

**Artists' Archives: A Cost-Benefit Analysis of Keeping Records Close to Their Creators
Versus Housed by an Institution**

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INFO 653-02

12 December 2019

Abstract

Artist archives are maintained by an array of organizations throughout their lifecycle. The many different types of objects in an artist's collection make it more difficult to ensure proper care of all objects without professional oversight. While under an artist's care, a collection is able to grow and be easily accessed by an artist's collaborators. Unfortunately, objects are often lost or damaged due to negligent care while under the ownership of the artist. Repositories can offer better care and increase public access. However by donating their collection, an artist indicates their creative death. Finding a compromise between these two options is the best way to balance a working archive with proper collection care.

Keywords: artist archive, collection donation, repository, access

Art is a cultural record as well as a personal one. Because of this multifaceted nature, art is difficult to preserve. Although a painting or musical score is straightforward, the object itself is an incomplete record. Art requires context: the creators' lives, the social climate, and the audience's reception (Oke, 2017). An artist's archive cannot be a gallery of their work, nor can it be just a collection of personal papers. This makes artists' collections more complex to maintain than a traditional personal collection. Unfortunately, artists don't typically have the resources to properly care for their collections (Dunning, 1987). Repositories offer resources to better care for an artist's collection. However, these advantages come with tradeoffs (Society of American Archivists, n.d.).

In this paper, I will explore the costs and benefits of an artist's collection remaining under organizational care versus donating the collection to a repository. For the scope of this paper, I will be narrowing down artists in general to specifically dance artists and choreographers. I chose to focus on dance due to my personal experience with dance-related archives as well as because it is the performing art slowest to adopt preservation as part of regular institutional operations (Dunning, 1987).

Many dance artists and organizations keep business records as well as records of their work, but few have an official archive. Unfortunately many records are lost or destroyed while in the possession of the artist. This is due to poor or negligent care of the records (Shepard, 2011). Artists lack the proper knowledge of documentation and preservation, but they also do not prioritize having an archivist on staff to fill this knowledge gap (Keens, Kopp, & Levine, 1991). In 1987, only two dance companies in the country had an archivist on staff: Dance Theatre of Harlem and Merce Cunningham Dance Company (Dunning, 1987). Today, more companies have an established archive and archivist, but many of these archivists are grant-funded or

temporary positions, and archives in an artist's care are commonly not stored in climate-controlled environments (S. Neel, personal communication, September 18, 2019). Even with skilled care, items are in danger of deterioration if not kept in proper conditions (Keens et al., 1991).

In contrast, a repository has the benefits of better resources for collections care. In addition to climate and light controlled environments, repositories have professional archivists and conservators to care for objects. There are also clear institutional policies to ensure continuity of care for all materials (Society of American Archivists, n.d.). In addition to having the resources to properly care for the objects themselves, repositories are more equipped to immediately care for and transfer information from mediums that are rapidly deteriorating (Jimenez & Platt, 2004). This is particularly important in dance where the primary form of record keeping is moving images (Oke, 2017). Beyond having the resources to maintain collections, repositories' primary goals are to preserve the past and encourage scholarship. Unlike a dance company whose primary goal is performance, a repository will continue to fund and support new ways to exhibit, preserve, create access to, and utilize the collection (Steinberg, 1990).

Archives owned by dance companies are easily accessible for the artists and administrators working within the organization. This accessibility is very important to a company when restaging old works or introducing new collaborators to an artist's history (Cates, 2019). However, these collections are often restricted in access to the general public. Scholars and students may be able to view some part of the collection by appointment or with a fee, but this is at the discretion of the company (Boissonnault, n.d.). These restrictions are often made for pragmatic reasons; most company archives are kept informally and do not have a reading

room, nor the staff to monitor proper handling of objects (Neel, 2019). Additionally, these items are rarely—if ever—displayed publically either in an exhibit or online (Oke, 2017).

Collections owned by a repository create more access to the general public. In addition to digitizing collections, repositories can create many different access points to a collection. Exhibits, which may feature multiple collections, showcase unique and interesting objects from a collection to engage audiences who might not be initially drawn to a particular subject or artist (Steinberg, 1990). Repositories can publish research or art books featuring collection material. Some repositories will even use collections as part of their public programming (Brooks, 2011). However, this increase in public awareness and access to an artist's collection comes with more restricted access for the artist (Saylor, 2018).

Transferring materials to a repository occurs once a collection is inactive, because it is difficult to add objects to a collection later (Society of American Archivists, n.d.). An artist's archive is growing as long as they are still creating. This means that donating a collection indicates a psychological shift or major transition for a company (Oke, 2017). Once donated, the repository owns collection materials. Therefore, unless specifically negotiated otherwise, the company will not be able to duplicate or publish the materials anymore (Society of American Archivists, n.d.).

While in a company's care, the collection features a wide range of materials relating to the choreographer and their work. However, due to collecting policies or other kinds of limitations, repositories may not accept the collection in its entirety. Collections may be broken up and donated to multiple repositories (Cunningham Dance Foundation, Inc, 2012). A collection can also be broken up due to ownership rights. A collection might contain materials where the company who possesses the object is leasing the rights to it. Therefore the company

does not have the right to transfer ownership of these objects to a repository with the other collection materials (Saylor, 2018).

Some repositories will purchase collections from artists, which benefits both organizations (Brooks, 2011; Library of Congress, n.d.). When this happens, there may be a period of time where the collection is still primarily maintained by the company when it is a working archive, and then the materials are transferred to the repository once the archive becomes inactive (Cunningham Dance Foundation, Inc, 2012).

Some companies compromise by donating part of their collection to a repository. This allows proper care to more fragile materials like costumes, audio/visual objects, and photographs, while maintaining a company archive for internal use and allowing collection growth (Cunningham Dance Foundation, Inc, 2012; Neel, 2019). This also helps to increase visibility and scholarship of a company while it is still active (Brooks, 2011).

The traditional lifecycle of an artist's archive is to maintain a personal collection and then donate the collection upon the artist's death or retirement. However, if these objects are not properly cared for during the artist's lifetime, a lot of information may be lost before making it to a repository. This model also limits scholarship on an artist until they've retired. Especially in dance, where so much information is stored in the bodies and minds of individuals, having access to the artist and their collaborators will only benefit scholarship. Unfortunately, collections in a repository cannot be as dynamic as a working archive. Therefore, it is important for each model to inform the other. Hybrid models: where fragile, deteriorating, or dated material is donated to a repository while a company also maintains a working archive, balance the needs of an active artist with proper care for materials. Another compromise would be for artists to loan objects to cultural institutions for exhibits and educational programs to boost

visibility and interest in their work. Although it may be emotionally difficult for artists to donate their collection to a repository, unless they invest in proper care, a collection will deteriorate; information will be lost. Ultimately, an archive's function is to preserve the past. Whether in a repository or under organizational care, a collection should remain as unified as possible under the best preservative care possible.

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