

MEGAN HOETGER

Learning from *Gift Science Archive*

My background is as a curator and historian, with the emphasis on the historian here. Over the last decade or so, I have worked in more than 25 performance, film, and media archives—in collections ranging from the most cared-for acquisitions held by mega-institutions like the Getty Research Institute or the Tate, to the most forgotten and tucked away in private closets and cellars in Berlin or Texas. In 2019 I had the privilege of spending six months doing research and watching the archiving process in action in the Archive of the Avant-Gardes, a massive contemporary art archive collection acquired by the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, Dresden at the end of 2016, which was then (and still is at the time of writing) in the process of being catalogued.

This is the frame from which I entered Dutch-American artist Sands Murray-Wassink's "monumental" durational performance *Gift Science Archive* in December 2019 as both a collaborator in a feminist experiment and as a curator from the Amsterdam-based performance art institution *If I Can't Dance, I Don't Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution*. When Frédérique Bergholtz, Director of *If I Can't Dance*, approached Murray-Wassink in March of that year, he happily accepted and proposed to "take stock" of his 25-year studio practice. He proposed taking up the process of archiving as a performance, and he proposed calling this performance *Gift Science Archive* after Carolee Schneemann's 1965 *Gift Science*, an assemblage work bringing together objects gifted to her by other artists. With *Gift Science Archive*, Sands and the *Gift Science Archive* team (Amalia Calderón, Radna Rumping, and myself) playfully took up Schneemann's proposition of 'gift science' as a starting point to reproach the supposed scientific bases of an archiving system. No one on the team was trained in the library sciences, and none of us particularly care for sanitized, or 'systematic,' ways of thinking that push out the messy relationality—the spillage and the seepage—of the gift and the understandings of 'value' and 'economy,' which it engenders and enacts.

So, what did I learn about archives and archiving from this durational art/life performance process?

Alongside the years spent working in archives and thinking about the intimacy of the encounters with 'history' and the messiness of the stories that emerge, I am also committed to collaboration and to experimenting with methods of collective knowledge production and transmission. When we began *Gift Science Archive*, we did so with the shared dream of building an archive system and archiving method that structurally took into consideration the ideas of collective history-making that interested us and, somehow, put these into practice. How exactly that should be done was an unknown that persisted as our always-question throughout the process. As collaborator on the project, Radna Rumping explained once in relation to a 'horse cloud' formation we made together on the wall of Murray-Wassink's studio at the Rijksakademie van Beeldende Kunsten (where our archiving performance mostly unfolded), that "You have to start somewhere. It looks like there is no 'system' or 'strategy' for hanging this work but, in a way, there is: it is a relational one, we figure the structure out by doing."

There is a poetry in Rumping's statement that is invigorating and enchanting. And yet. Once we are in the realm of the relational in this way—as a kind of collective praxis—it becomes incredibly difficult to draw lines between 'the art' of the performance and 'the life' of participants. Navigating the tensions that emerged between the delicate, porous boundaries of our collective production, and the deeply felt attachments to authorship—with all that implies—was an ongoing process that had to somehow be structurally folded into the archive system and archiving methods themselves. That is what the proposition of the 'gift science' called for. And yet, as much as each of us is (and was) committed to 'fighting for' recognition of relational value, we all also live in the realities of market value where collective authorship is not only illegible but often undesirable, and where acknowledgement credits—a soft way of gesturing at intellectual property rights—are queen.

Lest we also forget, as our guest Vivian van Saaze so aptly articulated in the *Gift Science Archive's* first process event ("VALUE. What is trash? What is trashy but valuable?"), archive production is a form of value production within the cultural marketplace (something I knew quite well from my experience of different archives over the years). Whose relational value is being produced in the archiving process, we must ask; and where is the market value of the collective process in that? Or we could also flip that around to ask: whose market value is being produced in the archiving process and where is the relational value of the collective process in that? Or flip it again: whose relational value is being produced in the archiving process and where is the relational value of the collective process in that? Or again: whose market value is being produced in the archiving process and where is the market value of the collective process in that?

Such inquiries can seem to become particularly fraught if we consider the broader power structures under which the performance of archiving took place: it was a solo commission by the artist Sands Murray-Wassink focused on Murray-Wassink's archive with the three other collaborators working under uneven contractual conditions (me as an institutional curator, Rumping as an independent curator-practitioner invited by the artist and Calderón as a graduate student in artistic research interviewed for an internship) with their names—try as Murray-Wassink might to consistently correct this—unevenly appearing across references to the project. How to uphold tenants of feminist horizontality while also implementing working structures under the conditions of our unevenness was an ongoing negotiation, as was continually recognizing and discussing the visibility politics involved in the reception and circulation of the work we did together. It was often messy. To be expected, I think, when one learns by doing in a form of praxis that is illegible and often undesirable in prevailing systems of valuation. Mutual respect and trust were crucial in our process—centering those relations was, I think, the 'gift science' experiment, and continues to be a kind of through-line in Murray-Wassink's work, from the earliest of drawings and photographs in the archive until our work together under the title *Gift Science Archive*.

All of this is what we committed ourselves to folding into the very structure of the *Gift Science Archive* database, which catalogues nearly 2,500 works from Murray-Wassink's oeuvre, and, as I've often said, maps webs of relations *and their* objects from across the artist's nearly 30-year practice. The database documents our archiving performance—both the object details for its entries (title, dimensions, materials, typology, photographer, etc.) and the relationships that formed between us, the four collaborators, as we dug through and "ordered" Murray-Wassink's works—and enacts it. Through hyperlinked constellation poem filters, typology descriptions and reflection notes, we attempted to build a 'gift science' universe where archive users would be invited to dive into Murray-Wassink's

works, as well as his memories, our words, our conversations, and our shared and private understandings of his art/life world.¹

The tensions of authorship, of ownership, of the “I” are there. This is something that figures centrally in Murray-Wassink’s relational art/life practice. As he regularly discusses, accusations of narcissism are ever present for him (as they were, he always points out, for Hannah Wilke), but the work is never only about him. It is relational. It is about him and not about him. It is messy. It is something we talked about rather openly throughout our time together, as material to work with in conceiving our system and methods, rather than as a problem to be overcome. There is no ‘overcoming’ of relationality and its messiness. It is something, I hope, we will continue to consider together as the years go on, and *Gift Science Archive* continues to live in the world as the ever-expanding database website www.giftsciencearchive.net.

Megan Hoetger (PhD) is a performance historian and curator, an exhibition-maker and a educationalist. She holds a PhD in performance studies with specializations in critical theory and film studies from the University of California, Berkeley. Before taking up her position with the Amsterdam-based arts organization *If I Can’t Dance, I Don’t Want To Be Part Of Your Revolution* in 2019, Hoetger held visiting research positions in the Centre for Cinema and Media Studies at the University of Ghent and in the Archive of the Avant-gardes, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden. From 2021-22 she co-lead the workshop “Archiving Club Cultures” at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW), Berlin, culminating in the experimental essay “Reassembling East German Nightlife: Scores for Curating from Elusive Archives” (*Archives on Show*, HKW) and an ongoing interview project hosted by the HKW’s *Whole Life Repository* digital platform.

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Vivian van Saaze, *Installation Art and the Museum: Presentation and Conservation of Changing Artworks*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press (2013).

1 For more details on the database structure see my introductory essay for the project, “Honouring Sands’s Horsepower: An Introduction to Sands Murray-Wassink’s Gift Science Archive”, on www.giftsciencearchive.net.