

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Archives, Education, and Access: Learning at Interference Archive

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THE FRONT PORTION OF THE ARCHIVE, SHOWING BOOKSHELVES, AS WELL AS FLAT FILES FOR POSTERS. (PHOTO: JEN HOYER)

Introduction

Archives are a tool for education, and the access policy of an archive affects what kind of education takes place in its space. In this paper, we describe how Interference Archive (IA), a community archive in Brooklyn, New York, creates unique educational opportunities by providing access through a radical access policy based on open stacks and experiential learning. These means of access are intended to subvert representational power by allowing visitors, donors, and volunteers to take part in deciding how histories are told, how materials are accessed, and how the collection is re-used as a resource for learning about contemporary and historical social movements.

We lay groundwork for how the radical nature of our access policy provides space for unique education opportunities through a brief history of IA and an introduction to its collections and day-to-day work. We'll provide context for how access typically plays out in archives and contrast this with how collection access at IA, through a variety of means, shapes our work and is a tool for education and mobilization.

The authors of this paper are regular volunteers at IA; it is important to recognize that in speaking as "we", we are four voices and perspectives among many at IA. Bonnie Gordon is an archivist who volunteers her time by working with the online catalog and administrative support. Lani Hanna works at the farmer's market while pursuing graduate studies and primarily volunteers on exhibitions, audio archiving, and administrative support at IA. Jen Hoyer is a librarian and musician who volunteers her efforts towards cataloging and fundraising. Vero Ordaz came to IA while she was a student in American Studies at Brooklyn College. She expanded her classroom education through IA and supports the archive as she can.

About Interference Archive

The mission of IA is to explore the relationship between cultural production and social movements as a way to tackle social and political issues. We bring together people interested in social change, such as educators, artists, activists, archivists, and community organizers. We offer a study center and public programs including exhibitions, workshops, talks, and screenings, all of which are free and open to the public.

The archival collection at IA grew out of the personal collections of its founders, Josh MacPhee and Dara Greenwald, who amassed an extensive collection through their involvement in social movements over the preceding 25 years. Along with collaborators Molly Fair and Kevin

Caplicki, they opened IA in December 2011 as a public archive where movement participants with firsthand knowledge about the material could play a role in organizing and describing this collection.

In 2016, IA has established itself in New York City's activist scene as well as in a national and international network of activists and community archives. IA is located in the Gowanus neighborhood of Brooklyn, New York, in two rented rooms on the ground floor of a converted industrial building that houses other studios and offices. One room houses the archival collections as well as some study space. The second room is used for exhibitions and public programming; it can comfortably fit 35 chairs for a talk or film screening. Sections of the exhibition room are partitioned off as co-working space; this rent subsidizes the rent of IA and provides work space for groups and individuals whose interests connect with those of IA. The building is situated close to three major subway lines and, while we see regular visits from New Yorkers, we have a steady stream of visitors from around the globe who have included IA in their travel plans because they are



THE EXHIBITION SPACE AT INTERFERENCE ARCHIVE, WITH MATERIAL FROM "WE WON'T MOVE: TENANTS ORGANIZE IN NEW YORK CITY", MARCH - JUNE 2015 (PHOTO: GREG MIHALKO)

interested in our work or for research purposes. IA is open to the public four days per week, with at least one volunteer staff member available during each open shift. Additional events and meetings keep the archive open three or four evenings per week. Through a combination of regular open hours, programming, and exhibition openings, we see anywhere from 30 to 300 visitors to the archive each week.

Increased attention to IA's work has resulted in collection growth through regular donations. IA's collection policy encompasses the cultural production of social movements—posters and prints, buttons, t-shirts, periodicals, pamphlets, zines, books, moving images, audio recordings, and other ephemera produced in multiples. Our collection development policy does not favor any political agenda, but IA's policy of open stacks access, which we'll

describe in more detail through this paper, affects what we collect. The intent is not to develop a collection of material that has been designated as “radical” by a certain community, movement or individual, though many materials may fall into that category. Instead, the radical nature of IA’s work lies in this open access policy and a focus on public facing programming that radically shifts the communities and individuals who have access to the history recorded in this archival material.

