Artists, Archivists, and Activists: Collaborative Art Making in the Archives

“The artist is always adding new varieties to the world,”¹ write Deleuze and Guattari. When artists create works of art with the archives, what new varieties of the record and the archives do they show us?

In a recent volume of the chapbook, Essay Press, investigative poet Kaia Sand writes: “These days I linger in archives, those repositories of documents organized according to idiosyncrasies of lives lived alongside paper. Provenance guides the archivists. Piles of documents, akin to a kind of enduring shadow-life. The documents are relational, but I also consider a document in its flickering autonomy, a small system of language, a form…A document seems like a poem in its becoming.”²

From March 2013 through February 2015, Kaia, who works across genres and media, dislodging poetry from the book into more unconventional contexts, and Garrick Imatani, an interdisciplinary artist who uses performance and sculpture to think through ideas of material culture, the public, and history, were artists-in-residence at the City of Portland Archives and Records Center, in Portland, Oregon. The City of Portland Archives, also known as PARC, is the official repository for the City of Portland records that represent the activities of city bureaus and elected officials, and that document the social and infrastructural history of Portland.³

The artist-in-residence program, initiated by City Archivist, Diana Banning, as a way “to explore new working methods and develop socially engaging art experiences with the archives,”⁴ is an ongoing series of artist residencies. The goal of the program is for the resident artists to create work in any media that engages and/or is a result of working with the archive’s collections and


³ Diana Banning, email message to author, 28 April 2014.

archivists. The works the artists produce in this program become part of the City of Portland and Multnomah County’s permanent art collection—a portable and rotating collection whose works are sited in publicly accessible spaces throughout approximately thirty City and County buildings.

Since January of 2013 I have been conducting an ethnographic study entailing participant observation and in-depth interviewing as well as document analysis of all materials generated from and about PARC’s artist-in-residence program. My attraction to this particular residency comes from my research interests in understanding:

(1) How artists approach and respond to the archives
(2) The types of physical, conceptual, and creative work artists do in the archives and with records
(3) The experience of archivists who work with artists in the archives
(4) How records as works of art move and circulate, and, through this movement and circulation, what, if any, kinds of social relations occur and histories accumulate between records, individuals, communities, and the archives

Within this study I am also particularly interested to identify and highlight moments of affective resonance between the artists and the records, moments in which feelings arose for the artists while working with the records that in turn propelled and informed their creative strategies, directed the trajectories of their art and literary works, and brought the artists into generative collaborations and relationships with a number of individuals both inside and outside of the residency. I explore moments of affective resonance in order to answer the following questions: What can records inspire individuals to do? What is set in motion by the use of records?

Another question I had going into this study was the following: why does an archives initiate an artist-in-residence program? During a presentation given by the artists and PARC’s archivists—Diana, Brian Johnson, and Mary Hansen, at the 2014 Northwest Archivists Conference, Diana spoke about her reasons for initiating the artist-in-residence program:

For a long time now our profession has been talking about ways to bring in other audiences. We all have our usual suspects coming in, the history people doing research...genealogists, etc. But for us to remain relevant, to get support of the community, we need to continue to reach out to the communities. What I wanted to do

was to try to reach out to a group in a totally different new way...this is not to say that we haven’t had artists come in and use the collections. But, for the most part, these artists were using the collections similar to our usual suspects [historians, genealogists] - they have a project and want to find a photo to go with it, or they want a map as a backdrop for a poem they’ve created - essentially they’re still mining the collection to support the work that they’re doing. What I wanted was something different.

She continues,

For the residency, we wanted collaboration between the artists and the archives and we didn’t care if it was through engaging with the collections or looking at the processes that we use as archivists. We are really open to how the artists want to engage; but, we don’t want them to just mine the collection, we want some type of back and forth. We want them to be ambassadors for the collections: we want that entrée into a world where we don’t necessarily have those connections.\(^6\)

(Image)

Kaia and Garrick named their work in the residency, *The Watcher Files Project*, reflecting their artistic and literary engagements with the one of the collections at PARC, the Portland Police Bureau’s surveillance files. From 1965 to 1985, the Portland Police Bureau as part of its surveillance of 576 activist and civic groups as well as individuals, amassed thousands of photographs, notes, intelligence reports, news clippings, and materials generated by political and civic activists who were challenging and/or working within the norms and laws of the day.

