

The Pillow Book of Chris Marker: The Arrangement and Description of Personal Archives



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RÉSUMÉ Cet article examine comment un archiviste qui s'occupe des archives personnelles d'un artiste peut acquérir une profonde connaissance de l'œuvre de cet artiste en classant et en décrivant son fonds d'archives. Chris Marker, l'artiste multi-média français qui a laissé ses archives à la Cinémathèque française à Paris, sert de point de départ et de fil directeur à cette discussion. À partir d'une recension des écrits en archivistique, l'auteur s'inspire des enjeux communs aux processus de classement et de description des archives personnelles, et créé des liens entre ces enjeux et l'œuvre même de Marker, en particulier son film *Sans soleil*, et *The Pillow Book* de Sei Shonagon, l'une des références littéraires dans ce film. En spéculant sur les façons dont un archiviste peut tenter de gérer « le désordre ordonné » des archives de Marker, par l'entremise de la recherche, de l'observation et de la méthodologie archivistique, l'auteur explore des questions clés portant sur la provenance, l'ordre originel, et le classement et la description à l'ère du numérique. Il considère aussi les divers rôles que l'archiviste doit jouer afin de rendre les archives personnelles disponibles à des fins de recherche future.

ABSTRACT This article explores how an archivist dealing with the personal archives of an artist might be informed by that artist's work in arranging and describing the fonds. Chris Marker, the French multimedia artist who left his archives to the Cinémathèque française in Paris, is the starting point and thread of this discussion. Through a review of archival literature, the author draws upon issues common to the arrangement and description of personal archives, and creates linkages between these issues and Marker's own work, specifically his film *Sans soleil*, and Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*, one of the literary references in the film. By speculating about how an archivist would attempt to deal with the "ordered clutter" of Marker's archives through research, observation, and archival methodology, the author explores key questions surrounding provenance, original order, and arrangement and description in the digital realm. Also considered are the various roles an archivist must take on in order to make personal archives available for future research.

Finally his language touches me, because he talks to that part of us which insists on drawing profiles on prison walls. A piece of chalk to follow the contours of what is not, or is no longer, or is not yet; the handwriting each one of us will use to compose his own list of “things that quicken the heart,” to offer, or to erase.

– Sandor Krasna, *Sans soleil*

Chris Marker, the French multimedia artist and pioneer of the essay documentary, died in July 2012, leaving no formal will with instructions concerning the future of his personal archives, other than an email sent a few short weeks before his death to the director of the Cinémathèque française,¹ in which he requested that the institution retain his documents and papers. After negotiations with Marker’s heirs, the Cinémathèque acquired the archives in April 2013 and set up a committee to take inventory, work that is still ongoing and yet to be published. The contents of his workspace can be glimpsed in a short YouTube video by Agnès Varda, titled “Chris Marker, le magnifique désordre.”² Bill Horrigan, who visited Marker’s studio, recalls it as “a riotous elaboration of ordered clutter – thousands of books, documents and photos and drawings, videotapes, *objets* both exotic and mundane, mechanical and whimsical cats and owls, piles of newspapers – Chris’s studio also noticeably had the latest in video and digital equipment, now sharing space with the technologies it had displaced.”³ Horrigan is also one of many writers who have seen in Marker’s work and thematic concerns a similarity to the creation and building of an archive: “Marker’s passionate engagement with the biases and byways of memory has a physical correlative in the existence of the archive – whether a literal one or in such domesticated forms as the family or vacation photo album or in advanced forms of digital storage and delivery systems.”⁴ However, those who have spoken of Marker’s work in connection with archives have done so largely in response to postmodern writers like Derrida, without tackling the archival literature on arrangement and description. In dealing with the archives of an artist such as Marker, much of which is non-textual and digital, it might be fruitful to rectify this and speculate about how an archivist could be informed by Chris Marker’s work and documentary residue, as well as by the issues surrounding the theory and practice of arrangement and description.

1 La Cinémathèque française, <http://www.cinematheque.fr/>.

2 Agnès Varda, “Chris Marker, le magnifique désordre,” YouTube video, 3:55, posted by Javier Eder 24 August 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2JALchHC6I>.

3 Bill Horrigan, “In Memoriam: Chris Marker (1921–2012),” *Millennium Film Journal* 56 (Fall 2012): 90.

4 Bill Horrigan, “Some Other Time,” in *Chris Marker, Staring Back* (Columbus, OH: Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 140.

There is not a long tradition of theorizing about the arrangement and description of personal archives, and even less so for artists' archives, for the early writers dealt mainly with organizational records. However, as Rob Fisher has noted, that does not mean that writers like Jenkinson and Schellenberg had nothing to say about personal archives collections.⁵ For Jenkinson, the "archive quality" of records resided in the fact that they accumulated organically in the carrying out of an organization's actions, without thought for posterity or future research value. It is this "impartiality" in record creation that lends a body of records its authenticity and, by extension, its evidentiary value. Though Schellenberg can be seen to be more hospitable to private archives, acknowledging their research value, he too disparaged the organizational principles placed upon private archives. In his view, as Fisher points out, private archives fell under the purview of collecting libraries, which had few qualms about dealing with them as discrete items and imposing on them subject or chronologically based classification systems. Though they cited different reasons, both writers were doubtful of any claims made for the archival properties of personal records. Terry Eastwood reminds us, however, that even with regard to organizational archives, Jenkinson's notion of the impartiality of record creation can only be relative in our own "historically conscious" time. Researchers must be cognizant of this factor when weighing the value of archives as evidence.⁶ This has perhaps always been a salient issue in personal archives, increasingly so in an age when living writers and artists are more aware than ever of the value of their archives, both in monetary terms and as cultural-historical sources of research.

