

# Archivaria

The Journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists

## Review

Archives by Artists. Archives of  
Ontario, Toronto, ON

AMY MARSHALL FURNESS

*Archivaria* 98 (Fall 2024), pp. 216-22

---

### Cite this article:

Furness, Amy Marshall. Review of *Archives by Artists*, curated by Curated by DisplayCult (Jennifer Fisher and Jim Drobnick). *Archivaria* 98 (Fall 2024): 216-22.  
<https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/14009>

**Archives by Artists.** Archives of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario.  
December 19, 2023 – October 4, 2024. Curated by DisplayCult  
(Jennifer Fisher and Jim Drobnick).

AMY MARSHALL FURNESS

*Rosamond Ivey Special Collections Archivist and Head, Library & Archives  
Art Gallery of Ontario*

Artists creating archives – or at least, artwork that resembles archives – is a well-documented phenomenon. Countless artists have explored archival themes in the decades before and after art theorist Hal Foster identified the “archival impulse” in artistic practice.<sup>1</sup> On the archival side of things, numerous authors have written about artists and archives, including in several exhibition reviews in *Archivaria* over the years.<sup>2</sup> *Archives by Artists* is an exhibition in a related vein. It functions as a playful infiltration of the archival reading room by art curators – an effort to bring the art world into the archives and to leverage the apparatus of the reading room for aesthetic effect.<sup>3</sup>

The exhibition features 13 projects by 18 artists, displayed in eight tabletop vitrines in the Alexander Fraser Reading Room, the main public research

1 Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October*, no. 110 (2004): 3–22. The curators cited Ernst van Alphen, *Staging the Archive: Art and Photography in the Age of New Media* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014) as an influential piece of reading.

2 For a good overview of archival artwork from an archival perspective, see Kathy Carbone, “Archival Art: Memory Practices, Interventions, and Productions,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 63, no. 2 (2020): 257–63. Examples of exhibition reviews of archival artwork include Amy Marshall Furness, “Vera Frenkel: Cartographie d’une Pratique / Mapping a Practice. SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art, Montreal,” *Archivaria*, no. 71 (Spring 2011): 155–60; Chaya Litvack, “Rehearsal/Performance. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto,” *Archivaria*, no. 79 (Spring 2015): 201–5; Alexandra Wieland, “Carol Sawyer: The Natalie Brettschneider Archive, Vancouver Art Gallery,” *Archivaria*, no. 86 (Fall 2018): 198–202.

3 Disclosure: I was invited to attend the curators’ talk to the staff of the Archives of Ontario on April 17, 2024, which allowed me to hear directly from the curators and take part in some of the conversation between them and the AO staff. I am grateful to Danielle Manning at the AO for this invitation and have made a good-faith effort to write this review at an appropriate degree of removal.



FIGURE 1 *Archives by Artists (2023)*, installation view of eight vitrines at the Archives of Ontario, Toronto. Source: photo courtesy of DisplayCult.

space of the Archives of Ontario (AO). Although centrally located near the main entrance of the room, the vitrines blend in with the room's many desks and tables, reflecting an understated approach to installation. (The exhibition was deliberately *not* installed in the Archives' purpose-built Helen McClung Exhibit Area, where the shows tend to be educational offerings geared toward a general audience, with interpretive texts and graphics that conform to conventional museum practices.) This display strategy gives rise to an interesting tension, since archival and curatorial approaches may be somewhat at odds in their attitudes toward the space of the reading room. Like archivists at many institutions, the staff of the AO tries to thoughtfully mitigate the administrative and security conventions of the reading room, which might feel like cultural barriers to new researchers. In contrast, the curators expressed enthusiasm for the apparatus of the reading room as a desirable part of the look and feel of the show. From their perspective, the context of the provincial archival institution adds a

“gravitas” to the show that it might not have in the setting of an art gallery.<sup>4</sup>

The artworks in the show are grouped according to themes that articulate their “archival” nature, such as autobiography, the archive as conceptual process, and fictional archives. Although the works represent a diversity of modes of engagement with archival ideas, they also share certain generic conventions. Most obviously, they are almost all examples of *artists’ multiples*, a distinct but multifarious genre of artistic creation characteristically created in editions and valued at relatively accessible prices in the contemporary art market.<sup>5</sup> Multiples can vary from small, discrete objects to larger and more complex assemblages that invite intellectual and literal/physical unpacking. The works featured in the show are all on the more physically complex end of the scale, and all “appropriate the look and feel of the archive,”<sup>6</sup> to use the curators’ phrase – meaning that they tend to consist of printed documents, photographs, and other material contained in boxes or portfolios, perhaps with some internal envelopes or other enclosures. Archivists and archival researchers might well share the curators’ enthusiasm for artworks that come neatly contained and invite tactile exploration, revealing their full nature only through the process of being opened up and read or viewed.