IA is run completely by volunteers; there are no paid staff. We aim to operate along similar lines to the organizational structures of many of the social movements represented in our collection: these are largely non-hierarchical, consensus-based groups from the political left. Initially run by a core collective, IA’s volunteer community has evolved into a network of working groups that each focus on different projects or tasks. These include the Admin, Cataloging, Audio, Born Digital, Education, and Fundraising working groups, as well as ad hoc groups that come together to develop exhibitions. All labor at Interference Archive is volunteer and commitments vary depending on an individual’s desire and availability. Operating on volunteer energy necessitates careful budgeting of labor. At IA we choose to focus our labor in ways that serve experiential access. The majority of our labor at present is focused toward regular open hours and educational programming, including exhibitions, talks, and workshops.

Access at Interference Archive

Open access is a priority at IA. Open collection access means visitors can drop by anytime during our open hours and work with material themselves. They do not need to make an appointment to come see the collection, and institutional credentials are not required for access to the material.



STUDENTS FROM A LOCAL YOUTH PROGRAM VISIT INTERFERENCE ARCHIVE TO STUDY POSTER DESIGN WHILE CREATING THEIR OWN NEIGHBORHOOD MURAL (PHOTO: JEN HOYER)

We prioritize open access because it creates opportunities for experiential education, which we define as direct interaction with archival material as the basis for educational programming and learning opportunities that

are of benefit to any visitor, whether they would take the formal title of “student” or not.

Before describing how IA’s radical emphasis on open access to collections shapes the kind of educational opportunities we provide, it’s helpful to step back and understand how access typically unfolds in archives. We understand that making any statements about what is “typical” is a broad generalization, but we’d like to clarify how IA’s position towards collection access plays out as a radical shift from the norm, and how it enables IA to be a valuable resource and tool for education.



A VISITOR TO THE ARCHIVE READS ZINES (PHOTO: JEN HOYER)

IA’s work fits broadly under the umbrella of community archives, or “collections of material gathered primarily by members of a given community and over whose use community members exercise some level of control” (Flinn, Stevens and Shepherd 73). It’s useful to think of community archives as grassroots groups that focus on saving the material of community organizations. Community archives often collaborate with the organizations represented in their collections, and they tend to be self-organized with a “bottom-up” approach. By contrast, institutional archives tend to take a “top-down” approach, often mirroring the bureaucratic organizational structure of the institutions they exist within, and drawing on the efforts of that institution to collect and organize archival material, rather than utilizing the efforts of the subjects of the archival material (Ziegler 107-108). When we talk about how IA fits into the realm of community archives, we recognize the community we serve as an incredibly broad spectrum of activists and organizers (for further elaboration on this, see Sellie et al. 2015).

Additionally, many archives collect unpublished records generated by organizations and individuals during their normal course of business. Archives sometimes need to place physical and intellectual access restrictions on these. By contrast, IA collects materials that were produced in multiples and explicitly intended for public consumption. Staffing volunteers at IA do not need to restrict access to specific materials in the collection.

While not absolute, the framework of community vs. institutional archives gives a useful lens for thinking about different ways that archives approach access. Within the bureaucratic structure of institutional archives, the primary

goal of an archivist has traditionally been seen as preserving records before providing access (Cook 224). Even in the context of an institutional archive that houses radical, activist collections, access limitations on the Riot Grrrl collection at Fales Library have been viewed as problematic because Fales' access policy states that it prioritizes access to 'qualified researchers' (Eichhorn 31). By contrast, community archives are a space for "participatory recordkeeping", where the subjects of archival material also become decision makers about how collections are accessed (Upward, McKemish, Reed 221).