Nonetheless, the traditional line of thought has had important implications for archivists, not just in terms of the attribution of different values to personal and organizational records, whether that be cultural or evidentiary, but also with regard to how archivists have talked about what it is that makes an archive, and how the distinct tradition that has developed around personal archives has coloured issues of arrangement and description. For Jenkinson, and others like him, the idea that an archivist would have to impose an order of her own on a body of records would have been anathema. Indeed, anything other than a passive role for the archivist vis-à-vis the arrangement and description of an archive would, in Jenkinson's view, compromise the archival status of that body of records. However, since Jenkinson's time, there has been something of a détente between personal and organizational archives. In Canada, with its tradition of "total archives," this antagonism between the two

5 Rob Fisher, "In Search of a Theory of Private Archives: The Foundational Writings of Jenkinson and Schellenberg Revisited," *Archivaria* 67 (Spring 2009): 1–24.

6 Terry Eastwood, "A Contested Realm: The Nature of Archives and the Orientation of Archival Science," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2010), 4–21.

types of archives has perhaps not been as notable as elsewhere, but certainly archival theory has always been lopsided and more pertinent to organizational records. Be that as it may, while acknowledging the different practical concerns of archivists dealing with personal archives, most archival writers have come to understand that order and the preservation of context are relevant to both traditions. In this respect, the image of the archivist as a passive receiver of records is now seen as a rather antiquated one, and therefore the idea that she might leave her own mark on the order and meaning of an archive is no longer the *bête noire* that it once was. It should also be noted that theorists are now taking more of an interest in the challenges faced by archivists in the arrangement and description of personal archives, as demonstrated by the recent *Archivaria* issue dedicated to such perspectives.⁷

As the observations about Marker's archives make clear, it can be more of a challenge for the archivist to discern a predetermined order in personal archives than it would be in an organizational fonds. Nevertheless, for the archivist charged with the arrangement of such an archive, a certain order is exactly what must be conferred upon it. Amy Furness notes that "the practice of arrangement arises out of the largely practical need to impart order on archival holdings."⁸ What this means in practice is that a determination must first be made of both the external and internal structure, thereby gaining intellectual control over the archive, which is reinforced through description to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the levels being described.

The report of the Invitational Meeting of Experts on Arrangement in 2005 stated that "for persons or families, external structure refers to the interests, activities, familial and professional relations of the records creator, e.g., birth and death dates, place(s) of residence, education, occupation, life and activities."⁹ Here, we are looking at the provenance of the records, and while this may seem less problematic than dealing with organizational fonds, in which one will find records and the activities that gave rise to them subsumed by different record-creating entities, it does pose further questions. Are there within the fonds, for example, the records of organizations or groups to which the person belonged? Would it be more appropriate to place these records within the organization's fonds if one exists? Have the fonds passed through several custodianships, being added to and taking on the records of heirs or

7 See *Archivaria* 76 (Fall 2013), <http://journals.sfu.ca/archivar/index.php/archivaria/issue/view/459>.

8 Amy Furness, *Towards a Definition of Visual Artist's Archives: Vera Frenkel's Archives as a Case Study* (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2012), 30.

9 Heather MacNeil et al., "Invitational Meeting of Experts on Arrangement, Ottawa, October 15–16, 2004: Final Report and Recommendations" (Ottawa: Canadian Council of Archives, 15 April 2005), accessed 30 December 2014, <http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/IMEAreportEN.pdf>, 11.

friends? This last question deals with much the same problem that Michel Duchein outlined and tried to solve in the organizational context.¹⁰ That is, when do we determine that we are dealing with a separate fonds and treat it as such, or instead agree that records have now become an integral and organic part of a newer body of records? Geoffrey Yeo has noted the friction between authorship and the integrity of the fonds. It is standard practice and generally assumed, for example, that the letters received by a person become part of that person's fonds, but this no doubt creates work for the researcher who happens to be less interested in the recipient of the letter than in the writer.¹¹

All of these questions could be asked of the Chris Marker fonds. Despite the fact that Marker was averse to giving interviews and rarely agreed to be photographed, there seems to be enough consensus about his background (birth, death, residence), and even more so about his career. We are dealing with a filmmaker, photographer, and multimedia artist who made some key works in the history of cinema, such as *La jetée* and *Sans soleil*, but the archivist working with the fonds of an artist needs to go deeper than that if she wishes to further understand what this person's interests, activities, and personal relationships were. She does this by examining his work and his fonds, certainly, but may also have to consult external sources in her research, including perhaps the personal fonds of other artists. Having done her research, she would have discovered that Marker belonged to a leftist filmmaking collective called SLON (Société pour le lancement des oeuvres nouvelles), which later morphed into another collective called ISKRA.¹² In examining Marker's records and documents, she would have to ask herself if there was anything that would more properly belong in the fonds for this collective, which in fact exists as the SLON/ISKRA audiovisual fonds in the Departmental Archives of Seine-Saint-Denis, France. She would learn that, in 2002, Marker donated fifty-three boxes of television recordings and documentary footage to l'Institut mémoires de l'édition contemporaine (IMEC), a modern literary archives in Paris that contains the papers of French authors and intellectuals such as Jacques Derrida and Marguerite Duras. An intellectual link would have to be made to this original donation in order to have a complete picture of Marker's fonds. The archivist would also find numerous letters, emails, and faxes from other artists, some of whom might have their own fonds. Is there any correspondence between Marker and his former neighbour Simone Signoret, for instance? What of his documentation and portraits of fellow filmmakers Akira Kurosawa and Andrei Tarkovsky? How does one

10 Michel Duchein, "Theoretical Principles and Practical Problems of Respect des Fonds in Archival Science," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983): 64–82.

