia DelGandio: I think it's also cool to think about the way that we can use this archive as a medium to reach out to artists that we're interested in connecting with. We can just send an email to any artist we want to talk with to see their work or have a conversation with, we can use the ASPA as an official entity that we're sitting behind. If I just send an email to an artist I was interested in from my own email, maybe I'd get a response or maybe they'd decide they don't really have time for that. But coming from the Art + Social Practice Archive, it's a structure where we are also offering something that might be useful to artists to have their materials housed in an official university archive. I feel like there's much more of a chance to get a response and have a conversation with someone. It's cool to think about the reciprocity of it. It works as this safe place for artists to put ephemera from their work. It's also a really great place for students to be inspired by the materials and talk to new artists working in social practice. It feels like a cyclical process.

Christine Wong Yap, image from "BELONGING ABQ", 2017, https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/belonging_abq/1/

Marti Clemmons: On the other side of that, I was talking with someone who works with queer historic sites for the City of Portland, and they have been reaching out to try to get stories and ephemera from certain places in Portland that have connection to queerness. And they haven't really heard back from people because many people don”t want to work with the City institutions. I wonder if we weren't attached to a university what would change?

Caryn Aasness: Yes. I wonder if any of the people who don’t respond when we reach out about archiving materials are not responding because of any feelings about institutional affiliations. There are so many social practice artists who make archives as artworks outside of institutional structures, I wonder what it looks like for them getting contributors.

Olivia DelGandio: I see this archive as a big social practice project.



Jeff Kasper, “Sketching Mutual Aid” cover, 2020, https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/sketching_ma/1/

The advantages and challenges of working within an institutional system

Lo Moran: We are definitely talking around one of the questions I had, which was about the advantages and challenges of working within an institutional system. With the digital archive, we would have had to build a whole website system, we would have needed to find funding to work with coders and web designers, but all those structures were already in place within the PSU University Archives structure, and we just kind of globbed on to that and used it in a different way. I think there are questions that are created by the ASPA being within an institution for people who are cautious about how their work is represented within an institutional context or people who have been historically excluded from institutions, or artists who have self-taught/ community/ activism based practices that function outside of institutional contexts; but I also think there are advantages that people who submit materials find useful.

Caryn Aasness: Have you ever come up against censorship within the archives? From being attached to a university?

Lo Moran: No. Just hearing from more radical projects I think there is sometimes a disinterest or active avoidance of working with academic institutions.

Marti Clemmons: Not to say censorship doesn't exist, because I'm sure it does, but I can't think of any instances where this university has said "No, you can't have that or you need to change the exhibit poster".

Lo Moran: I have a question about socially engaged art becoming a more defined discipline, having things like MFA programs and archives. The documenta 15, one of the biggest contemporary art festivals in the world last year was all social practice art, and it also having a history in grassroots community art and activists projects, how do you all see that development? It's much more recognized as a way of working within the larger art world now.

Caryn Aasness: I think certain artists might enjoy the way that social practice artwork can be a rebellion. I think it is still a rebellion in many ways. I think that there's so much capacity to be anti-capitalist and social justice oriented. But is social practice still punk? Is it selling out? Is it gonna die?

Lo Moran: With documenta 15 it was interesting to see how ruangrupa, the social practice curatorial team, were fucking with the structures and everyone's expectations of what an contemporary art festival should be and how it should be structured and how the budget should be used and how transparent the process was. The German media and political as well as institutional entities made this a completely un-nuanced spectacle when it could have been an opportunity to discuss discrimination and racism against Palestinian people and antisemitism in the German context. They focused on perspectives from the Global South and decolonial perspectives, they used a delegated curatorial model where they had 14 partners from different parts of the world who also curated work into the festival and invited partners within their projects, they had the most programming and participatory events I've ever seen at a visual art festival, they used a large amount of their budget to bring thousands of people involved in the projects to the festival and focused on those people connecting instead of focusing on large blockbuster art world names or even large materials budgets, they had diagrams on display of how they were using the budget, they considered accessibility and programming for kids in expansive ways that had never been as considered at documenta previously. It still felt very institutional, but also was challenging the inherent structure and expectations of a contemporary art festival. Social practice art in the institutional context is about changing structures, but it's still funded by institutions, and institutions tend to have a hard time with change so the changes end up being temporary or constant points of tension.

