

Archives, Artists and Designers

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Abstract:

The University of Stirling Archives and Glasgow School of Art recently undertook a number of projects in collaboration with artists, designers and galleries to create new work inspired by the study of their collections, bringing their archives to new audiences. These collaborations provided an insight into the art and design world's attitude to archives. The discussions held and decisions made highlighted the tensions often present between archival methods and creative choices and highlighted the visual, aesthetic beauty of archives, something the profession often overlooks, preoccupied with the evidential value of the material we manage. This article looks at the issues raised by these often fretful, but always fruitful collaborations

As archivists we are familiar with dealing with the research processes and outputs of user groups whose main focus is producing historical research; for example genealogists, local historians, and academic researchers. These users' primary interest is in the information our archives contain about a particular person, place or event. Many artists and designers also regularly use archives in their work. Their interest in archives is perhaps less familiar to archive professionals as they may use collections of personally collated material rather than visiting public repositories. However, creative practitioners use archives for many of the same reasons as traditional researchers (i.e. to find information on a particular subject or person). It is the direction of their research and the format of their outputs that distinguishes them from more traditional user groups and which can pose challenges and open up opportunities for archive repositories.

The use of archives by fine artists can take various forms; from investigations into the concept of archives and archiving practices; to research into a subject or story represented in archive collections; or a focus on the visual and physical properties of archive items. In an article in the art journal *October* in 2004 the critic Hal Foster identified what he described as the 'Archival Impulse' visible in the work of many contemporary artists.ⁱ A look through the pages of art magazines such as *Frieze* and *Map* provide ample evidence of this artistic interest in the concept of 'archives' and how this feeds into the works of many artists. Some such as Andy Warhol consciously create archives of their own life.ⁱⁱ Others, like the German artist Peter Piller, collect and curate their own archival collections of material.ⁱⁱⁱ The award-winning artist Tacita Dean provides an example of the artistic tendency towards being an

‘unreliable narrator’, creating apparently historical narratives whose veracity is uncertain, sometimes sparked by a single historical document (which may spark a narrative fiction) or backed up with apparent archival evidence which may in fact be a fiction also created by the artist as part of the work.^{iv}

The final expression of this ‘archival impulse’ in artists, and the one most relevant to this article, is that of the artist as researcher. These artists visit libraries and archives to research their collections and use archives as inspiration for new work and/or present and incorporate original archival material in their work. Many designers also regularly refer to examples of work produced by other individuals to inform their creative processes. Historically designers have often collated their own collections of material for this purpose or have accessed an in-house company library and/or archive. Recent examples of such work include Marks & Spencer’s and Liberty’s who have both created packaging lines which utilise imagery from their archives, and Pringle of Scotland who celebrated their 195th anniversary with an exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery, London showing new work ‘inspired by iconic products such as the twinset and argyle pattern’.^v The use of archives by artists and designers in this way allows for the collaboration and participation of archivists. It allows for material held in our collections to be used as the starting point for collaborative journeys that can end up in the most unexpected of places.

The archive collections held by the University of Stirling and The Glasgow School of Art (GSA) include material relating to film making, fine art, design and architecture. However, both institutions have only recently started to actively engage with artists and designers as archive users. This article explores three separate projects undertaken by Stirling and GSA in

which the institutions asked artists and designers to use their archives as a basis for creative outputs which would be displayed in public exhibitions.^{vi} Comparing the activities and outcomes of each of these projects serves to highlight some common observations of working with creative practitioners. This article will describe the practical activities involved in each project and explore the challenges and benefits of working with artists and designers. It will also reflect on how working with creative practitioners can provide useful insights into archival practices relating to description and access.

During 2008-2009 The Glasgow School of Art undertook a project in which staff members from the Textiles Department used items from the School's archives as a starting point for developing new work. A diverse range of approaches to this brief emerged and were documented by each designer in a creative process journal. These journals recorded the designers' research activities and thought processes, and in doing so encouraged reflective practice and acted as a document of the research process. The resultant exhibition entitled *Awaken* ran from 24 January – 28 February 2009. In the autumn of 2006 the University of Stirling Archives began a successful, on-going collaboration with The Changing Room, Stirling's contemporary art gallery. The first result of this partnership was an exhibition of archive material from the collection of the film director Lindsay Anderson^{vii} entitled *Is That All There Is?* (January – February 2007). Another project was initiated in the summer of 2008 when two young Scottish artists were invited to explore the archives of the Stirling-born filmmakers John Grierson and Norman McLaren.^{viii} This collaboration led to a live performance at the *Le Weekend* experimental music festival at Stirling's Tolbooth Theatre (May 2009) and the exhibitions *Art is not a mirror, it's a hammer!* (July – September 2009) and *Now is the time* (November 2009).