(Image)

Under surveillance were groups and organizations such as the Black Panthers, the United Farm Workers, the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, the Rape Relief Hotline, Greenpeace, the Chicano Student Movement, Amnesty International, Coalition Against Domestic Violence, Portland Citizens Against Racism, Sierra Club, Women Against Nuclear War, and the United Farm Workers.\(^7\)

In 1981, Oregon law made it illegal for police to gather or keep information on any individual or group not tied to a criminal investigation, and the documents were slated for destruction. However, Portland police terrorism expert Winfield Falk, a lead detective who conducted the surveillance activities, stole the 36 boxes of surveillance documents and continued to add to them for four years. Falk died in 1987, and the documents ended up in a barn.\(^8\)


In 2002, someone anonymously donated the boxes of documents to the Portland Tribune newspaper. The Tribune subsequently ran a series of articles about the documents, naming them *The Watcher Files*. The newspaper articles caught the attention of Diana who was right away interested to move the files into the city’s archives. She contacted the Oregon State Archives for a consultation, and the State Archives recommended that PARC acquire and destroy the records per the state’s record retention policy. Diana disagreed, believing the files should be acquired and preserved instead. She took the issue to the City Auditor (to whom PARC reports), who agreed with her that the records should be acquired and preserved by PARC. After meeting with the City Attorney, PARC decided to move forward with acquiring the files, and Diana worked with the managing editor of the Tribune to transfer the files, which officially occurred in March 2004.

Once transferred, the archivists applied preservation treatments to the files, such as airing out moldy documents and clearing off dirt and mice droppings. They had success in saving and preserving a large portion of the documents; however, some were unsalvageable, (such as bundles of photographs that had emulsified into bricks). Today, the Police Historical/Archival Investigative Files (a.k.a. *The Watcher Files*), a permanent collection at PARC, contains documentation on 301 organizations and groups who were under surveillance by the Portland Police.

Early in the residency, Kaia and Garrick were drawn to the surveillance files, especially after learning the biography of this particular collection from PARC’s archivists. At the Northwest Archivists Conference Kaia spoke about their research process in the archives: “Over the past year we’ve logged hours in the research room, thumbing through documents, photos, posters, and index cards. Early on the police investigation files caught our attention and we sat down and did an interview with archivists Mary Hansen and Brian Johnson to capture the story. I think the story surrounding the files was part of what drew us into working with these files.”

At the “Art, Archives, Activism: Talk and Performance” event presented by the artists and the archivists at Portland State University earlier this year, Garrick described their approach to *The Watcher Files* and their project: “As we encountered the files our process entailed wading through the preoccupations of the police. The files are filled with surveillance reports,

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10 Diana Banning, email message to author, August 14, 2014.

11 Garrick Imatani and Kaia Sand, “About the Watcher Files Project.”

photographs, newspaper clippings, and promotional materials created by the activist groups. We were interested in how the archives act as the city’s official record preserved into perpetuity, and since the works we produced become part of the city’s collection, our artistic and literary interventions serve as an addendum to the original files. A way to ‘talk-back’ and infuse the official with a voice that was unrepresented at the time, and to highlight and annotate what’s missing within the institutional record as well as investigate what is there.”  

About the archives and their project, Kaia has stated that with archives; “you get one story, and we know that there are other stories out there…and we know that a lot of the people are still alive. So we thought it was a great opportunity to talk to people and get their alternative stories.”

Wanting to explore the dynamic between the official records and the citizens whose lives intersect them, Kaia and Garrick interviewed seven activists whose lives are detailed in the records, and with four of the activists created several works that ‘talk-back’ to, build upon, and extend the surveillance files. The works include the activists’ own edits, redactions, marginalia and new writing—a process Kaia describes as “inscribing the archival record with power by amplifying unofficial voices.”

Garrick states that their art and literary works are “one small way to provide another narrative for the ways that people’s lives operated in the files in general…one small gesture to kind of counteract an otherwise overwhelmingly large narrative.”

Throughout their residency Kaia and Garrick produced a large body of work: they transformed records and their lived experiences in the archives’ reading room into embodied events such as spoken word/movement performances as well as poetry objects, photographic triptychs, graphic texts, and sculptures that invited haptic encounters and physical movement through space. They disseminated their works through lectures, public installations, exhibitions, publications, and performances in a variety of venues across the United States. They also maintain a Facebook page and website for the project where one can encounter images of the records and their art works.

Today I’d like to share with you some of the ways the artists responded to the records and the archives.

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16 Garrick Imatani, in discussion with author, January 1, 2015.
First, is one of the ‘talk-back’ works the artists made in collaboration with one of the activists. The artists found a large number of documents in the files about an anti-nuclear activist named Lloyd Marbet. Here is one of the documents they found—a surveillance report.