Every object accessioned into the collection at IA is available to the public for perusal. Visitors are encouraged to search experientially: to open boxes and look through the collection on their own rather than search a computer (although an online catalog is in its infancy, our open stacks browsing structure means that cataloging everything is not paramount to access). To make experiential searching easier, the collection is organized by format, and then by subject or alphabetical title within each format. Visitors find that browsing can result in relevant or inspirational connections between collections that they otherwise may not have discovered had they not had open access to the entire collection.

Other access issues connect to the nature of both visitors and staff at IA. Visitors to IA often define themselves specifically as "not a researcher." Some are uncomfortable simply opening boxes and taking pamphlets out because they have never been allowed to do this before. By contrast, others come equipped with a list of subject terms that they've used to search in their university's library, and they're upset that they can't sit down and search a computer to find exactly what they're looking for at IA. With regards to staffing, our all-volunteer structure means that the archive is staffed by people with diverse skill sets and subject knowledge. On any day, a visitor might interact with a volunteer who has a lot of experience working with zines, or a volunteer who has subject- or movement-specific knowledge. It's important to think about the impact staff knowledge and experience has on how visitors access the collection. Even in large institutional archives with highly accredited paid staff, there is a trade off between staff with subject expertise and staff with information science backgrounds.

By removing "gatekeepers" to access, we also remove transactional relationships that position our collection as a commodity.

For IA, an experiential method of relating to the collection has multiple benefits. It allows for more egalitarian relations with the space and material. By removing "gatekeepers" to access, we also remove transactional relationships that position our collection as a commodity. This moves closer to the original intent of the material in our collection: the cultural ephemera in IA's collection was made to be distributed for community

building and information sharing. Founder and volunteer Josh MacPhee explains that "the goal is not to lock this stuff away, but to keep it in circulation; if not physically circulating, intellectually circulating...It's not just about wanting to get a look at an old pamphlet. It's about coming and being able to talk to three other people about that old pamphlet" (Interview with V. Ordaz, November 2014).

Exhibitions and Programming: Creating Space for Experiential Learning

Our open stacks collection is meant to diversify the audience that engages with our material, but we recognize that many people think of archives as a space for people to do research. To counter this and make our material more available—and more obvious—to a larger audience, we focus on providing a platform for producing new information and communicating with a wider public by programming film screenings, panel discussions, and class visits. Our programming encourages critical and creative engagement with the histories of social movements and seeks to reach parts of our community that do not see themselves as "researchers" but whose life experience, work or education has historically been affected by the material and ideas represented in the IA collection.

Since 2011, IA has hosted four exhibitions each year, focusing on a variety of issues or tactics for social movement organizing. Regular events are held both to coincide with these exhibitions, as well as to highlight other issues, organizing work, and social movements. As a result of the volunteer nature of our organizing structure, each program is influenced and represented through the interest of the organizer. This brings a wide variety of perspectives and questions out of the collection.

We'd like to reflect further on how exhibitions and public programming at IA provide opportunities for experiential learning. Our exhibitions are as diverse thematically as our collection. These have showcased the Asian American Movement in New York in the 1970s; a comprehensive history of tenant organizing in New York City since the 1940s; the Havana, Cuba based Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America (OSPAAAL); and a look at the intersection of comics and identity politics, among others. Each exhibition is organized by a group of volunteer collaborators who comb the archive for related material in order to research, design, write, promote, and install each exhibition. IA exhibitions ask questions of the archival material that stem, in part, from the differing backgrounds or interests of the organizers.

The exhibition *Self-Determination: Inside/Out* (September - November 2014), organized by Molly Fair, Josh MacPhee, Anika Paris, Laura Whitehorn, and Ryan Wong, showcased a diverse selection of objects created for social action by incarcerated people and their allies. The materials in this exhibition included pamphlets, t-shirts, posters, and audio recordings. Laid out thematically, these materials depicted prison activism around AIDS education, political prisoners, incarcerated women, and LGBTQ people. The exhibition also depicted tactics such as hunger strikes,

smuggling audio testimony, and historical narratives such as the Attica Rebellion. All of this material came together in one space to create dialogue between the various pieces of ephemera about organizing tactics and issues in the past. This was achieved by presenting related and contrasting material adjacent to each other in the exhibition alongside textual commentary. This presentation was ultimately designed to educate about the past and stimulate conversation amongst exhibition visitors regarding these issues today.