11 Geoffrey Yeo, "Debates about Description," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2010), 105.

12 See ISKRA, <http://www.iskra.fr/>.

connect Marker's archives to these cultural figures, who are themselves the subjects of much research? The archivist will also try to determine whether his heirs have contributed in some way to the archives in the interim between Marker's death and its accession. A further related consideration would be the messages, films, and photos uploaded by the public on the blog set up by the Cinémathèque française in honour of Marker.¹³ In what way might these testimonials become part of Marker's fonds?

These various relationships and connections would have to be noted and detailed if we are to have a better understanding of Marker the artist and Marker the private individual. In other words, the dots of these various external relationships must be connected intellectually if not physically; this is part and parcel of respect for the provenance of the archives, which in turn touches upon respect for original order, or the original organizational principles of the fonds as established by its record creator. Both of these notions are contained within the concept of respect des fonds.

Determining the original order of a fonds requires an analysis of its internal structure, which the Invitational Meeting of Experts on Arrangement refers to in its report as

the activities and procedures generating the records, the relationship among and between the records, their organization, and their documentary forms, e.g., the specific activity or activities generating the records, the administrative and documentary procedures that explain how the records came into being, the structure of the aggregates, e.g., classification scheme, filing system, indexing system, the documentary forms of the records, the relationships between groups of records within this fonds and groups in other fonds, the time period of the records and the geographic area to which the records pertain.¹⁴

With an organizational fonds that most likely carries with it a formal classification scheme, an analysis of this sort is more straightforward, but with personal archives, as in the case of Chris Marker's, one will probably be confronted with an illustration of what Catherine Hobbs refers to as "original disorder."¹⁵ As Anna McNally notes, arranging an artist's archives is far from a simple task, as "artists tend to have messy lives and even trying to separate the personal from the professional can involve some rather arbitrary decisions."¹⁶

13 See <http://chrismarker.tumblr.com>.

14 MacNeil et al., "Invitational Meeting of Experts on Arrangement," 11.

15 Catherine Hobbs, "Reenvisioning the Personal: Reframing Traces of Individual Life," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2010), 213–41.

16 Anna McNally, "All That Stuff!: Organizing Records of Creative Processes," in *All This Stuff: Archiving the Artist*, ed. Judy Vaknin, Karyn Stuckey, and Victoria Lane (Oxfordshire, UK: Libri Publishing, 2013), 97–108.

This does not mean that such an analysis is pointless, however, or even that the records should be physically left as they are. What it does mean is that the archivist will have to be more creative in establishing those internal relationships and connections, and form meaningful aggregations that respect the context of those relationships. The apparent disorder could also be deceptive. In Marker's own words, "Chance has intuitions, which shouldn't always be taken for coincidences."¹⁷ Though Marker may not have left a filing scheme, one might look among the "ordered clutter" of his workspace for what Hobbs calls "working bundles" that form meaningful units.¹⁸ It may also be the case that once the decision was made to donate his archives, Marker edited them, removing some of the material he wanted to remain hidden from posterity, or even imposing a greater order on them than what originally existed.

If the work of the archivist at this point seems less than scientific, one should bear in mind what Brien Brothman has said about archival practice being an art rather than a science.¹⁹ Indeed, in shaping the aggregations of records in a personal fonds that seems to lack order or which contains gaps, archivists are taking on a more artistic and intrusive role than they might with an organizational fonds. In their analysis of the arrangement of writers' archives, Jennifer Douglas and Heather MacNeil claim that "the archivist's intellectual ordering of the records into fonds, sous-fonds, and series involves an act of imagination and interpretation ... the 'original order' of the records is constructed, not found, by the archivist."²⁰ Thus, in moulding an artist's personal archives, the archivist is much like the documentary filmmaker, placing one shot next to another, forming those aggregates of shots into sequences, and thereby giving a particular interpretation or meaning to an event, a time, a place, or a memory. A filmmaker like Marker was able to do this by looking at the raw material before him, whether that be film or video, and analyzing the context of its creation, fully aware that his own unique understanding of what lay before him was what helped to shape the final work. He was also cognizant of the fact that a different ordering of the shots could impart an altogether different meaning. Perhaps one can also see the archivist as akin to Marker's own description of himself as a "cobbler" or "artisan," moulding and mending the form of the archive.²¹

17 Chris Marker, *Coréennes*, trans. Brian Holmes (Columbus, OH: Wexner Center for the Arts, 2009).

18 Hobbs, "Reenvisioning the Personal," 213–41.

19 Brien Brothman, "Orders of Value: Probing the Terms of Archival Value," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991): 78–100.

20 Jennifer Douglas and Heather MacNeil, "Arranging the Self: Literary and Archival Perspectives on Writer's Archives," *Archivaria* 67 (Spring 2005): 30.

21 Chris Marker, "Chris Marker's Second Life," *The Criterion Collection*, 13 May 2009, <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1143-chris-marker-s-second-life>.