Thinking of archives as a community resource, what does the social practice community look like and how can we be a resource to that community? We see with the digital archive map that people all over the world are using these materials.

Caryn Aasness: Yeah, where do you draw the line around that community? As social practice artists are often creating communities around themselves through their work, or making work already immersed in a community. The people that are coming to the ASPA, are maybe more likely to be artists, but there's also a community around them that are participants in their projects, and maybe are even represented in some ways in the ASPA. There are many different layers of audience, the people who were at the events, then the people who experience the projects through the documentation and ephemera. The community is definitely growing.

Lo Moran: I think being here in Berlin and Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik has made me realize there's a global community of people that are specifically interested in social practice art, and even some people from a research perspective, or like social sciences perspective. I've met people who are writing their PhDs on community-based art and social practice. So, there is also this research aspect to it, from people who aren't necessarily artists.

Olivia DelGandio: I'm thinking about the ASPA Instagram as a social practice community point that can lead people to connect with the ASPA to dig more deeply into social practice art projects. Everything I've posted has gotten a lot of engagement and people reaching out about archiving or

accessing materials. The social practice community is, in theory, small and spread out, but there are these points like the ASPA where the community is really engaged and sharing digital space together.

Lo Moran: Since we received the Open Engagement archive from Jen delos Reyes I've thought about how Open Engagement was such an important international community gathering for social practice art discourse and connection for 10 years, and how the community is really missing that larger meeting point since it stopped in 2018. The website for OE doesn't even exist anymore, so I feel like we are one of the only spaces holding the stories of this significant gathering and we should focus on making those materials digitally accessible.

Olivia and Caryn archiving materials given to the archive by Jen delos Reyes.

How would you all define artistic research[1]? How has the ASPA played into your research as artists? Do you think that this archive is useful to other artists?

Caryn Aasness: Artistic research feels like such an opportunity and adventure to me, it can be so many different things. And it can look so many different ways. We're experiencing the ASPA from a slightly different angle because we're putting things in folders, and maybe other artists are taking things out

of folders. It's cool to think about the researchers not necessarily having to pore over a book that has a bunch of footnotes, and, you know, was written forty years ago, but they might be looking through a book full of bumper stickers made last week, or there's saltine crackers included in one of the publications. That's still research. It's using other people's idiosyncratic or weird work as a starting point for your own research. I feel like it gives you more permission to make your own weird projects.

Olivia DelGandio: I think that social practice being such a fluid, strange and always changing field, and projects touching on so many different topics, I feel like our collection could be used by all different kinds of artists for artistic research and someone from any field could look at our collection of social practice artwork and find something they find relatable or inspiring. If you were researching local history or urban studies you could look at People's Homes by Emily Fitzgerald and Molly Sherman to learn about personal histories of housing policy and access in Portland or if you were interested in Public Health or Disability Studies you look at organization materials from Public Annex.

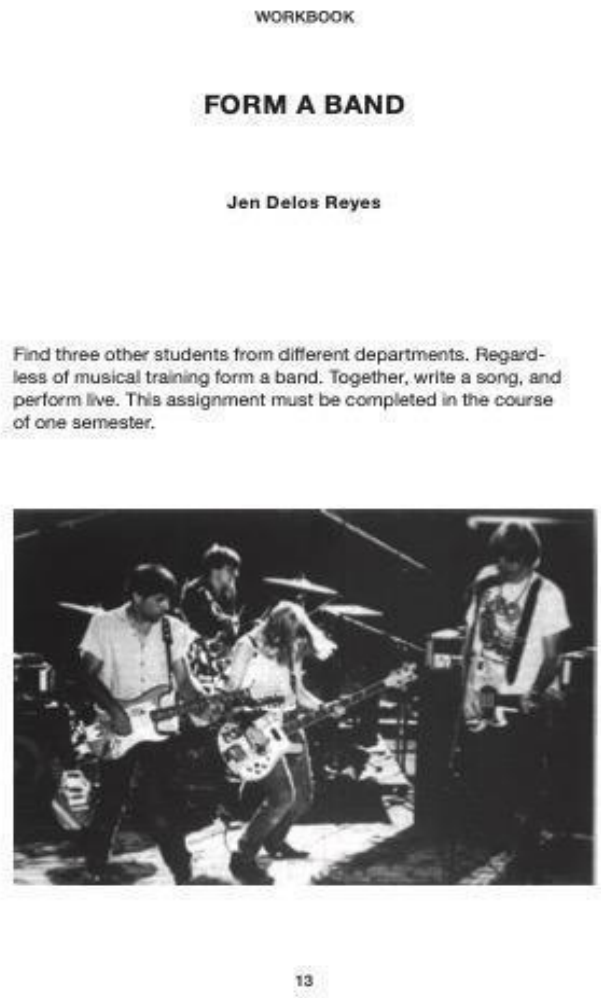
BB Andersson working with the ASPA materials. Photo by Lo Moran