There is insufficient space here to engage with all 13 works in the show, so this brief review will use three examples to provide a sense of the variety of approaches and themes. Vietnamese-born international artist Danh Vo’s *BlauOrange Preis* (2007) resembles a small personal fonds including copies of snapshots, news clippings, postcards, and correspondence contained in a humble-looking brown cardboard dossier. The form of the archive allows for a fragmentary, heteroglossic life narrative that aptly reflects the experiences of displacement and migration of the artist, who left Vietnam after the war as a small child, settling in Denmark and eventually achieving artistic success in Germany. (The title of the work is taken from a significant prize for young artists, which Vo won in 2007.)

4 Jim Drobnick and Jennifer Fisher, “Archives by Artists: Curators’ Talk,” Archives of Ontario, Toronto, April 17, 2024.

5 Editions of the works in the show range in size from 5 to 2,000; the exception is Jürgen O. Olbrich’s *Paper Police*, a unique assemblage of “found” paper ephemera and correspondence, which is part of the artist’s ongoing operations under this title.

6 Archivesbyartists (@archivesbyartists), “This exhibition of artists’ multiples includes Canadian and international artists, with works from the 1960s to today,” Instagram post, January 29, 2024, [https://www.instagram.com/p/C2sntgcuyOy/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==](https://www.instagram.com/p/C2sntgcuyOy/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==).

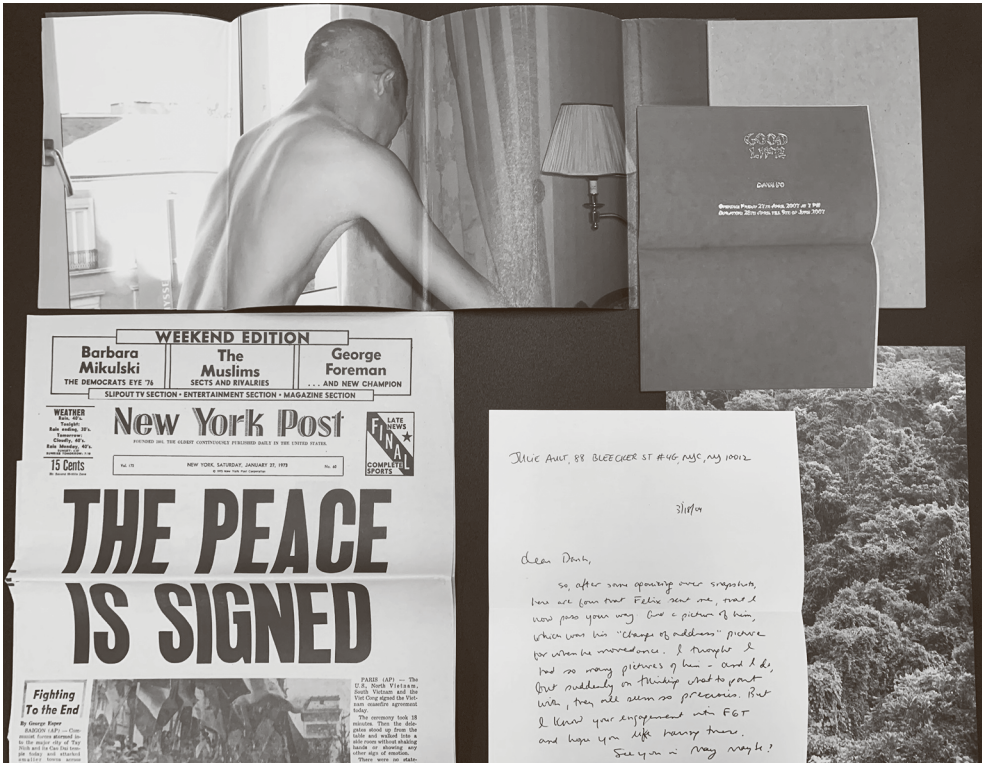


FIGURE 2 Danh Vo, *BlauOrange Preis* (2007), installation view of artist's multiple containing books, newspaper, poster, exhibition invite, and envelope with letter and photographs. Source: photo courtesy of DisplayCult.

Spanish artist Dora García's *Mad Marginal Archives* (2011) presents facsimiles of real archival documents from the artist's own studio practice, which serve as contextual history for the artist's participation in the Venice Biennale, one of the art world's most prestigious exhibitions, in 2011. García's Biennale project at the Spanish pavilion, titled *Mad Marginal*, involved performances and installations centred on countercultural radicals and psychiatric patients. The project was based on extensive research into populations who are not traditionally well represented in archives. Although fleeting and ephemeral in its official presentation, it was grounded in rigorous process and considerable administrative effort. Like many time-based artworks, the records of the work are essential to its