Again, for the archivist, original order should not mean a recreation of the “clutter” as it was encountered. Instead, Jennifer Meehan calls for a less literal interpretation of original order, one that brings us back to the analysis of the internal structure of the fonds.²² She argues for a process “based upon an understanding of the contexts of records creation, maintenance, transmittal, and use,” through which “archivists determine an arrangement for the records that elucidates certain important aspects of their context, thereby creating the internal and external relationships of the body of records.”²³

However, although respect for original order does not necessarily lead to the process Meehan calls for, neither has it been as dogmatically applied as a reading of some of the prescriptive literature might suggest. Jeremy Heil discovered this after examining the arrangements of the various accruals to the Al Purdy Fonds at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario: “Original order sounds powerful and authoritative, and it erroneously leads many archivists to believe that it exists in all fonds and each of their accruals. The reality is less than ideal.”²⁴ Heil makes the case that, in addition to analyzing the contexts of records creation, archivists need to look at the contexts of arrangement that have existed and informed them until now. After all, archivists arrange and describe according to a set of conventions, as MacNeil has pointed out.²⁵ The reality of arrangement that Heil comes to understand is one of a practical nature. He observes that “archives have used series, sub-series, and box listings so that archivists and, most notably, their researchers can find what they are seeking.”²⁶ In fact, the Queen’s University archivists, while paying lip service to the concept of original order, were often yielding to what they felt was an arrangement that would most benefit researchers, even if it meant straying from Purdy’s original box listing, an order that in itself may not have represented the so-called original order. The arrangement decisions made by the Queen’s archivists were influenced by previous decisions and their own inclinations regarding research use, resulting in an evolving grouping of series and sub-series based on documentary form or subject.

Heil’s observations are instructive in that they show how paradigms are formed and how they have affected archivists’ arrangement practices when it comes to personal archives. Original order may act as some form of “holy writ,” but its believers do not always practise what they preach. Heil writes

22 Jennifer Meehan, “Rethinking Original Order and Personal Records,” *Archivaria* 70 (Fall 2010): 27–44.

23 *Ibid.*, 36.

24 Jeremy Heil, “The Procrustean Bed: A History of the Arrangement of the Al Purdy Fonds,” *Archivaria* 76 (Fall 2013): 46.

25 Heather MacNeil, “Archivalterity: Rethinking Original Order,” *Archivaria* 66 (Fall 2008): 21.

26 Heil, “The Procrustean Bed,” 46.

that “the confluence of education, apprenticeship, and institutional best practices leads to what can be termed ‘traditions of arrangement.’ These traditions manifest themselves in how the organization of fonds are handled in archives, and can be traced through certain idiosyncrasies in series titles, file order preferences, and obsolete finding aids.”²⁷ He goes on to note that breaking free from these traditions requires a conscious effort.

How would a paradigm based on research use and past arrangement practices influence the arrangement of Marker’s fonds? With only one accrual, and assuming there is no filing scheme, the archivist does not have to worry as much about conforming to a previous scheme, nor does she need to bother attempting to fix past mistakes, but a paradigmatic tradition surely exists for the very reasons Heil mentions. Does the archivist create a grouping of series based on subject, documentary form, or, if there are SLON/ISKRA documents, even provenance? Is textual material separated from non-textual material, and, if so, are there justifications for this that go beyond mere past practices? One can point to the practice of film archives and collections in separating and arranging audiovisual work as discrete items, something Furness alludes to in her discussion of Frenkel’s video work, but these items could also be connected to a larger series.²⁸

There is also the issue of electronic records. Marker’s hard drive may or may not prove to be more orderly, with records grouped into files, but Yeo warns that “in digital environments, where juxtaposition of records is insignificant, even the limited contextual clues provided by physical ordering are largely missing, and we must reinterpret the principle of original order in terms of identifying multiple logical relationships among records, rather than in terms of their physical groupings.”²⁹ Catherine Marshall echoes the idea that the digital environment cannot provide proper context for records when she claims that “one thing the personal computer and subsequent services have failed to offer is a stable sense of digital place. What I mean is the digital equivalent to the box under the bed or the footlocker in the guest-room closet or the safety deposit box at the bank or even (at the extreme) the bomb shelter in the backyard – a place where valuables are kept.”³⁰ This may be true if speaking of the nature of digital file storage, but Marker’s creation of a museum on the virtual island of L’Ouvroir would seem to suggest that a digital environment can in fact provide context and a sense of place; the translation of *ouvroir* as “workshop” again conjures the image of the “cobbler” and

27 Ibid., 44–45.

28 Furness, *Towards a Definition of Visual Artist’s Archives*, 218.

29 Yeo, “Debates about Description,” 92.

30 Catherine C. Marshall, “Rethinking Personal Digital Archiving, Part 2: Implications for Services, Applications, and Institutions,” *D-Lib Magazine* 14, no. 3–4 (March/April 2008), <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/march08/marshall/03marshall-pt2.html>.

underscores the constructed nature of the archive. The museum contains a photographic exhibition, as well as many literary references and art history mash-ups.³¹ The archivist's avatar can enter via the online platform of Second Life, thereby garnering a better understanding of Marker's work and preoccupations, and perhaps coming away with some ideas about possible arrangements for his fonds.

If taking into account the research value of the material, the archivist would surely have to ask herself what aspects of the artist researchers would be most keen to understand and what sort of arrangement would best facilitate that understanding. As would be the case with most artists, the researchers using Marker's fonds would be looking for anything that might shed light on both the artist and his oeuvre. Does this mean that material dealing with specific works should be aggregated no matter what the documentary form or whether it is analog or digital? Does Meehan's top-down analysis bring about an arrangement that outlines the desired context and allows for a greater understanding of Marker's work?³² Can considerations of research use combine with an analysis of the records to outline a meaningful context for the records? There are no simple answers, but such questions suggest that archivists must take into consideration the contextual factors that have a bearing on both records creation and archival practice.

