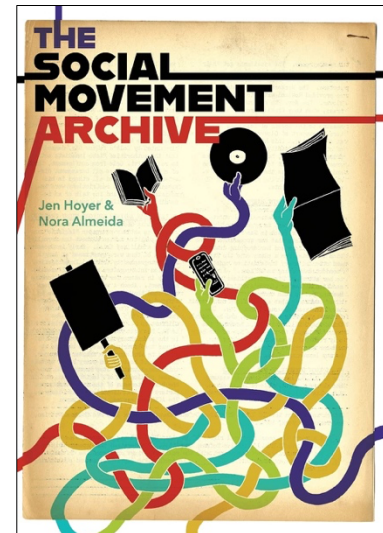


Jen Hoyer and Nora Almeida, **The Social Movement Archive**, Sacramento, CA: Litwin, 2021, 244 pp., \$55.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Benjamin Heim Shepard
New York School of Technology
City University of New York

Hurricane Ida visited us a few days ago, pouring through the cracks, leaving water in our Brooklyn basement after the flood. Cleaning up the mess the next day, I found myself digging through moldy paper sharks we'd ridden with the bike block during the People's Climate March of September 2014, as well as a few book blocks we'd made at the Interference Archive during our campaign to keep developers from turning the Mid-Manhattan Library into a condominium the previous year. I ended up leaving these moldy treasures on the sidewalk to be recycled. Looking at the damaged materials from campaigns past, I found myself thinking about the pieces of social movement ephemera that just disappear, my tapes of interviews damaged, some lost, others sitting in a dusty corner in my office.



Movements thrive to the extent that they build on past struggles, connecting current campaigns toward a livable future. Along the way, materials and zines are produced, dispersed, collected, saved, and lost. Even then, they inspire new movements. The best of these campaigns look like a garden, says my friend L. A. Kauffman, full of color and flowers, ideas and abundance. They also build on images and iconography handed down. Some we hold onto, others we discard. Some disappear. Which of all the boxes of book blocks, movement notes, flyers, and ephemera are worth preserving?

Enter Jen Hoyer and Nora Almeida—educators and librarians, writers and volunteers at Brooklyn's Interference Archive, movement collaborators, organizers of events like the prop making for the book block—and their thrilling new book. With ***The Social Movement Archive***, they ask:

What would happen if we start with a critical consideration of archiving that doesn't place the archive or the archivist at its center? What if instead, we begin with material and movements and then ask ourselves: what is the use of archiving this? Who is this archive for? (p. 5)

The Social Movement Archive is comprised of 15 interviews with activists and artists involved in struggles around women's liberation, disability rights, housing justice, Black liberation, antiwar, Indigenous sovereignty, immigrant rights, and prisoner abolition, among others. Flipping through the colorful book, the second page includes a striking black-and-white image of bodies being pushed away, under the caption, "Capitalism Breaks My Heart, Stop Evictions." Another caption under the Pink Bloque declares: "Dancing is Dissent" (p. 5). The *Social Movement Archive* excavates current and historic movement campaigns, through art, agitprop, zines, banners, stickers, posters, and memes, and explores the role of cultural production

Copyright © 2022 (Benjamin Heim Shepard, benshepard@mindspring.com). Licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial No Derivatives (by-nc-nd). Available at <http://ijoc.org>.

within social movements and archives. The book highlights the capacity of political art to transform practices, places, and understandings, pointing us toward new encounters with our worlds, history, gender, planet, and even ourselves, filling gaps in knowledge about lives and cultures, movements, and histories of ideas.

Much like Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston's (1990) *AIDS Demographics, The Social Movement Archive* combines images from movements and stories about what these images mean through the overlapping perspectives of activists, artists, designers, and archivists.

Standout sections address the work of Decolonize This Place and the Environmental Performance Agency. Hoyer and Almeida are asking activists directly about what it means to archive their work. Important additions include the performance-based groups Pink Bloque and the Environmental Performance Agency, as performance is particularly difficult to think about from the perspective of archives.