All three projects began by developing good working relationships with the creative practitioners involved and introducing them to the archives through hands on visits. Not all of the creative practitioners working on these projects had previously used archives, so initial discussions covered the practical issues of working with archive material, (such as handling and copyright regulations, and the use of finding aids), as well as introducing the range of archive material.

GSA's *Awaken* project began with a series of small group inductions in which a selection of items were shown to the designers for discussion. These sessions were created as a starting point from which the designers could plan their own research visits. Pieces were chosen that represented different areas of GSA's collections, and that could also be looked at from a variety of viewpoints. For example, notebooks and student diaries were viewed; the group discussed how student life and courses of study have changed over time, and the physical qualities of the items, such as paper quality, handwriting styles, illustrations and inserts, were also considered. These physical attributes provided useful historic information about the creation of the items, and also acted as sources of colour, pattern and texture for the creative practitioners to work from.

The Lindsay Anderson exhibition *Is That All There Is?* initiated a process of three-way collaboration between the university archivist, gallery curator and artist. This method of working created a productive relationship where each participant brought their own particular backgrounds, perspectives and expertise – archival, curatorial and artistic to the

projects. When it came to working with the archives of John Grierson and Norman McLaren the gallery curator selected two young Scottish artists whose working practices (documentary and experimental animation) mirrored the areas in which the individuals whose archives they would explore excelled.

With funding secured from the Scottish Arts Council the artists were given the opportunity to visit the university archives for a 'study week'.^{ix} This allowed them to examine the archives of Grierson and McLaren without any set outcomes or objectives being set by the university archives or gallery. They were free to find their own path through the papers, stopping where they found something of interest and passing by what others may consider important. The end result of the study week was a short report produced by each artist reflecting on their engagement with the archive and suggesting how it would shape the work they proposed to create in later phases of the project. This initial period of research and reflection proved very useful as it fed into another successful application made to the Scottish Arts Council to support the subsequent elements of the project suggested by the initial exploration of the archives.

From the early stages of these projects it was clear that the creative practitioners had a broad range of responses to the archive materials they were using; many of these responses were quite unexpected by the archivists involved. Some of the designers working on the *Awaken* project focussed on visual imagery in the archives as a source of inspiration. For example, knitted textile designer Christie Alexander utilised one of the archives' late 19th century photographs: 'The defining photograph, for me, was of Daisy [Anderson] pictured amongst four rows of young women wearing plain, dark coloured dresses with ornate, hand

made white, lace collars worn over them... I began to think about all of the possible combinations of fashion garment shapes and knitting techniques I could use to make the collars stand out from a simple shaped dress'.^x

Some participants were inspired by the stories, people or concepts they felt were represented by items in the archives. Printed textile designer, artist and author Joanna Kinnersley-Taylor focussed on a travel diary dating from 1950 by former GSA student Jack Lindsay: 'Jack's travel diary was for me, simply a most inspiring object – beautifully presented in every way. It was not something I sought to emulate or re-interpret visually; rather it acted as a catalyst that enabled me to take some new ideas forward in a particular way.'^{xi}

The designers were open to taking inspiration from every aspect of their visit. Several of the participants were very interested in the workings of the archive itself, the reading room environment, handling equipment and specialist packaging. This highlighted that the reading room environment is often an unfamiliar one for visitors and that the way archives are presented to users can impact on their interpretation. Kinnersley-Taylor's research also referred to labels attached to some of the archives' textile items.