Much could be gleaned by looking at Marker's practices and the past and present curation of his work. Uriel Orlow has studied the associative way Marker combined images in his own work to form what Orlow calls a filmic archive or inventory, and he argues that this technique is more akin to the formation of a thesaurus than a taxonomy or classification. "Classification privileges individual items of a collection through a structure which allows their precise tracking while the thesaurus creates a conceptual architecture for the archive that highlights the connections between items."³³ This is borne out by the photographic exhibition that Marker assembled for the Wexner Center for the Arts in 2007; groupings of photos were based on thematic motifs, within which the organizing principle was either chronological or derived from vertical graphic matches. The exhibition of Marker's work at London's Whitechapel Gallery in the spring/summer of 2014 showcased his work in sections devoted to his multimedia work, his travelogues and activism, and the concept of the museum itself, the latter including his virtual museum on Second Life. Marker's *Immemory*, a work composed for CD-ROM that allowed viewers to choose their own order of images, is also an example of an associative

31 The latter, titled "Pictures at an Exhibition," can be seen on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IPThypeEtIY&feature=channel_page.

32 Meehan, "Rethinking Original Order and Personal Records," 27–44.

33 Uriel Orlow, "Chris Marker: The Archival Power of the Image," in *Lost in the Archives*, ed. Rebecca Comay (Toronto: Alphabet City, 2002), 445.

succession. What this suggests is that there are different possibilities in arrangement and that rather than trying to fit items and files into predetermined categories, an archivist, after careful analysis, should look for the associative connections between and within records. Given the artistic value of Marker's archives and their future curatorial role in exhibitions, the archivist's arrangement should hint at the many forms such exhibitions might take.

With respect to the associative "order" found in Marker's oeuvre, Orlow sees a parallel in Sei Shonagon's *The Pillow Book*, a work that figures as a prominent literary reference in *Sans soleil*, one that hardly seems casual.³⁴ Sandor Krasna, Marker's alter ego, writes to his friend about Shonagon, the eleventh-century author of *The Pillow Book*, who composed lists of "elegant things," "distressing things," and "things that quicken the heart." Meredith McKinney, the latest translator of *The Pillow Book* into English, likens Shonagon's writing style to that of a letter, with its "random flow of anecdotes and opinions and thoughts, apparently dashed off extempore, veering impulsively from one comment or story to another, each new turn touched off by some random association or tangential connection, or perhaps by nothing at all."³⁵ In what could be a fitting metaphor for the archive, Richard Bowring observes in his study of female writing in Heian Japan that "the old Japanese word for letter, for writing, is *fumi*, a 'print' or 'trace.' Script is often referred to as being the tracks of a bird on sand; it is what remains."³⁶

With the earliest of four extant manuscripts dating from the thirteenth century, it is impossible to know the original order of Shonagon's essays, anecdotes, and lists, but most scholars seem to agree that the two versions that group together the genre styles – lists being together, for example – are later alterations of an original "random" order.³⁷ MacNeil, however, argues that such alterations or revisions become part of the story of that text, and are worth safeguarding in their own right, especially as original order is difficult, if not impossible, to determine.³⁸ "Variant versions of a text are not 'corruptions' to be eradicated but, rather, valid texts worth studying in their own right, and the task of the textual editor is not to reconstruct authorial intentions through the establishment of a single definitive text but, rather, to preserve a record of different intentions through the publication of multiple, historically situated texts."³⁹

34 Ibid., 444–45.

35 Meredith McKinney, introduction, *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shonagon, trans. Meredith McKinney (London: Penguin Books, 2006), xxvi–xxvii.

36 Richard Bowring, "The Female Hand in Heian Japan: A First Reading," in *The Female Autograph*, ed. Donna C. Stanton (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 53–54.

37 McKinney, xxix.

38 MacNeil, "Archivalterity," 1–24.

39 Ibid., 6.

McKinney acknowledges these other versions, as she should, but is faithful to the earlier version, one that perhaps best maintains the poeticism of the original. What is notable about McKinney's description of Shonagon's text is that it could just as easily be applied to Marker's own work, which in the case of *Sans soleil's* text also takes the form of a letter, flitting from one idea and allusion to another. It is perhaps a misnomer to call either artist's work "randomly ordered," for there are certainly connections and links between their respective images or texts, even if one must sometimes work harder to discern them.

The other similarity between works like *Sans soleil* and *The Pillow Book* is their deeply personal and subjective nature. McKinney speaks of Shonagon's "irrepressible" personality coming through, which is equally applicable to Marker's work despite the use of various alter egos. It is this personality that the archivist would not want to suppress in any arrangement of his archives. By studying the work of an artist such as Marker, a contextual portrait is created for the archivist, who in turn creates an arrangement for the personal archives that can facilitate a better understanding of the record creator for others.

However, just as *The Pillow Book* loses context when it is removed from eleventh-century Heian Japan and read with contemporary eyes, personal archives lose context when moved from their place of origin. This is an issue that straddles both provenance (origin or place) and original order (placement). Brothman argues that "the most basic disruption of original order, of course, is the removal of the records from the originating site of provenance and their placement in archives."⁴⁰ In her study of the artist Vera Frenkel's fonds, Furness writes that "personal archives that move from a context of idiosyncratic ordering and the material setting of a home or studio into the institutional context of an archives will undergo an alteration of meaning."⁴¹ Is it important, for example, for an archivist to somehow convey the "cluttered order" of Marker's archives, and, if so, how? The owl and cat motifs that run through Marker's work are found in the *objets* scattered around his workspace. What of the owl that sits prominently on a desk, a sign that this particular item was shown a certain reverence, and what meaning does it have placed next to or facing a beckoning cat figurine. Indeed, the picture of a woman staring back at the artist from the wall loses meaning when placed in a file and boxed away; what was once part of someone's memory becomes a research object for another. Neither are all memories equal; the object of the artist's focus and use takes on a greater complexity and significance than the object or document

