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More Than Just Cataloging, In Three Acts: Reflections

by Adrian Applin, Regina Carra, and Sarah Nguyễn

Abstract

This article contains proceedings from a performance-presentation at the 2021 LACUNY Institute called “More Than Just Cataloging, In Three Acts.” It features three performing artist-librarians, showcasing dance, music, and theatre while reflecting on connections between the performing arts and the information professions. Accompanying performance footage shared at the Institute is referenced in this article.

Keywords

Archives, performing arts, socially engaged arts, oral history, engagement, librarians

Author Biographies

Adrian Applin is a recent graduate of the University of Washington’s MLIS program. He is currently the artist-in-residence for Uncaged Library Productions, a SF Bay Area-based organization that produces collaborative music, theater, film, and data that highlights the struggles and victories of LGBTQ people and people of color.

Regina Carra is the Rapaport Archivist at the American Folk Art Museum. She is also an independent researcher studying the history of libraries, archives, and museums. Her scholarship has been published in *Slavic & East European Information Resources*. She holds a MA in History and a MLS from Queens College—CUNY.

Sarah Nguyễn researches information disorder about science communication and non-English diasporic sociotechnical contexts, information infrastructures around crises, and mixed research methods. Previously, they contributed to programs advocating for openness of information, dance preservation, and the preservation of at-risk media. She is a PhD student at the University of Washington Information School, and a movement practitioner with experience in performance, choreography, and improvisation.

Introduction

Librarians can be activators of collections, facilitators of creative expression, and catalysts for social change. At the 2021 LACUNY Institute, the authors endeavored

to prove this point by performing rather than talking, in keeping with the theme of the conference “Ending the Library Stereotype.” This article follows a similar format to that presentation and provides references and links to the performance footage shared during the Institute under the heading “Supplementary Materials and Performance Videos” at the end of this article. This article is divided into three “acts,” each featuring the perspective and voice of an information professional working at the intersection of librarianship and the performing arts. In Act 1 “It Happens: Creating as a Librarian,” Regina Carra writes about her collaboration with Sarah Nguyễn to activate oral history through performance and reflects on how her creative work supports her career as an archivist. Act Two “Activating the Space Through Performance,” features Nguyễn’s account of her work to facilitate collaboration between information professionals and community artists to creatively activate under-utilized library spaces. In the last act, Act Three “Octavia of the Earth” Adrian Applin describes his work with Uncaged Library Productions and presents a case where librarians are artists rather than simply information facilitators, highlighting the unique perspectives information professionals bring to creative work and their collaborations within library spaces. Showcasing original dance, music, theatre, and perspective, the authors hope this article will illuminate the potential for reimagining existing library spaces, resources, collections, and communities, particularly to promote the performing arts.

Act I - It Happens: Creating as a librarian

By Regina Carra

In 2019, *It Happens* originated an idea for Sarah Nguyễn and I to perform an archives-inspired dance work at a boat-themed variety show. At the time, we were co-workers at the Mark Morris Dance Group Archives. Long story short, due to a few cancellations—including the boat-themed variety show and, a few months later, a world-wide pandemic—the 2021 virtual LACUNY Institute became our first opportunity to present this piece to an audience. Preparing, presenting, and performing *It Happens* (through pre-recorded video on Zoom) was a rewarding experience in and of itself. The piece is a dance to spoken word, with the text derived from an oral history given by Gabriel “Gabe” Frank for the American Merchant Marine Oral History Project in 2011. Through the process of creating the piece, I learned about the United States Merchant Marines, the difficult and sometimes dangerous work involved in being a merchant mariner, and Frank’s life and legacy. Additionally, this experience helped me reflect on the ways in which being an artist and content creator enhances my professional practice as an archivist.