The Art + Social Practice Archive taking shape

Marti Clemmons: I mean, it already happens. Someone comes in here researching one thing, and then they leave with five different outlets for something else, or they change their entire thesis. But I think the digital archive probably has a little bit of a step up from the paper archive because of the metadata that's included. I think that's why I've been asking how should this archive look? Because yes, it's organized by artists, but I feel like the themes aren't attached to it. On the digital archive, you can search by a keyword and get the artists that have those words in their metadata listings. I think with the finding aid for the paper archive here, that's something we should work on including.

Lo Moran: Can I tell you my idea? Inspired by other digital archives I've been looking at, what if we had everything in the paper archive represented in the digital archive? Just like a photo of the book cover with the metadata, rather than the full text. It's a huge project, but then we could slowly digitize things over time – and it would be a reference point for all the materials we have. Big dreams.
This is also a question related to the digital archive, about developing global networks through digital archiving. What is the balance between social practice art being so community and place based, while also being a global artistic movement and network of artists working within this methodology? What are the advantages of connecting with people all over who are creating social practice art even though it is a context and place based medium?

Caryn Aasness: I feel like I'm going to accidentally use business terms here. But there's a horizontal connection between artists who are doing similar things. And then there's like an outward connection


WORKBOOK

FORM A BAND

Jen Delos Reyes

Find three other students from different departments. Regardless of musical training form a band. Together, write a song, and perform live. This assignment must be completed in the course of one semester.

13

Jen Delos Reyes prompt for the Art and Social Practice Workbook organized by Travis Neel and Erin Charpentier

with artists who are working in a community. And I think that the archive could maybe be a place where you could find that community that you want to connect with about your work. Seeing other people do similar work, it's encouraging. And it also can give you an idea of people you could collaborate with or projects that you could recreate in your own context. I think that the benefit of

the global part is that you could be influenced by someone who's thousands of miles away working in their own context, but their work could inform your work and be adapted to your own context.

Lo Moran: So many of the items in the digital archive function as workbooks or instructions or scores to be used and recreated, like the Art and Social Practice Workbook organized by Travis Neel and Erin Charpentier, for example. Anyone could take something and try to recreate it in their own different context. The point is that the different local contexts will change the work eventually. And it's about the idea of playing with context.

Caryn Aasness: That's true. We've been talking recently about getting stuck. I just realized there's all these projects that exist and I could just recreate somebody else's project to give myself a little boost and give myself an idea of how it feels to work in a different way and gain some of the skills of working in that way. And then maybe that will lead me into doing different types of projects.

Lo Moran: How would you describe a social practice ethos? And how do we build that into what we do with the ASPA?

Olivia DelGandio: I feel like that's something that comes up a lot in our discussions. There's always some debate about it. I think there's consensus on a few aspects of it. It should be collaborative, maybe collaboration is the only consensus. I think if we're talking specifically about that, it's collaborative, fluid and done in dialogue with other people and is context-specific.

Caryn Aasness: Every time it comes up, there's a tendency toward conversation around ethics, people should be doing good things and they should be responsible and create social change. But is that how you define or characterize social practice art? I think Harrell [Fletcher] specifically usually argues it doesn't have to be morally good to be social practice art. There are also things to be gained from having a project that isn't morally good. It could bring to light new questions, potentially. There are benefits of morally neutral projects, things that are just for fun, projects that make things weird but not necessarily "better" and not necessarily worse. Like our bus stop project where we declared ourselves Artists in Residence of the bus stop and hosted activities for people at the bus stop. People had fun participating, but I don't think it changed anything about the world. It made some people smile that day, or made some people think we were weird. Also, some people put their headphones in and ignored us.