40 Brothman, "Orders of Value," 85.

41 Furness, *Towards a Definition of Visual Artist's Archives*, 36.

shoved into a drawer and forgotten about. McNally suggests a possible break from the convention of cataloguing records as “personal items,” organizing them instead according to their frequency of use.⁴²

This might better serve what Hobbs calls “the psychological context of the archives,” a context surely lost in archival re-arrangement.⁴³ A slavish adherence to a literal interpretation of original order, taken to its extreme, would mean leaving the archive in situ, an impossibility. As a way of dealing with this, Hobbs states, archivists should be focusing on the “mental map” of the creator rather than the physical space, and asking, “What elements *can* be found and *might* be representative of the personal workspace? What can we capture in this ephemeral realm? It is then up to the archivist to determine how he or she might make this aspect known by applying tools and processes creatively or expanding their use to suit the archives.”⁴⁴

One of these tools would be the descriptive practice of the archivist. If, in the darkness of “original disorder,” the archivist is akin to an owl with her eyes open and attentive, then in her descriptive practice she is more like Sei Shonagon’s court lady, contextualizing, listing, and transforming arrangement into language. Before she can describe how certain items may have “quickened the heart,” however, she finds herself looking at the provenance of the item. That is, first she must create a history for the creator and his records, as well as for other custodians of those records.

Rather than getting into a lengthy history of the concept of provenance, it is more important here to talk about where that history has led us and how our debates surrounding the concept of provenance today affect descriptive practices, especially as they pertain to the personal archives of an artist. As Douglas states, “Today, postmodernism is the metanarrative that informs debate about the principle and discussion about its potential and limitations.”⁴⁵ The ideas stemming from postmodernism have allowed us to take a critical stance when it comes to the stories that both records and archivists tell. It has opened up those stories, allowing them to be informed by an ever more evolving list of socio-historical contexts, and, in the case of personal archives, even psychological contexts. It has also allowed archivists to be more mindful of the stories that are excluded and how archivists themselves have had a hand in shaping, sharing, or even withholding those stories. In practice, this means that, in Terry Cook’s words, “Postmodern description would reflect, in short, sustained contextual research by the archivist into the history of the records

42 McNally, “All That Stuff,” 97–108.

43 Hobbs, “Reenvisioning the Personal,” 213–41.

44 *Ibid.*, 231.

45 Jennifer Douglas, “Origins: Evolving Ideas about the Principle of Provenance,” in *Current of Archival Thinking*, ed. Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil (Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2010), 37.

and their creator(s), and produce ever-changing descriptions as the records creation and custodial history itself never ends (as at the moment of archival accessioning or of creating a fonds entry).⁴⁶

Though she understands the value of descriptive standards that are more forthcoming about the changing nature of a body of records, Douglas stresses that there are limits to the contextual factors that can be included in relating the provenance of records and their creator. “When provenance grows to include any and all type of action or relationship that impacts the nature of a record or a body of records, its boundaries become infinite.”⁴⁷

Quite simply, the archivist is limited only by time, institutional demands, and her emotional attachment, or lack thereof, when describing the provenance of the records and their creator. Descriptive standards such the *Rules for Archival Description (RAD)* do not dictate how long biographical sketches or custodial histories must be. Certainly, one can find lovingly detailed sketches, especially when dealing with the archives of writers and artists. If taking *RAD* as an example, biographical sketches would relate the life, education, occupation, and activities of a person. The archivist is free to decide just what activities and life events are pertinent to an understanding of that person and their fonds. The elements and sub-elements here may superficially distinguish the descriptive record of a personal archive from that of an organizational archive, but the true difference lies in the value of the records themselves and how that value is manifested in the description.

As opposed to the evidentiary value that organizational records take on, we seem to affix many terms to the records of personal archives when dealing with their value, whether it be one of “cultural heritage,” “cultural memory,” or simply “research value.” The personal archives of artists could also be said to have curatorial value. In dealing with cultural works, film curator Paolo Cherchi Usai defines the archivist as one “who collects, preserves, and makes accessible the works – that is, the contents and the identity of their media.”⁴⁸ Among other duties, he says, it is the job of the curator to interpret a cultural artifact’s “environmental, social, cultural, and industrial” context.⁴⁹ One might argue that he has defined the archivist in too narrow terms here, for one of the ways an archivist makes works accessible is through descriptive practice. One could also argue that the postmodern inflection of the discussion surrounding descriptive practice has acknowledged the archivist’s “curatorial” role in interpreting the contextual factors that shape personal archives. The term

46 Terry Cook, “Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives,” *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001): 34–35.

47 Douglas, “Origins,” 37.

48 Paolo Cherchi Usai, “A Charter of Curatorial Values,” *Journal of the National Film and Sound Archive* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 2.

49 Ibid.

“curatorial” may be particularly apropos if an archivist is charged with helping researchers better understand an artist such as Marker, not to mention his work, records creation, and documentary practices. It may be a useful term to ascribe to an archivist’s descriptive practices in general.

In fact, one could say that the archivist takes on the role of both researcher and curator in her creation of a biographical sketch. As previously stated, the arrangement of Marker’s fonds would require research if one is to determine its provenance and make the fonds accessible for further research. In the resulting sketch, one might expect to read about Marker’s career, key works, and perhaps even his love of cats. One would also expect to find information about his political activism and membership in SLON/ISKRA. Should there be records from this group in the fonds (a curious mix of the personal and organizational that would not be unheard of), a more detailed history of this group would be called for, especially if these records formed their own series. The important thing would be to provide an intellectual link to the other fonds in the finding aid for Marker’s fonds.