The curators for *Self-Determination: Inside/Out* were comprised of a group with varying backgrounds and entry points to the material, including a former political prisoner, prisoner rights activists, as well as volunteers who were interested in learning more about these issues. As a result, curators and additional volunteers who helped with this show all had the opportunity to learn from each other, as each brought different knowledge and experience. This exhibition evolved out of personal interest from a few regular volunteers at IA who connected with IA supporters who also shared an interest in putting together an exhibition of archival material about prison organizing. These individuals brought their idea to the Core Collective (now the Admin Working Group) to propose the exhibition and address questions or concerns. Over the course of several months, the curators met regularly to comb the archive for relevant material, to discuss themes they wanted to highlight as well as themes brought to light by the archival material, and eventually they worked to finalize content and install the exhibition. Decisions about what material and themes to highlight developed out of careful conversations among the collaborative curators.

Alongside this exhibition, the curators organized a schedule of regular programming, which drew conversation out of the archival material and asked visitors to engage more deeply with the material on display. Events included a reading group discussion of James "Yaki" Sayles' *Meditations on Wretched of the Earth*; and a panel discussion with National Network for Immigrant & Refugee Rights (NNIRR), Families for Freedom, Black Alliance for Just Immigration, CUNY Prison Divest, Columbia Prison Divest, and Enlace which invited visitors to think about the role of private prisons in criminalization. Members of the New Jersey 4 visited to take part in a film screening and discussion of their criminalization. Beyond just looking at material on the walls, these programs provided clear entry points for discussion and continued conversation about the issues presented by archival material in the exhibition: reading group participants talked about current issues of incarceration, and event participants learned from current organizers how they can become involved in confronting these issues today.

Armed by Design: Posters and Publications of Cuba's Organization of Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (OSPAAAL) (September - November 2015) was conceived as an exhibition which could broach issues of solidarity in the past and today by looking at the posters and publications of the Cuba-based OSPAAAL. This exhibition was organized by Lani Hanna, Jen Hoyer, Josh MacPhee, Vero Ordaz, Joelle Rebeiz, and Sarah Seidman.

The work of this Havana-based group focused on building solidarity with liberation movements across the third-world and developing an identity for the anti-imperialist world. Bringing posters and publications together provided an opportunity to explore questions and topics related to OSPAAAL's work that are bypassed when this material is more commonly shown in contemporary art and design contexts which celebrate or critique the work for its aesthetic value. This exhibition re-presented the work in its political and historical context.

The curators of *Armed by Design* included regular archive volunteers, newer members of the volunteer community at IA, graphic design professionals, and scholars whose work focuses on Cuba and OSPAAAL. The idea for this exhibition was sparked by a major donation of OSPAAAL posters. The donor of this collection gave them to IA because of IA's access policy. He wanted members of the public to be able to look at these posters without any kind of institutional barriers. To honor this intent, volunteers at IA began discussing how an exhibition of these posters and other material generated by OSPAAAL could provide an ideal way for the public to learn about and interact with this donation.

As conversations about the exhibition expanded, a focus on the connection between graphic design and the changing aesthetics of solidarity work developed, it became evident that a political statement would not be necessary or relevant to the goal of the exhibition.

The curators met over the course of a year to have conversations about graphic design and solidarity, as well as about these issues specifically in the context of Cuba. By pulling out major questions from these curatorial discussions, the organizing committee developed themes for the exhibition -- such as the role of women in liberation movements, or the changing relationship between solidarity and armed struggle. The curators wrestled with whether the exhibition should take a stance on the current political situation in Cuba. As conversations about the exhibition expanded, a focus on the connection between graphic design and the changing aesthetics of solidarity work developed, it became evident that a political statement would not be necessary or relevant to the goal of the exhibition. The curators decided to allow the public to explore a variety of perspectives represented by the OSPAAAL design.