Lo Moran: I see it kind of as doing things differently and challenging systems and structures in all various ways. And even if it's a serious project, there's a playfulness to social practice or a messing with people's expectations about how you're supposed to act within systems and social situations.

Caryn Aasness: It feels like that because institutional critique[2] is historically somewhat of a precedent to social practice that it also influences the way that we think about it.

Olivia DelGandio: I feel like I'm always getting new questions, and not many new answers. But that's the fun of it. And I don't necessarily need more answers. I like the questions.

Marti Clemmons: I'm definitely on the lines of thinking of social practice as something that I'd like to see help dismantle systems and structures. I think there are a lot of new conversations about disrupting or changing structures in the archive field in general, because many archivists currently want to change the old guard, colonial, white, hetero, patriarchal systems that are still in place. I think that's why I was so excited with the Art + Social Practice Archive coming in, because it was something extremely different and fresh. It changed my mind of how I'd like to see other collections come in and

evolve, which might not always be possible, but it's nice to have an example of how things could be different. In the majority of the collections that I work with, the people are dead. With the ASPA I really do love the engagement that I have with the people involved. I can talk to them, I can ask them questions, I can learn more about their projects. What the Art + Social Practice Archive has brought in is the question, why do archives have to follow these structures that have been in place for so long? What are ways we could change or reimagine these structures? So yeah, totally all about dismantling the system.

Lo Moran: From within. I see social practice projects as testing grounds and experiments for imagining new systems and structures in experiential ways.

Caryn Aasness: This feels like part of the social practice ethos, too, that you can use those structures, you can use what is beneficial to you and change the rest, at least in a microcosmic, local or momentary way. The reason why so many artists make archive or museum projects is because there can be a way of conceptually playing with the historical power and significance of those structures there. Like Cris E. Vargas's project, the Museum of Transgender Hirstory and Art. It's powerful to make an imaginary museum to point to the fact that so much trans history has been lost or not thought important enough to be preserved in a US museum and trans artists face a lack of representation in museum collections. Because he created it from the perspective of an artwork, it can challenge the standards of what it mimics, and reimagines or inverts the parts of the systems that create barriers and exclusion. As artists, we can just do what we want.

Olivia DelGandio: I'm a research assistant for a professor in the Urban Planning department. I was just working on her Institutional Review Board application for this research project she's doing. They review all the sociological research happening. The application was 40 pages long, took forever and was so repetitive – and you have to be so monotonous and specific, it was ridiculous. For the project that she was doing, if she was doing it through a social practice lens instead of the research lens, she wouldn't have had to do that whole application, she could have just done the project without having to follow rigid bureaucratic procedures. I feel like that is a part of social practice art that I love. We can circumnavigate structures that are trying to place all these restrictions on the work that you do, and just do the work because you think it's important and you don't have to get approval from someone else.

Lo Moran: I think issues can come up with that too, but that's another set of stories you can read about in Claire Bishop's Artificial Hells, where many dark ways artists have had people participate in their cruel or problematic projects are cataloged.
This nicely goes into the last topic, which I am excited to hear your thoughts on, of the idea of queering archives and archiving in relation to under acknowledged histories and the remnants of ephemeral projects. We have all these little bits that tell us the story of something that happened. In relation to our archive and messing with institutional structures, how do you all see this?

Queerness and archival practice

Olivia DelGandio: I'm thinking about a conversation we had when we first started working at the ASPA with Marti. We were really hyped about the fact that archives are inherently queer. I don't know if we had a distilled reason for that, but we were like, it's obvious this is queer.

Caryn Aasness: Maybe because we're still at relatively early stages of social practice as a field of art it has a sense of queerness to it. And with under acknowledged histories, what I'm thinking about is we get to actually acknowledge multiple perspectives that are underrepresented in western art history and address the barriers to anyone who isn't a straight, able-bodied white man to get into the canon of art history. That was people keeping other people out, but with this project a real variety of stories is there. It's going to be a more accurate picture of what's actually happening, who is involved, and what's actually influencing this field.