(Image)

Lloyd was at a hearing about a nuclear plant and the police were watching him. The report details what he had in his truck, suggesting that he had the components for a bomb. Here is Lloyd’s response to the record—a silk screen overlay on top of the record.

(Image)

(Image)

Kaia created several series of poems and poetry objects during the residency. I’d like to focus on one of these poems, as it is intimately bound up with the affective resonances Kaia sensed from the records—resonances that shaped the intent behind and content of the poem. And, throughout the residency, the poem’s affective energies activated and oriented a chain of performance, literary, and visual responses and as well created unanticipated associations and relationships between individuals, records, poetry, and visual art.

Two things in The Watcher Files particularly struck Kaia:

1. The considerable amount of police surveillance on movements regarding women. She states: “The police tended to be surveilling women in terms of any kind of transgression—feminism, labor, domestic violence.”

2. The amount of ‘fear’ she sensed from/in these particular files, stating: “There’s clearly a lot of fear in the files - the thinking [of the police] that dissent needs to be suppressed. What did the police fear about women and people organizing for the rights of women?” Kaia became interested in changing this fear and “flipping around the paranoia” through her work in the residency.

Out of a desire to collage “language to coax lyricism out of the files” to see how “meaning will accrete,” Kaia gathered sentences that began with the word ‘she’ from the records about women under surveillance. About her process with the poem she writes:

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19 Ibid.

‘She was always hunched over the machine.’ This was one of the first lines I read that prompted me to begin to collect sentences that began with ‘she.’ So I sledgehammered these words into a copper card, hunched over, on a patch of basement concrete. I added this line to hundreds of lines beginning with the word ‘she,’ a poem accreting into a crowd of women. The poem is titled She Had Her Own Reason for Participating.”

Kaia imagines the poem as a “kind of wire service report on conditions of women who were challenging the status quo in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s,” and a way for her to both “index the fear these police spies had about women - particularly women organizing for rights around domestic violence, around labor, and for peace issues” and “commemorate women struggling for rights.”

Kaia’s poem exists as a poetry object consisting of nearly thirty copper plates, each of which is stamped with one line of the poem. The inspiration for the physical form came from boxes of index cards the police investigators meticulously kept, “cards and cards and cards of peoples’ names,” which Sand learned about through conversations with PARC’s archivists, Brian and Mary. During one of their lecture/performances Sand explained that when Brian pulled out the boxes of index cards, “it was an ‘aha’ moment…I realized I could create something poetically that could move like these index cards.”

Thus, using the physical shape of the police index cards as a form, Sand imprinted the ‘she’ language she had collected from newspaper articles, activist materials, and surveillance documents onto the copper plates with steel type, a sledgehammer, and alcohol-based ink.

Kaia’s copper plate poetry object is housed in a drawer in a plinth built by Garrick.

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23 Sand, Kaia, Poetry Performance.


25 Dave Miller, “Artists Bring Archived Portland Police Surveillance Records To Light.”

26 Ibid.
Kaia often recasts her poetry. She describes this process as “not abandoning a poem quickly,” but rather, “staying with and recreating the poem in different forms” such as books, objects, and performances.

(IMAGE)

Kaia recast She Had Her Own Reason for Participating for performance, using a scroll, stating: “There’s a beautiful movement of a scroll. There’s also a way in which it creates a kind of coherence - and that I think ultimately started to really make sense to me working with the police files. When everything’s in pieces there’s a way in which the scroll gathers.”

Here you can see an image of one of the panels of Kaia’s scroll; it is made of paper, which she intuitively redacted lines with blue house paint, stating: “I thought redacting visually is significant because of the [surveillance] files we work with…a black redaction replicates the act of the redactors—that’s the color documents are redacted with—especially when they’re photocopied. So that’s why I didn’t want to use black.” For Kaia, using the color blue to redact was also about taking “what they [the police] did and then flip it, turn it, contort it…there’s something very sweet about blue.”

(IMAGE)

Both Kaia and Garrick were particularly drawn to maps they encountered in the files, maps submitted by different activist groups to obtain permits in order to march in the city. These maps inspired a number of works and a means to imagine a different type of city layout and history.

(IMAGE)

For one of their lectures/performances, Garrick printed maps by the National United Workers Organization 1980 march, the Revolutionary Communist Youth Parade and Communist Party 1979 and 1980 marches, the Walk for the Equal Rights Amendment by the National Organization for Women in 1981, and the March Against Racism by the Black United Front in 1982 at scale proportional to the space of the room. The maps were then put on the ground in relationship to the orientation of the city of Portland. The chairs in the room were spaced in such a way to mimic the Willamette River that runs through the city, thus splitting the room into north, south, east, and west. They did this in order to “to imagine the physical layout of the city in relationship to activist history.” Here the records become a way to imagine, visualize, and chart a history hidden yet embedded in the files.