We were motivated to compose a dance to oral history by the opportunity to explore, enhance, and reimagine Frank’s embodied expression through performance. Many scholars, including dance theorist and oral historian Jeff Freidman, have written about oral history as a practice and source comprised of “layers of meaning,” which

include not only the content or text of a narrator's story, but also the expression of their voice and body language within the overall performance of their conversation with the interviewer ([Friedman, 2014, p. 291](#)). The format of the interview and the method of archival access, however, can flatten or erase these "layers" of evidence, leaving the researcher with only a partial picture of the narrator. For example, an audio-only oral history does not document the appearance of the narrator nor the physical expression they use when telling their story, such as whether someone "talks with their hands" or is visibly stressed when remembering a particularly difficult time in their lives. Furthermore, some researchers only encounter oral history through a text-based transcript, which does not afford the opportunity of hearing the vibration of the vocal cords and the emphasis that the narrator gives to their voice to shape the story they are telling. With this critique in mind, we sought to explore the insights that could be gained from Frank's audio oral history by focusing on the body as a tool for retelling his story.

We started by conducting background research on the Merchant Marines and Frank's life and work. The U.S. Merchant Marine comprises civilian mariners who transport goods and services around the globe. The U.S. Merchant Marine Act of 1936 established training stations for mariners in New York City, and consolidated control over the transportation of foreign commerce as well as soldiers, weapons, and supplies for the benefit of national defense during times of war ([Mekonen & Mekonen, 2018](#)). During World War II, the Merchant Marine played a critical role in the war effort, ensuring that frontline troops had the resources they needed to succeed. The frontlines, however, came to the Merchant Marines as the Axis Powers recognized that targeting supply lines disrupted the coordination of the Allied war effort. Consequently, the Merchant Marines suffered a casualty rate of over 1 in 26, higher than any branch in the military during World War II. In total, an estimated 8,300 merchant mariners were killed and approximately 12,000 more were wounded ([Thayer, 2020](#)). Despite this service and sacrifice, merchant mariners were not afforded the privileges of military veterans. They were not initially included in the 1944 G.I. Bill, which provided health services, financial benefits, educational opportunities to millions of veterans. Starting in 1988, after decades of protest, merchant mariners received Veteran status and were afforded the benefits extended to veterans at the time, however, World War II merchant mariners were not retroactively compensated for the nearly 40 years in which they were denied these benefits by the U.S. government. Their protest for these benefits continues today ([American Merchant Marine Veterans, n.d.](#)).

Gabriel Frank grew up in New York City, where he had a difficult childhood and adolescence living with his younger brother in various foster care and group homes. In 1944, he heard a radio advertisement calling on young men to enlist in the Merchant Marine to support the war effort. Frank, then only sixteen years old, enlisted ([Thayer, 2020](#)). The Merchant Marine gave him purpose and direction as a young man and later as an adult. Between 1945-1968, Frank sailed the world as a merchant mariner and, in that time, served his country during two conflicts, World

War II and the Korean War ([American Folklife Center, n.d.](#)). Upon returning to New York, he worked at the Seamen's Church Institute and became a tireless advocate in the cause to achieve proper recognition and compensation for merchant mariners who served in World War II. He passed away in 2020, a very much beloved member of the merchant mariner community. As Johnathan Thayer, the interviewer of Frank's interview, recalled following his death, "He was a scrappy kid from the Lower East Side, a sailor in times of war and peace, an unstoppable advocate for merchant mariners, and my friend since the moment we met" ([Thayer, 2020](#)).

It Happens features a unique and strikingly poetic section of Frank's interview. It is one of the few instances in Frank's interview in which he discusses hijinks on board the ship. The clip begins with Frank sharing his belief that the Merchant Marines was "the best life I had," followed by several short stories featuring extraordinarily harrowing, near-death experiences for Frank and his fellow seamen. Frank punctuates each of these stories, though, with the refrain "things happen." The result is a very rhythmic recollection, rolling in similar motion to the waves that Frank would have experienced on the open ocean. The listener is rocked back and forth between Frank's memory of events and his perspective that these experiences are just part of the life of a merchant mariner.