Overwhelmingly the designers involved in *Awaken* were interested in the physical qualities of the archive collections, and in most cases (although certainly not all) less attention was given to the evidential value of an item. This approach differs from that of most historians who are concerned with the trustworthiness of their archive sources. The designers' concern with the physical is a reminder of how important these attributes can be in our

understanding of archives and our emotional relationship with them. Working with the designers served to highlight that most archive catalogues do not include detailed information about the physical attributes of the items they describe; for example the techniques and materials used to create archive items, their colours, and any visual motifs present (such as stamps or annotations). Some of this information is of course difficult to convey in a written catalogue; however, digital images (tagged with information on colour, pattern, technique, and indexed by person and place) can be an invaluable means of conveying this information to users.

The barrier that written catalogues provided to some of the designers' access to areas they were interested in resulted in quite in-depth discussions with the archivist to try to identify suitable pieces for their work. Most archive visitors consult archivists to some extent in order to locate records relevant to their research. However, during this project the archivist's role in choosing suitable material was essential and the impact of the archivist's decisions (based on the visual qualities of materials as well as their subject matter) inevitably impacted on the direction of the project. It is perhaps only when working with a new user group (such as artists and designers), and considering new questions, that we realise how our suggestions can shape a researcher's experience of using and interpreting our holdings.

The freedom of the *Awaken* project allowed for a wide variety of responses to the archive collections; the final exhibition illustrated the diversity in these responses and showed work created using a large number of techniques, both modern and traditional, including print, knit, and embroidery. Many of the pieces used bold colours and/or patterns. A lot of the

design pieces were fairly large scale, such as printed fabric lengths, posters and knitted squares. Three-dimensional objects were also included in the display, for example, a fabric covered chair, a group of lamp shades, and a set of knitted collars. The overall affect was a visually vibrant exhibition, something that can be difficult to achieve if only displaying original archive material.

No original archive items were included in the *Awaken* exhibition. This decision had partly been made for preservation reasons. However, it was also felt the emphasis should lie on the processes and outcomes related to using archives for design purposes, rather than focussing on individual archive items. The exhibition did include creative process journals compiled by the designers as a way of recording their thoughts and processes. These journals helped to illustrate the ethos of the project - to encourage the use of archives for new creative work. The journals have been retained by the Textiles Department which continues to encourage this approach to research.

The discussions between archivist, curator and artist during the planning of the university's Lindsay Anderson exhibition brought to light the clear differences in the understanding of, and attitude to, archives that can arise. The artist invited to curate this exhibition, Stephen Sutcliffe, primarily works on video and his work is heavily influenced by British cultural life of the past 30 years and its major figures.^{xii}

Throughout the selection process for the exhibition a constant dialogue was maintained between artist, curator and archivist. *Frieze* magazine described Sutcliffe as an artist with “a collage technique with a rather laissez-faire attitude to publicly available material”^{xiii} – and

his earlier works also placed him in the category of the 'unreliable narrator' – so the planning meetings generated some very interesting discussions around the issues of use, access and display of archives. Where the archivist wanted to present a didactic chronological account of Anderson's life, the artist stepped in and suggested something more impressionistic. Where the suggested method of display of an item may have put it at risk of damage the archivist raised concerns.

Sutcliffe's approach to the presentation of biographical information about Anderson was not as linear and didactic as that in a traditional archival display. Rather than using stock images of Anderson and familiar scenes from his work he revealed aspects of the director through more personal items such as letters, postcards and scrapbooks. The dominant images in the exhibition became those of actors closely associated with Anderson rather than Anderson himself. The exhibition took shape as the more visually interesting items from the collection were framed for display on the walls of the gallery – or in some cases reproduced and enlarged to create very striking pieces such as a set of three reproductions of small 1" colour transparencies to 1.5 metre square photos.^{xiv} Alongside the wall mounted material a selection of archival documents were selected to be displayed in a number of exhibition cases. A screening programme of highlights from Anderson's personal video collection was also curated by the artist – with the details of securing rights to publicly screen the selected programmes being left to archivist and curator. Again as with the objects in the exhibition the screenings reflected on the lives of Anderson's close friends, rather than being a showcase of his own films. The one film of Anderson's which was included (screened daily in the gallery) was his last, a documentary about a day in his life, called *Is That All There Is?* – which was also chosen as the name for the exhibition.