Ideally, the description would go beyond the biographical sketch, though, for like Sei Shonagon, Chris Marker was a key observer of his time, using archival material himself when commenting on and interpreting the cultural and historical developments of the late twentieth century. While it is true that both artists’ work reflects their personality, they also had something to say about the wider world around them, even if Shonagon avoided the overtly political. In Marker’s case, that might be the effect of the Algerian war in France or the failure and disillusionment of Marxist movements abroad, which the archivist would be remiss in not reflecting in her description. It is through the work of artists like Marker and Shonagon that forgotten, once hidden stories are told and private worlds revealed. While the male courtiers were busy transcribing the official Chinese history of Sima Qian’s *Records of the Grand Historian*, Shonagon was able to bear witness to and comment on her immediate contemporary surroundings, a world in which women were often hidden from view behind screens. Catherine Lupton comments on Marker’s critique of how memory is constructed to form an official version of history, and how *Sans soleil* displays “aspects of Japanese culture that don’t officially exist: reasonable, anti-imperial kamikaze pilots and the *burakumin* underclass, a vestige of the medieval caste system.”⁵⁰ The narrator of Marker’s *The Koumiko Mystery* says that the eponymous Japanese woman of his portrait “won’t *make* history, but *is* history.” For the archivist, this dichotomy between official and unofficial history might highlight a corresponding dichotomy between stories

50 Catherine Lupton, “Memory’s Apostle: Chris Marker, *La Jetée*, and *Sans Soleil*,” in *La Jetée/Sans Soleil* (Criterion Collection, 2007), DVD booklet, 11–12, <http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/498-chris-marker-memory-s-apostle>.

told in personal archives as opposed to those told in organizational records. It should also serve to demonstrate that when talking about provenance and fonds-level description, the archivist should not be satisfied with telling only those stories that come most easily.

Description at the series level of Marker's fonds would aim to deepen an understanding of, and detail the connections between, his record-creating activities. It would cover the scope of each series, explain how and why it is organized the way it is, and list the documentary forms related to each activity. Again, Marker's work and his own organizing principles could inform both arrangement and description, but so, too, would the choices the archivist made in the arrangement decisions. Unfortunately, too often intellectual control of the archival material stops there, which would be a mistake in dealing with an artist's archives. Yeo argues that "context is crucial, and contextual knowledge is often captured in high-level descriptions, but relying *exclusively* on high-level descriptions is not easily justified as a matter of principle."⁵¹ It is even less justified if telling the story of an artist or writer whose items tell stories of their own. As we have seen, meaning is often lost when the item is removed from its original place, but through description the archivist can at least hint at what Hobbs refers to as the "mental map" of the creator and what these items may have meant to him or her.⁵² Even the annotations Marker added to the books in his library might prove telling in this regard. However, one can assume that much at the item level of his archives is non-textual, and as Wendy Duff and Verne Harris claim, the non-textual is disadvantaged in descriptive practices and standards that privilege the text.⁵³ For an audiovisual artist like Marker, it would be important to find ways to describe the unique character and nature of non-textual material. As Jane Zhang notes, item-level control is equally imperative in the digital realm, where digital preservation management relies on item-level metadata.⁵⁴

All of these details would fashion an image of Marker, but it would be one of many possible versions, and ideally that would be understood by anyone reading a particular interpretation. Douglas and MacNeil warn against romantic notions of personality, seeing personality itself as a fictional creation of the artist.⁵⁵ This implies that we can only have a partial knowledge of the artist behind Sei Shonagon's diarist and Chris Marker's alter egos. Douglas and MacNeil argue that the reading and understanding of a writer's archives is a

51 Geoffrey Yeo, "Debates about Description," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil (Santa Barbara: Libraries Unlimited, 2010), 106.

52 Hobbs, "Reenvisioning the Personal," 213–41.

53 Wendy Duff and Verne Harris, "Stories and Names: Archival Records as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 263–85.

54 Jane Zhang, "Original Order in Digital Archives," *Archivaria* 74 (Fall 2012): 167–94.

55 Douglas and MacNeil, "Arranging the Self," 25–40.

collaborative and social process that occurs between the writer and reader, whether the latter is the writer herself, the archivist, or another user of the archive.⁵⁶ So, too, should the process be collaborative between the archivist and the reader of the description. It should also be understood as an open text that leaves room for other stories and lays bare the decisions made vis-à-vis the arrangement of the fonds. This would encourage those who use the archive to see description and arrangement as a construct that can be viewed critically.

MacNeil cites Roland Barthes as an example of a post-structural literary theorist who argued for an open reading of text, one that requires the reader's participation and interpretation.⁵⁷ Umberto Eco is another writer who has determined the open work to be one that is interpreted and "performed" with every encounter.⁵⁸ The open work lends itself to this largely through suggestion and the laying bare of its mechanisms, so that the interpreter is always clued in to the constructed nature of the text, and thereby aware of her own engagement with the text. As Eco argues, "An artistic work that suggests is also one that can be performed with the full emotional and imaginal resources of the interpreter."⁵⁹ Interestingly, at least one scholar has drawn upon Eco's concept and has looked at *The Pillow Book*, with its untethered and poetic digressions, as an example of an open work.⁶⁰ Marker's work, too, suggests through its own stylistic devices; the subjects of his camera's gaze, for instance, are wont to direct that gaze back at the viewer, forcing her into a mode of active participation and interpretation. Likewise, the archivist's description should be an open text. By inserting herself into the text and documenting the decisions she has made concerning arrangement, and by elaborating on the many contexts that formed the archive, she can create for the researcher a multitude of pathways. To do this, McNally proposes using speculative language in description, with words like "'probably,' 'possibly,' and 'appears to be.'" It's these tentative expressions that mark out archival cataloguing from library classification and should remind you that there's a human involved in the process."⁶¹ If the historian's purpose is to tell a story, it is the archivist who points out the many forms that story can take, without, of course, effacing her own part in the process. Programmer Patrick Friel almost gets it right when he says that "archives, and Marker as archive, are repositories of things, but it requires an artist's eye or

