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Archiving Is The New Folk Art

by KENNETH GOLDSMITH

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The digital theorist Rick Prelinger has proclaimed that archiving is the new folk art, something that is widely practiced and has unconsciously become integrated into a great many people's lives, potentially transforming a necessity into a work of art. Now, at first thought it seems wrong: how can the storing and categorizing of digital (or analogue) data be folk art? Isn't folk art the opposite, something predicated upon the subjective handcrafting of an object into a unique and personal statement, often times one that expresses a larger community ethos? One need think of, say, the magnificent quilts of Gees Bend produced over many generations by a group of African-American women who live in an isolated Alabama town. Each quilt is unique, while bearing the mark of that specific community. Or the spectacular cosmic visions of someone like Rev. Howard Finster, whose obsessive, emotional hand-rendered religious paintings and sculptures could only be sprung from the unique genius of Finster himself.

Like quilting, archiving employs the obsessive stitching together of many small pieces into a larger vision, a personal attempt at ordering a chaotic world. It's not such a far leap from the quiltmaker to the stamp collector or book collector. Walter Benjamin, an obsessive collector himself, wrote about the close connection between collecting and making in his essay "Unpacking My Library": "Among children, collecting is only one process of renewal; other processes are the painting of objects, the cutting out of figures, the application of decals — the whole range of childlike modes of acquisition, from touching things to giving them names." In Benjaminian terms, all of these impulses — making, collecting & archiving — can be construed as folk practices.

Let's add to that the organizing of digital materials. The advent of digital culture has turned each one of us into an unwitting archivist. From the moment we used the "save as" command when composing electronic documents, our archival impulses began. "Save as" is a command that implies replication; and replication requires more complex archival considerations: where do I store the copy? Where is the original saved? What is the relationship between the two? Do I archive them both or do I delete the original?

When our machines become networked, it gets more complicated. When we take that document and email it to a friend or professor, our email program automatically archives a copy of both the

email we sent as well as duplicating our attachment and saving it into a “sent items” folder. If that same document is sent to a listserv, then that identical archival process is happening on dozens — perhaps even thousands — of machines, this time archived as a “received item” on each of those email systems. When we, as members of that listserv, open that attachment, we need to decide if — and then where — to save it.

I could go on, but you get the point. Writing on an electronic platform is not only writing, but also doubles as archiving; the two processes are inseparable.

Or take the “simple” act of listening to music. If we look closer at that which we automatically do every day without thinking, we’ll find it’s not so simple. Let’s say I want to play a CD on my computer. The moment I insert it into my drive, a database is called up (Gracenote) and it begins peppering my disc with ID3 tags, useful when I decide to rip the disc to MP3s. The archiving process has begun. Unlike an LP, where all that was required was to slap the platter on a turntable and listen to the music, the MP3 process requires me to become a librarian. The ID3 tags make it possible for me to quickly locate my artifact within my MP3 archive. If Gracenote can’t find it, I must insert those fields — artist, album, track, etc. — myself.

iTunes automatically stores these MP3s into my “iTunes Music” directory, creating two new folders — the first being the artists’ name and the second, the album’s name. Within the album folder, I find that these tracks have been assigned numbers and names, as well as bearing its ID3 tags. If I move these MP3s into the iTunes program to play them, iTunes automatically creates yet another database of all this information, seeking as well to acquire album artwork and so forth. And yet, I might decide that I don’t want my files archived according to the iTunes scheme and stored on my hard drive, which is quickly running out of space. Instead, I store all my MP3s on a large external hard drive, organized by a schema that makes sense to me, which involves another level of transfer and archiving. Once I want to share my playlists or MP3s with other people, I must archive on yet an entirely other level.

All of this needs to be constantly backed up, which creates yet another level of the archive. No one wants to lose their data. Since I’ve pretty much been living online for the past fifteen years, archiving my work — my documents, my correspondence, my collections, and so forth — has become just as important as the creation of new artifacts. Having lost too much information over the years, I religiously back up: some drives are backed up redundantly, two or three times.

Clearly, all of this is a far cry — and a lot of extra busy work — from the act of merely listening to music. In fact, I spend much more time acquiring, cataloging and archiving my artifacts these days than I do actually engaging with them. The ways in which culture is distributed and archived has

become profoundly more intriguing than the cultural artifact itself. What we've experienced is an inversion of consumption, one in which we've come to engage in a more profound way with the acts of acquisition over that which we are acquiring; we've come to prefer the bottles to the wine.

Our primary impulse, then, has moved from creators to collectors and archivists, proving Walter Benjamin, once more to be prophetic: "If my experience may serve as evidence, a man is more likely to return a borrowed book upon occasion than to read it. And the non-reading of books, you will object, should be characteristic of collectors? This is news to me, you may say. It is not news at all. Experts will bear me out when I say that it is the oldest thing in the world. Suffice it to quote the answer which Anatole France gave to a philistine who admired his library and then finished with the standard question, 'And you have read all these books, Monsieur France?' 'Not one-tenth of them. I don't suppose you use your Sevres china every day?'"

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