For the piece, Sarah and I decided to make Frank's narrative motion the quality we would replicate from his oral history rather than try to imitate Frank's voice, movement, and physical presence. I recorded the audio first after transcribing the words and editing the chosen section of Frank's oral history into a succinct five minutes' worth of text. As I was reciting Frank's words, I did not try to mimic his voice, but rather adopt his emphasis and style into my own performance. Like Frank, I was more animated as I was reciting his stories, and softer in my tone in the more reflective refrain. Likewise, Sarah used dance and video editing to choreograph Frank's oral history and represent his story-telling motion. Using a stony, Seattle-area beach as her backdrop (an homage to the sea), Sarah represented Frank's memories of dangerous adventures as a young merchant marine through dance and his "things happen" reflections as an older man with her feet walking on the beach. In time with my recitation of Frank's story, she spliced her dance footage with her walking footage to create *It Happens*.

The results of this project extend beyond the *It Happens* video, now archived and publicly available on the Internet Archive. I believe the process of creating the piece helped Sarah and I focus on Frank's oral history more intently and communicate his story through dance performance. While our focus on the body did not necessarily yield new insights on Frank as a person, the work involved in researching, listening, relistening, and thinking about our artistic expression led us to recognize the uniqueness of Frank's life experience and presence as distinct from our own. As an archivist, it reminded me of the power of archives to create connections and promote empathy between people. To be sure, I know this power and have seen it

firsthand, but, I admit, it is easy to take this quality for granted when dealing with the daily work of managing archives.

Information professionals should support and encourage each other in their creative pursuits and hobbies because, not only do they contribute to our mental, physical, and spiritual health ([Spencer, 2013](#)), they influence how we interact with researchers and construct the programs that go on in our spaces, as both Sarah and Adrian will discuss below. I write this with some reservation, because I do not think it is healthy for someone to view every activity they do through the lens of work and career. In fact, librarians and archivists are often stereotyped as being excessively devoted to their work and to the sanctity of the library as an institution. Considering Fobazi Ettarh's scholarship on the prevalence of this obedience and "vocational awe" in librarianship, one could argue that information professionals help to perpetuate this stereotype ([Ettarh, 2018](#)). Still, I think it is important to use our creative pursuits in a constructive and empowering way that helps us recognize the skills that make each of us unique, creative, and valuable information professionals.

Act II - Activating the Space Through Performance

By Sarah Nguyễn

In *Act II*, I recount an evening-length event as an example of reimagining physical library and archives spaces as hosts to creating and presenting artistic endeavors. As former and current practicing performers, we, the authors, have faced barrier-to-entry when engaging our artistic practices with historical and cultural institutional spaces, but now, as practicing librarians and archivists, we have come to realize that there is a lack of discourse around this barrier-to-entry in engaging with these public-serving community spaces and collections. In this section, I will review programming for an evening art exhibition and performance, titled *Don't Ask My Age of Aquarius*. I situate the series of events in relation to select relevant literature that provide specific examples of how librarians and archivists can realistically play a role in engaging with community artists and lower this "walled-garden" to create space and time for, with, and by community creators, producers, and creatives.

Administrative and technical event logistics

Don't Ask My Age of Aquarius was an opening reception held on January 31, 2019, consisting of a curated collection of multimedia visual art pieces and an evening-length performance of music and dance, hosted at the Metropolitan New York Library Council (Metro) space in Hell's Kitchen, New York City. I curated and produced this event in response to my time working, collaborating, and engaging with Metro's member community. I was motivated to make use of the potential in Metro's physical office, conference, laboratory, and kitchen spaces in conjunction

with membership communities' vibrancy and appreciation for arts, culture, and exchange. This particular event was inspired by the likes of New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center's Bruno Walter Auditorium and Amsterdam room, as a prime example of formalized spaces and programming that dedicates the presentation of the library's collections to be embodied and performed for public enjoyment.