Related programming brought together groups of political artists and designers to host a discussion about doing solidarity work through art creation, including Avram Finkelstein, Dread Scott, and Kameelah Janan Rasheed, a screening of the work of Santiago Álvarez, a roundtable discussion on posters in the digital age, as well as a panel of organizing groups who have worked in solidarity with Cuba over the past five decades. Attendees at the latter

panel explained that they had come to the event because they wanted to learn more about how to engage with Cuban solidarity movements in today's political climate. Programming for this exhibition was designed both to reflect themes presented in the exhibition, and to foster conversations—such as how solidarity with Cuba specifically has changed since the height of OSPAAAL's work.

Additionally, because this exhibition focused on two types of material—posters and books—it gave visitors a way to think specifically about how these formats are useful as tools for organizing, how we learn from both printed material and graphic posters, and how we can implement these today as a tool for change. A bilingual exhibition catalog in the same format as OSPAAAL's regular *Tricontinental* journal publication gave visitors a tangible way of thinking about the information-as-solidarity tools that OSPAAAL produced.

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More than just a series of events and a collection of material on the walls, IA's exhibitions can serve as an introduction to accessing the physical collection. Many of our exhibitions start in the exhibition space and continue on the walls of the archive itself. A selection of exhibition material is available to be handled and further examined; when visitors can pick up exhibition material and begin to explore it, they ease into the experience of handling archival collections. Our exhibitions often represent a very small portion of relevant material, limited by the actual wall space available. Situating an exhibition of curated material alongside the broader collection encourages visitors to further explore questions and connections raised in by the exhibit, or begin a search on other issues and themes.

While a large percentage of IA's volunteer labor is directed at staffing and exhibitions, there is a strong focus on additional programming and education that supports creating access to the collection. Typical events include a recent film screening and skype conversation between local Black Lives Matters organizers and student protesters in South Africa; and a moderated discussion with local organizers who have taken part in and learned from Rojava's fight for democratic confederalism, gender equality, and ecology in the midst of the Syrian Civil War. This kind of programming utilizes the space at IA to incubate conversations in response to very recent events, and to give the audience a way to plug in with various communities or organizing groups. Depending on the event and our archival holdings, when possible we also pull related archival material to give attendees a clear way to integrate the movement they are learning about with

historical movements they may (or may not) already be aware of. All programming at IA is free and open to the public; requests to host events are often received from outside organizations and individuals. Determining whether an event will happen at IA necessitates evaluating requests against IA's event policy (available at interferencearchive.org/events-policy/) as well as the availability of volunteer labor to host events. As an all-volunteer archive, labor is a constant negotiation. We have found ourselves in situations where we were supportive of an event proposal but could not commit any volunteer availability in order to host it. We have learned that we need to be honest with ourselves about our capacity as volunteers.

Creating a new Classroom Experience at Interference Archive

Interference Archive is also a space for formal education. We host numerous class visits from local schools every year, including NYU Gallatin, Pratt, Hunter College, Brooklyn College, and Sunset Park High School. We also host groups of students from neighboring community organizations, such as Reelworks, YouthFX, Mobile Print Power, and Groundswell. Teachers bring their students to IA specifically because they cannot interact with the archival collection at their institution in the same way. This is usually because their institution's archives have not collected the types of material that IA collects, or because IA models an alternative classroom structure for participatory and experiential learning. Some teachers bring their class with the hope to discuss a specific movement or look at a specific type of material; others are more broadly interested in activism, design, and how social movements produce material to achieve their goals.