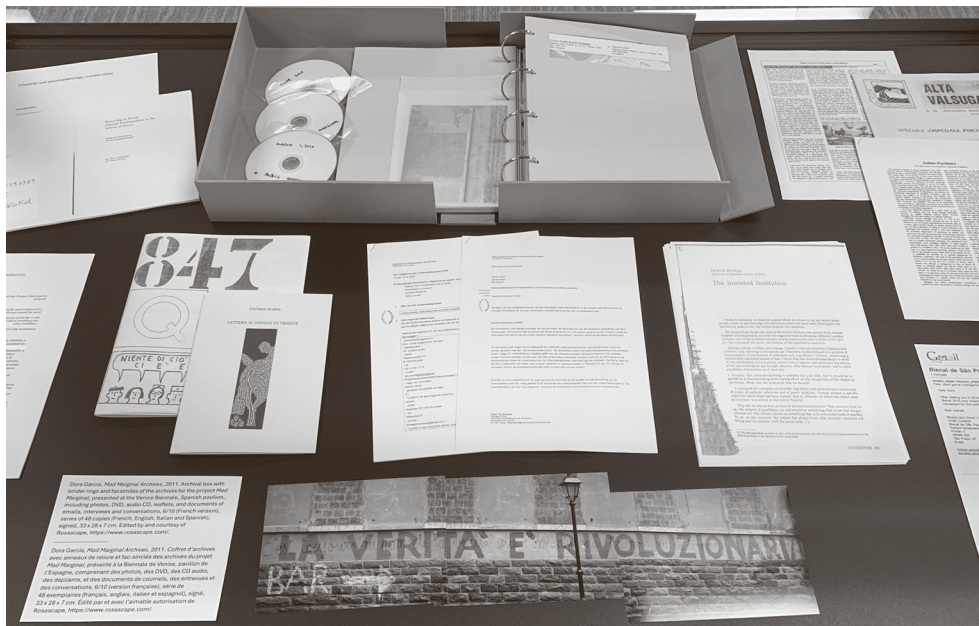


FIGURE 3 Dora García, *Mad Marginal Archives* (2011), installation view of archival box with binder rings and facsimiles of the archives for the project *Mad Marginal*. Source: photo courtesy of DisplayCult.

continued existence. By compiling and publishing these records, García gives *Mad Marginal* a tangible form and a potential afterlife.

Toronto-based Yaniya Lee and Camille Turner's *Black History Navigational Toolkit* (2021) is an intervention into the historical silences of the archive. Produced as a commission for the Toronto Biennial of Art, the toolkit has been distributed as an educational set to schools and similar venues.<sup>7</sup> Although it has some physical similarity to the other works in the show – it presents a set of uniformly designed cards that inform the reader about significant people and stories that are missing from the prevailing historical record – it makes no attempt to emulate the look and feel of archival documents. Both Turner, in

7 The toolkit has an online counterpart: Camille Turner and Yaniya Lee, *Black History Navigational Toolkit* ([Toronto]: Toronto Biennial of Art, 2022), <https://torontobiennial.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Black-History-Navigational-Toolkit-2024-UPDATE.pdf>.

her art practice, and Lee, in her writing, have histories of engaging powerfully with archival silences, and here, they make a direct and urgent appeal to their audience. Black history needs to be more widely taught, and the toolkit is ready to support this important work. Of all the works in the show, this is the most directly related to the history that is documented, with inevitable systemic omissions, in the AO's own holdings.

Exhibitions in archival settings usually function to illuminate and interpret some aspect of the institutions' holdings for a general public or community audience, but *Archives by Artists* is different: with its understated exhibition design, it seems to make an oblique appeal to an audience of archival researchers,



FIGURE 4 Camille Turner and Yaniya Lee, *Black History Navigational Toolkit* (2021), installation view of box with 22 double-sided printed cards. Source: photo courtesy of DisplayCult.

and it is at least partly aimed at art world insiders. In all three of the featured artworks – as in others in the exhibition – artists have leveraged the archival format to present a history that is too complex and unbounded to be presented as single, linear narratives. Viewers may find that these works prompt reflection on other historical silences in the archives, perhaps in the holdings of the host institution.

The curators of the exhibition, Jennifer Fisher and Jim Drobnick, work as an independent curatorial collaborative by the name of DisplayCult. They are also art collectors (the works in the exhibition are drawn from their own collections); professors of contemporary art (Drobnick at OCAD University, Fisher at York University); and joint editors of the *Journal of Curatorial Studies*. As academics and denizens of the art world, they are at home with the academic and aesthetic dimensions of archival artwork. Fisher and Drobnick expressed an openness in their curatorial approach, which they described as “inductive,” letting the works speak for themselves, rather than imposing a focused curatorial message.<sup>8</sup>

There is a necessary, inherent limitation in displaying complex multiples, which is that they need to be enclosed in display cases and are therefore static and untouchable, no matter how thoughtfully the contents are arranged. This physical constraint is partly addressed by the exhibition’s manifestation on Instagram, which brings it into a virtual and interactive arena and will allow it to outlive the physical exhibition for as long as that platform survives.<sup>9</sup> The account has 156 followers as of the date of this review, apparently a mix of artists, art institutions, collectors, and archival institutions. Many of the staff of the Archives of Ontario were clearly engaged with the project, turning out in force for a talk by the curators at the midpoint of the show’s run. The exhibition seemed to succeed in sparking conversation between archivists and the curators and in bringing some art world attention to the AO. Artists have a great deal to say about archives, and the show gives every indication that the conversation will continue.

8 Drobnick and Fisher, “Archives by Artists: Curators’ Talk.”

9 DisplayCult (@displaycult), “Archives by Artists,” Instagram, accessed June 15, 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/archivesbyartists/>.