28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Garrick Imatani, “Art, Archives, Activism: Artist Talk & Performance” (Portland State University, February 25, 2015).
Maps Garrick found in the files ultimately determined the shape and outline of a cabinet he built to house multiple art works. He states: “The cabinet and Plexiglas sheets on top of the cabinet mirror the outline and take the shape of three overlaid different protest routes with each colored chute representing three separate marches. The entire Plexiglas structure is proportionately scaled to actual streets in downtown Portland…The architecture of the cabinet and Plexiglas sheets commemorate dissent that is not easy to track.”

With this work he asks: “How would our city be shaped if we could see the contours of all the people who have tread the streets in dissent?” “So,” he continues, “the sensibilities [of the cabinet] hopefully try to realign themselves around collectivist action and public memory.”

By paying attention to the implicit and explicit past bodily movements inherent in the records, and by realigning, layering, and resituating these records, the artists intensify and chart a new journey with these records, creating potential for new paths and turns of thought about activist history in Portland—the records in this instance are a means for and components of creative and social action as well as a meditation on and commemoration of activist history.

Maps Kaia found in the files also inspired her poetic endeavors, and she worked with one map in particular, a map of the 1978 Women’s Nightwatch March in downtown Portland. Reflecting on her experience with working with the maps Kaia stated: “one march, one pamphlet, or one map can seem so unimportant…but then, how do I with hindsight, simply notice the particulars so that they add up? How do I, in a sense, commemorate the small acts, like the [1978] march?”

Some of the ways Kaia commemorated the protest march was by re-walking the march route in downtown Portland as well as recasting the ‘she’ language from her poem as a march - that is, when performing the poem, she walked the map of the march in the space of the room in which she was performing.

Not only did Kaia recast *She Had Her Own Reason for Participating* poem into different forms, but visual artist Daniela Molnar, moved by Kaia’s poem, recast it as well. Daniela asked Kaia to take part in her project, *Words in Place*, a project in which Daniela interviewed five poets in

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32 Ibid.
33 Garrick Imatani and Kaia Sand, “Passing It On: An Exhibit of New Work from the Watcher Files Project.”
34 Garrick Imatani, “Art, Archives, Activism: Artist Talk & Performance.”
35 Kaia Sand, “Viewing Archives through an Artist’s Lens: The City of Portland’s Artist-in-Residence Program.”
public places of their choosing. She then asked each poet to give her a poem he/she had written in response to the poet’s chosen place.

For the interview with Kaia, Daniela joined Kaia on one of her walks along the route of the Nightwatch March that Kaia had been re-walking. Daniel recalls: “We strode the route of the original march, inspired by Kaia’s current residency at PARC. Some ideas rose vividly and repeatedly to the surface: the history of protest and feminism in Portland…public memory and creative practice; and the ingenuity of poets and artists to repurpose, redefine, and reclaim.”

Kaia then gave Daniela a photograph of the scroll of *She Had Her Own Reason for Participating*. Daniela created six signs; each is painted with one line from the poem. Daniela then invited friends, over two nights, to be photographed holding the signs at various places along the route of the march, out of a desire to “bring these covert phrases into the public, utilizing the visual language of a protest sign since our route followed a historic protest march route.”

During the two evenings as Daniela was photographing her friends with the signs they attracted attention: nearly fifty strangers asked Daniela about her project, and, over fifteen of them asked to be photographed with the signs.

(Image)
These are some of the strangers that asked to be photographed with the signs. So, here in Daniela’s work, the police records of control transfigure into visual statements, sources of inquiry and social engagement, and a means to make a personal and perhaps empowering statement.

To conclude, the artist-in-residence program at PARC is revealing to me several things about records and the archives:

How records can be active energetic forces that evoke emotional and creative responses; channel human connection and action; and, provide sensory, aesthetic, and affective experiences in a variety of contexts.

The ways in which bodies can join with records and records can join with bodies to enable creative, archival, social, and political endeavors that forge new linkages, alignments, and relationships between individuals, records, and the archives.

How archival art works have the capacity to explore the nature of the record and the archives and hence participate in the cultural and social figuration of the archives.

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Lastly, the artist-in-residence program at PARC shows how individuals, records, art and literary works, activism, and aesthetics can touch and intertwine in unpredictable, generative, and community building ways, and encourages thinking about the archives not only as a space of memory, but as a vital stimulus, conduit, and space for social, cultural, and political production.