During these group visits, staffing volunteers try to pull material related to questions and themes being explored by the group, as well as set aside time during the visit for open exploration of the archive. This allows for variable discovery which may delve deeper into the issues that brought the group to visit IA in the first place. The type of material at IA also presents new questions for consideration. Ephemera, often lost from regular view in academia, is opened to discovery. Many students, as well as other visitors, don't have opportunity elsewhere for the level of interaction with archival material that allows for this kind of interpretation.

Several classes from various CUNY schools visited during the *We Won't Move* exhibition on tenant organizing in New York City. These students were learning about urban development, and more specifically gentrification, discrimination, and tenants' rights. IA's exhibition became a platform for these classes to actively engage with material that depicted the history of tenant rights, and several of the students returned to the archive for project-based research throughout the length of their course.

While professors are often drawn to IA because a current exhibition fits thematically with their course subject matter, teachers find the archive through other relationships or issues. A middle school class from a nearby

Brooklyn neighborhood came to look at political graphics, and an IA volunteer pointed the students towards several collections of posters that feature political design language and illustrate how it has developed over the last 50 years. The students then facilitated a discussion of the material and how it connects with current social justice movements, contemporary graphics like GIFs, and the use of material culture versus the internet.

The ability to handle the collection at IA provides room for critical thought that can arise from the physical state of objects, giving space to understand not only the primary "text" or message expressed, but the context of creation, the objects' creators, and where the objects were meant to be seen. Resulting discussions with students about the connections between movements and material have even become the foundation for public events hosted at the archive, like workshops and panels.

As an example, IA hosted a group of teens from Willie Mae Rock Camp for Girls (WMRC) who were exploring arts and activism through audio during the 2015 exhibition *if a song could be freedom...Organized sounds of Resistance*. Each teen was creating a podcast about issues they had selected as important, and they visited Interference Archive to learn from how this exhibition presented music as a tool for political organizing. Visual, textual, and audio elements helped the teens connect the role of music in political movements. They viewed album artwork alongside liner notes, lyrics, flyers, magazines and zines, and also made use of the exhibition's listening station. The WMRC participants were presented with perspectives they had not yet considered, opening a discussion that linked the work of previous generations to the contemporary issues they were asking questions about on their podcasts. While the visit was meant to provide the teens with inspiration, the conversations that ensued led to an event at IA showcasing their podcast projects. These included a survey of music of the Black Lives Matter movement, dispatches from young women in roller derby training camp, and conversations with women of color about music and activism. The audience for this event included other teens and adults connected to the WMRC program, as well as family and friends, members of the IA community, as well as the general public.

IA is able to expand the dimensions of the classroom through its open stacks access to diverse collections. Our priority on collection use and audience engagement provides educators and students a chance to participate, in its broadest sense, with public scholarship. Access to the materials and ideas contained in IA's collection, as well as the opportunity to shape IA's programming, provides space to ask new questions and apply skills and knowledge gained in the classroom. This shift allows for inquiry beyond the boundaries found in traditional academic settings.

Conclusion

The access policy of Interference Archive, grounded in an open stacks policy and experiential learning, lays a foundation for education and mobilization. The examples above are a very small selection of the range of programming and direct educational support that we develop out of the ideas represented by material in our archival collection. By reflecting specifically on the access policy and educational programming at IA, we've explored one facet of how an archival access policy can impact education. At IA, our access policy is apparent in the ways that we prioritize volunteer labor to maintain open hours so visitors can explore our collection, in addition to our efforts towards exhibitions and programming that develop critical and creative engagement around the histories of social movements.

Returning to core issues of access in archives and how an access policy can impact education, we come to the intertwined issues of archives, access, and politics. The politics of any archive is rooted in power (Pell 40). Archives are places of control: archivists make decisions about what to collect, how to organize it, and how to provide access to it. By doing so they are making decisions about what history should be privileged above others, who has the skill to describe that history, and who has the right to access and learn from history. A desire to give power rather than keep it is implicit in this core part of IA's mission, and is at the core of IA's focus on access. If the politics of an archive is power over historical narrative, IA's politics is that information, as a tool for power, be put into the hands of the people it represents.

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