The artists who worked with the archives of John Grierson and Norman McLaren responded with a series of new works, events and performances which presented the archives in unexpected and innovative ways. In her review of her exploration of the Norman McLaren archive Katy Dove identified many parallels between her work and that of McLaren such as their use of abstract animation and interest in the relationship between sound and image. At the time of her archival research sound was becoming an increasingly important aspect of Dove's practice. She was particularly taken with the book *Six Audio Visual Musical Forms* in which McLaren drew diagrams representing different musical structures - a development of his technique of drawing directly onto edges of film to create sound. Dove took inspiration from this work to create improvised music with her band Muscles of Joy, a musical collective of Glasgow artists.

The fruits of this musical inspiration were seen in a performance by Muscles of Joy at the *Le Weekend* experimental music festival at the Tolbooth Stirling in May 2009. During this performance the band created an improvised soundtrack to McLaren's correspondence adopting a 'cut-up' technique to his letters with selected words, phrases and sentences from his letters being read / sung to the musical accompaniment along with a visual backdrop inspired by McLaren's work.

Another element of McLaren's work which was highlighted by Dove was his experimental spirit, using what he described as all of the "tools of his time" to create his work. This led Dove to suggest that if McLaren was making films today he would have embraced tools such as computer programming and the web. These two elements of technological

experimentation and musical inspiration combined in Dove's show *Now is the time* which was shown in The Changing Room in November 2009. Using the tools of her time Dove created an interactive piece of animation which was activated by playing a selection of instruments placed in the gallery (including drumkit, guitar and violin) – the interactive software for this show (produced in collaboration with the artist Simon Yuill) was also made available on a website which was launched to coincide with the Stirling show.^{xv}

Between these two artistic responses to the archives there was a slightly more traditional exhibition of material from the Grierson and McLaren collections curated by Luke Fowler and Katy Dove at The Changing Room gallery in the summer of 2009. This show fitted into Stirling Council's summer programme of Homecoming events providing wider publicity for the exhibition in the Council's promotional material (presenting the exhibition as a celebration of two of Stirling's greatest cultural exports).

The preparation for this exhibition required a return to the archives by the artists who selected material for display in the exhibition and also items which would feature in a number of new works of photographic montage created for the show.^{xvi} Borrowing one of Grierson's most memorable quotes for its title "*Art is not a mirror, it's a hammer!*" presented a selection of archive material selected by the artists alongside the new works of photographic montage and screenings of Grierson's and McLaren's films. The timing of the show (during the summer) and its location (in a gallery on the main tourist route to Stirling Castle) combined to present an accessible and informative exhibition for visitors to the city during the summer months in a venue which (meeting its remit as Stirling's contemporary art gallery) often displays more challenging material.

Usually archivists have some idea of the physical form a visitor's research output will take, perhaps a family tree, student dissertation or publication. These outputs have standard formats into which information from archives is placed. However, with the above projects, despite a significant level of interaction with the creative practitioners involved, there was still a certain amount of mystery for the archivists as to how the finished products would look. This was exciting and the resultant exhibitions gave the archivists the opportunity to view familiar items in a new light. The creative eye brought previously ignored items to prominence in the displays of material from the Lindsay Anderson and John Grierson archives, while the designers involved in the *Awaken* exhibition reinterpreted archive items to develop contemporary objects. The research carried out on the Norman McLaren archive resulted in a musical playground where colourful patterns and shapes were created on a large screen by beating on a drum-kit or strumming a guitar.

These experiences of collaborating with, and exhibiting in, gallery spaces helped to take the archives out of the reading room and bring them to a new audience. Gallery audiences provide a relatively untapped group of young, culturally aware potential archive users, with the creative environment of the gallery often sparking new projects and further use of collections.^{xvii} The visual impact and, in some instances, interactive nature, of the resultant displays helped users to reconsider their views on archives, what they are, and how they can be used. The Stirling projects also made specific subject areas (the work of Lindsay Anderson, Norman McLaren and John Grierson) more accessible to visitors. Visitor feedback collected by The Changing Room in the gallery's visitor books, along with a published

catalogue produced as a result of the *Awaken* exhibition have provided documentation and further reflection on the activities of these projects.^{xviii}

The curatorial expertise at The Changing Room and GSA's Exhibitions Department brought invaluable skill and experience in exhibition display and publicity to these projects. A huge amount of the success of the exhibitions was due to the work undertaken by the curators and creative practitioners involved. Many archivists do not have the time and/or expertise to manage large-scale exhibition and outreach work on their own. Such projects offer the opportunity to work and share skills with others on a mutually valuable project.