56 Ibid.

57 MacNeil, "Archivalterity," 3.

58 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

59 Ibid., 9.

60 Tzvetana Kristeva, "The Pillow Hook (*The Pillow Book* as an 'Open Work')," *Japan Review* 5 (1994): 15–54.

61 Anna McNally, "All That Stuff!," 97–108.

an historian's interpretation to shade these objects with meaning and resonance."⁶² Is the archivist missing from this cycle of interpretation, or is it the case, as could be argued, that the archivist acts as both artist and historian?

Marker's alter ego in *Sans soleil* shows that he understands the nature of memory, history, and the archive when he says, "We do not remember, we rewrite memory much as history is rewritten." Duff and Harris note that "the power to describe is the power to make and remake records and to determine how they will be used and remade in the future. Each story we tell about our records, each description we compile, changes the meaning of the records and re-creates them."⁶³ A postmodern reading of the archive, such as Gabrielle Dean's, also highlights the absences within the archives, for archival descriptive and arrangement practices can surely erase as much as they compose.⁶⁴ Our descriptions, then, should not just be about the person and his records; they should also be about this remaking or exclusion, and should allow others to remake and interpret the archive for themselves.

Of course, the online environment, with the database search and query tools it offers, can widen the possibilities of giving up some of that descriptive power to others. As Yeo concedes, "Opening description to user participation gives a voice to minority groups and marginalized communities, enables users to supply additional perspectives and differing opinions and recognizes that final or definitive descriptions are never possible."⁶⁵ It is not within the purview of this article to discuss the merits and demerits of user-contributed metadata and folksonomy, but it is important to consider the postmodern appeal of ceding more descriptive power to users, a concept that Marker, given his embracing of new technology, would no doubt have welcomed. In the liner notes to his interactive CD-ROM *Immemory*, he says that "his fondest wish is that there might be enough familiar codes here (the travel picture, the family album, the totem animal) that the reader-visitor could imperceptibly come to replace my images with his, my memories with his, and that my *Immemory* should serve as a springboard for his own pilgrimage in Time Regained."⁶⁶ In her analysis of *Immemory*, Erika Balsom states, "The possibility of a digital

62 Patrick Friel, "Chris Marker and the Archival Imperative: *La Jetée: ciné-roman* and *Staring Back* by Chris Marker and *Chris Marker* by Sarah Cooper," *Senses of Cinema* 52 (September 2009), <http://sensesofcinema.com/2009/52/chris-marker-and-the-archival-imperative-la-jetee-cine-roman-and-staring-back-by-chris-marker-and-chris-marker-by-sarah-cooper/>.

63 Duff and Harris, "Stories and Names," 272.

64 Gabrielle Dean, "Disciplinary and Disorder," *Archive Journal* 1 (Spring 2011), <http://www.archivejournal.net/issue/1/archives-remixed/>.

65 Yeo, "Debates about Description," 101–2.

66 Chris Marker, "Immemory by Chris Marker," liner notes from original English edition of CD-ROM *Immemory* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou and Les Films de l'Astrophore, 1997), reproduced at *Chris Marker: Notes from the Era of Imperfect Memory*, accessed 30 December 2014, <http://chrismarker.org/chris-marker/immemory-by-chris-marker/>.

archive seems to provide a method of transmission perhaps more suited to the characteristics of the archive itself.”⁶⁷ Like Yeo, she sees the possibility in the digital environment of tools that are able to accommodate different structures and multiple aggregations. These are digital tools that Athanasios Velios argues can now represent “standard and non-standard structures,” still allowing the archivist to tell her own version of the story.⁶⁸ Indeed, this does not take the archivist out of the equation, for she would still be relied upon to provide the context necessary for enabling these alternative structures and renderings.

The archivist who deals with Marker’s fonds will find a kindred spirit in that both archivist and artist are arrangers and storytellers, though working in different mediums. One may add various other hats to both their professional roles – that of researcher, historian, curator, and detective, for instance. If the archivist should lose her way in the murkiness of Marker’s cluttered order, trying to discern some pattern and find a place for this item or that, she would do well to recall the opening shot of *Sans soleil*, which features three Icelandic children on a country road. In the voice-over, we hear a letter by Sandor Krasna being read, and we learn that he wanted to put the shot in a film but could not find a place for it. He decided to place it at the beginning, followed by black leader tape. That way, if people could not see the happiness of the children, they would at least see the “black.” The archivist should understand why it was necessary for him to explain his choice, but should also understand that the shot could just as easily have been placed elsewhere. In her work with Marker’s fonds, the archivist would gain a unique perspective on the character and challenges of personal archives, one informed, it is hoped, by Marker’s own artistic practices. However, there would also be an awareness on her part of the archival theories, traditions, and practices that have shaped this insight, an insight that Sei Shonagon could add to her “list of venerable things.”

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67 Erika Balsom, “Qu’est-ce qu’une madeleine interactive?: Chris Marker’s *Immemory* and the Possibility of a Digital Archive,” *e-Media Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008), <http://journals.dartmouth.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/Journals.woa/1/xmlpage/4/article/289>.

68 Athanasios Velios, “Creative Archiving: A Case Study from the John Latham Archive,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 32, no. 2 (October 2011): 255–71.