Movement scholarship depends on historic materials. Researching book after book, I have been grateful to see old boxes reveal treasures and lessons from movements that changed lives. There is nothing quite like discovering a lost treasure, an old letter, revealing a secret. The question is: What materials are available? This is contested space. After all, knowledge is fraught. It opens space; it enlightens. It unsettles. No text or piece of art exists in a vacuum. Social forces impact what we see and how we see them. Nothing is neutral in an archive; holding is reserved, questions about what disappears, what is selected to be remembered, and what is hidden away without access have everything do with politics. Umberto Eco (2004) makes this point in *The Name of the Rose*. In *In the Freud Archives*, Janet Malcolm (1983) traces stories of the legal battles over access the founder of psychoanalysis's often-contradictory letters, embracing and rejecting seduction theory, tracing episodes of drug use, revision, and confession. In *Artwash: Big Oil and the Arts*, Mel Evans (2015) suggests that liberating the museum from the toxic relationship between funders and the producers of art involves unpacking layers of history, including colonial influences. Decolonizing involves deconstructing and dismantling while finding new spaces for art and history and memory.

Movements open space for agency. In their introduction, Hoyer and Almeida quote from Karen Barad's (2003) article, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter":

"Particular possibilities for acting exist at every moment, and these changing possibilities entail a responsibility to intervene in the world's becoming, to contest and reward what matters and what is excluded from mattering. (p. 827)

Writing about the "uncommon and unreplaceable space" that is an archive, Hoyer and Almeida posit: "Archives can reconcile their priorities with the needs of the communities who use them and contribute to them" (p. 9), "archives can be transparent about their role and their practices" (p. 9), "archives can allow the materials they collect to shift their practices" (p. 10), "archives can and must negotiate change" (p. 11), "scarcity and precarity are issues that archives share with social movements" (p. 11), and "archives can reconcile their priorities with the needs of the communities who use them and contribute to them" (p. 9).

Their interviews seem to produce more questions than answers, the authors confess, acknowledging the sometimes contradictory messages, allowing for complexity instead of prescription: "We hope, then, that this book will complicate the perspectives and assumptions we bring to archival conversations and preserve, in ways that are both illuminating and fraught, some of the paradoxes and challenges that archivists grapple with" (p. 13).

Students of, and participants in, social movements will be inspired by this work. It should be widely read by archivists and librarians, movements people and historians, anyone interested in what should be saved, what can be learned from social movement actions and archives.

After all, how do we know what we know? Usually from history, some of which is lost. Recall that *Friendship and Freedom* was the name of the first gay rights periodical in the United States. Its founder, Henry Gerber, formed the Society for Human Rights in Chicago in 1924 and later lost his job with the postal service. When he was arrested, all his journals were confiscated along with issues of *Friendship and Freedom*. Although only two issues of the publication were produced, one found its way into the hands of Magnus Hirschfeld, the noted German sexologist, whose institute and all its files were subsequently burned to the ground by the Nazis on May 6, 1933. Courts eventually called for the return of Gerber's files, yet only his typewriter was turned in. All else was lost.

"Perhaps they are somewhere, lost in a police archive," I wonder, speaking with historian Neil Katz.

If only a few copies found their way into a social movement archive. Without such archives, manuscripts and flyers, artwork and meeting minutes, arrest records and journals from jail support, plays and poems, vast histories of ideas, ways of living, and questions disappear.

References

- Barad, K. (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28(3), 801–831. <https://doi.org/10.1086/345321>
- Crimp, D., & Rolston, A. (1990). *AIDS demographics*. Seattle, WA: Bay.
- Eco, U. (2004). *The name of the rose*. London, UK: Vintage.
- Evans, M. (2015). *Artwash: Big oil and the arts*. London, UK: Pluto.
- Malcolm, J. (1983). *In the Freud archives*. New York, NY: Knopf.