Olivia DelGandio: Living a queer life is questioning things and this makes it necessary to think about different rules and other futures. And I feel like that's what we're trying to do with the Art + Social Practice Archive, we're making the rules and queering traditional structures of archiving. This space didn't exist and now that it does we're gathering and putting these things into the world to make them exist in the present so that they can continue to exist in the future. And I think it's so gay. Also, look at us as a group of people doing this project, if everybody involved in the archive is queer, the archive is queer.

Marti Clemmons: I wouldn't want it any other way. I think when I first started volunteering and working at the City Archives and the Oregon Historical Society, I was very much afraid to place my identity in my work. As a student in the History department, I learned you keep yourself out of your work. But now if I see the words "queer" or "gay" in the materials I'm working with, I'm making sure that it goes in the finding aid, because historically that is not acknowledged. Any chance I get to put queerness in the collections I do, and I will continue to do so.

Caryn Aasness: Making the future. Yeah.

Lo Moran: I think also going back to the social practice ethos question, it is about valuing things that are undervalued in our current systems and having trickster energy in your artistic approach. And I feel like that is a theme, drawing attention to everyday moments or stories that weren't traditionally paid attention to, and that is what queerness is all about too.

Marti Clemmons: I think that the work that we're doing, not to toot our own horns, but it's very important. I think queering history is essential, especially since people are trying really hard to erase us from existence. We need to continue to place ourselves and what we believe in into our work.

Caryn Aasness: I feel like people have always inserted themselves into the history and the work that they're doing, they just weren't acknowledging their identity and what that meant. You have to acknowledge where you come from.

Olivia DelGandio: Being a social practice artist also means putting all your different identities into your work. Thinking about the work in the ASPA, the breadth of projects is so vast, because all of our identities are in our work. And we can't separate our identity from the work we want to be doing. Our experiences shape the work that we want to be doing. Caryn, your work is so much about how your brain works and you put your brain into every project you do. And my work is so much about grief, and I put all of that into every project I do. These projects are archiving our identities and the person that we are at that point in time.

Caryn Aasness: There is a generosity of putting your identity in your work and allowing audiences to see into your personal experiences. I think that's what I like. It just makes things richer.

Olivia DelGandio: I feel like social practice is gay and being gay is a social practice.

Lo Moran: I think we should end there. I feel like that's a good ending.

Marti Clemmons: Totally. That was the answer to the first question right there.

Olivia DelGandio: Yeah. What is social practice art to us?

Lo Moran: Gay.

Grief is a Reservoir collaborative artist book by Olivia Delgandio

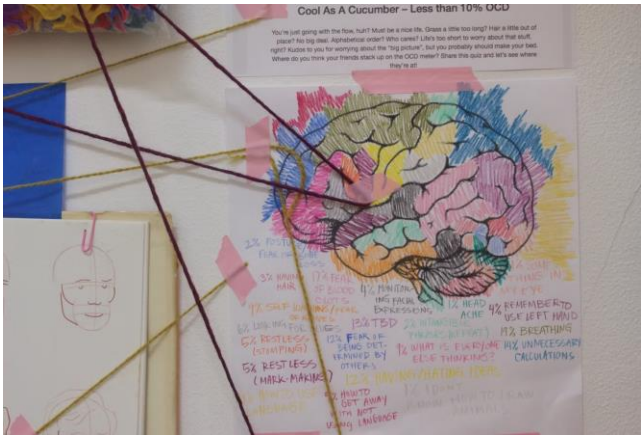


Image excerpt documentation of Kevin Bacon Brain part 1: Heyday of the Cookie Cake by Caryn Aasness

Endnotes

1. Artistic Research is considered any type of interdisciplinary research an artist does depending on what kind of art they make and what subjects they are focusing on in their work. Artistic research could be looking at archival materials, or having conversations with people, or trying out different mediums and materials, or watching tv or going on a hike or any sort of activity an artist considers an experience related to their artistic practice.
2. Institutional Critique within the art and museum context involves artworks that change, challenge, or examine the institutional structures of the art world systems themselves, rather than focused on an object in a museum it aims to ask why that object is contextualized by that museum and who is on that museums board of directors and what the museum prioritizes in its budget for example. An example of a seminal institutional critique work would be Fred Wilson's Mining the Museum from 1992, in which Wilson rearranged and reinterpreted items sourced from the Baltimore Historical Society into an installation.