Collaborative projects of this nature may also provide access to funding streams which archive repositories may be unaware of, or otherwise ineligible for, such as arts and knowledge transfer funds.

Curators and creative practitioners will see, and display, archives in different ways and provide a new perspective on how archives can be presented. Creative collaborations also open up a whole network of interested individuals and institutions to your collections. The art press will help promote your exhibitions and collections and you may have the opportunity to tour your works to venues around the country. In the case of *Is That All There Is?* coverage in the arts press brought the Lindsay Anderson exhibition to the attention of the curators of the James Hockey Gallery, University for the Creative Arts, Farnham. An expanded version of the exhibition, with additional material from the archive framed and prepared for display by the gallery, went on show in Farnham from January – March 2008.

The recent explosion of interest in archives within the artistic community has resulted in an increased use of archive collections by a new user group in unusual and innovative ways.^{xix}

They may be small in number but the work they produce can have a wide impact due to its public dissemination and visual appeal. Indeed the artists and designers themselves can act as 'archival ambassadors' promoting our collections to new audiences and the wider public through gallery openings, media interviews, exhibition programmes and publications, and through their continued enthusiasm for working with archives.

Working with artists and designers also benefits archivists by enabling us to view our collections and practices in a new light. The creative outputs of the above projects often focussed on unexpected aspects of the archives such as colour, texture, shape and format and on questions surrounding how archives can create stories surrounding an individual or subject. As archivists we should be aware of these additional, non-traditional approaches to archives and reflect on how our standard working methods can accommodate diverse demands on our collections. Meeting the needs of artists and designers may bring up unexpected challenges for archivists but the benefits of such collaborations should encourage us to facilitate the creative exploration of our collections.

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ⁱ Foster, pp. 3-22.

ⁱⁱ Warhol, p. 31.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eichler, *Frieze*, Issue 103.

^{iv} Dean, Tacita, *Teignmouth Electron*.

^v See <http://www.pringleScotland.com/projects-195-about/collection/fcp-content>

^{vi} It should be noted that the creative content of an archive collection is not a prerequisite for working with creative practitioners. For example, The Baring Archive and University of the Arts London collaborated on the *re:SEARCHING: playing in the archive* project in 2010 in which new work was produced inspired by items such as bank ledgers, 19th century correspondence and Argentinean bearers bonds. For further information see Lovegrove, p. 23.

^{vii} <http://www.is.stir.ac.uk/libraries/collections/anderson/index.php>

^{viii} <http://www.is.stir.ac.uk/libraries/collections/spcoll/media/grierson.php> and <http://www.is.stir.ac.uk/libraries/collections/spcoll/McLarenHome.php>

^{ix} In July 2010 the Scottish Arts Council became Creative Scotland.

^x *Awaken*, p. 42.

^{xi} *Awaken*, p. 96.

^{xii} Sutcliffe made his name with a series of video works resembling pieces of 'found footage' which are actually created from a number of separate audio and video sources subtly re-edited and merged by the artist – described in one review as having "that hard-to-define quality of being a pre-existing, unedited out-take."

^{xiii} Thorne, *Frieze*, Issue 130.

^{xiv} These large reproductions provide a colourful example of the artist creating new material from the archive and actively using the material held in the repository in a new way.

^{xv} <http://www.now-is-the-time.org.uk/>

^{xvi} Again, as with the new items created for the Anderson exhibition the quality of the works ensures their long-term value – these works now hang on the walls of our new archives reading room in the University of Stirling Library.

^{xvii} Another exhibition at the Changing Room gallery in Stirling by the artist Ben Rivers which used the Grierson Archive as a starting point for the work opened in July 2011. GSA's archives continue to be used for in-house creative projects.

^{xviii} The praise for the exhibitions included in the visitor books for the Stirling exhibitions vindicated the university's decision to engage in these collaborative projects.

^{xix} Recent exhibitions include 'Unfolding the Aryan Papers', Jane and Louise Wilson, Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh, 7 August – 26 September 2009; 'The Last Days of Jack Sheppard', Anja Kirschner and David Pannos, CCA Glasgow, 8 August – 26 September 2009; 're:SEARCHING – playing in the archive', Chelsea College of Art and Design, The Baring Archive, 7 May – 4 June 2010.