The physical space and bandwidth to run consistent arts and culture programming is expensive in monetary and human labor bandwidth. *Don't Ask My Age of Aquarius* (hereafter referred to as *Aquarius*) was an experiment in designing and prototyping a different type of community-centered event—as evidence of small-scale programming that advocates for collaborations between artists and information professionals. Glassman, et al (2017) discusses engagement between the university's art department and students as a space of experiential learning and fine arts pedagogical space in a chapter within *The Handbook of Art and Design Librarianship*, but as they mention, their program is limited to two-dimensional works and the engagement only considers people who are already engaged with the art domain. We are interested in activating alternative spaces, particularly library spaces, through performance, allowing performers of all kinds to reach new audiences.

In this case, the majority of the planning happened between the artists and me. Fortunately, I met all of the artists through my work at the public and private library and archival institutions while I was finishing my MLIS. I will review the artistic roster in the following sections. Once the line-up was settled, I began the outreach campaign and worked with Metro administrative staff to design the space. Since this was a pilot event, outreach was done through mostly grassroots efforts. First, I created an image-centric flier with basic event information: title of event, date, start times, URL to RSVP, name of featured artists and address of Metro's location. See Figure 1 for the flier image. The image used in the flier was my attempt to provide an imagery of movement, flow, nature, and reflection. These are qualities that I intentionally wanted to bring into the Metro, library, and archives space to convey that this event would be inviting and artistic despite being located in an office setting.

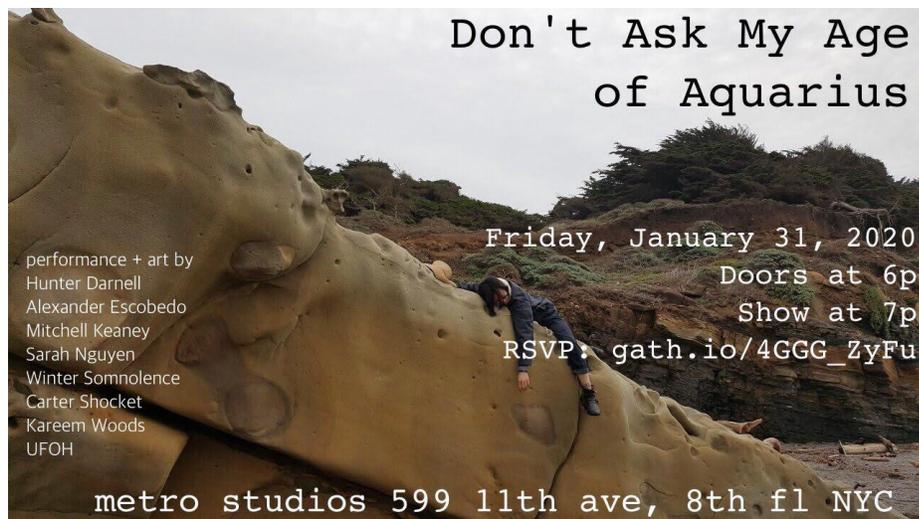


Figure 1. Image of the event flier that was distributed during outreach.

This flier was distributed through email, social media, and word of mouth from myself, the artists, and Metro’s monthly email newsletter. The one external listserv that promoted the event to the wider general public was an event listing resource specific to “independent art, weird events, strange happenings, unique parties, and senseless culture in New York City,” known as Nonsense NYC. As a pilot event, I expected to have the audience include no more than 35 people in order to hold a certain level of control (i.e., manageable foot traffic, noise levels, intimate social engagements, and cleanliness of space). This was crucial since Metro was still an active digital preservation media lab with delicate and rare digitization equipment that I wanted to display during the event but not get tampered with by visitors.

The audience included a diversity of New York City locals, not exclusive to librarians and archivists. While one goal was to engage with practicing librarians and archivists to inspire similar events in their own institutions, I am also interested in engaging with people outside of the information profession. This is an effort to debunk the myth of the stereotypical librarian and archivist, and reimagine the spaces that information professionals are usually associated with. By hosting an event open to artists and art appreciators, I envisioned this event could open up the general public’s perception of how they can engage with libraries and archives, from the physical space, to the available resources, to the people and community within. Such as community support in arts and culture as seen through the pilot funding approach. Admission to the event was donation-based and all proceeds were distributed among the seven artists (see Figure 2).

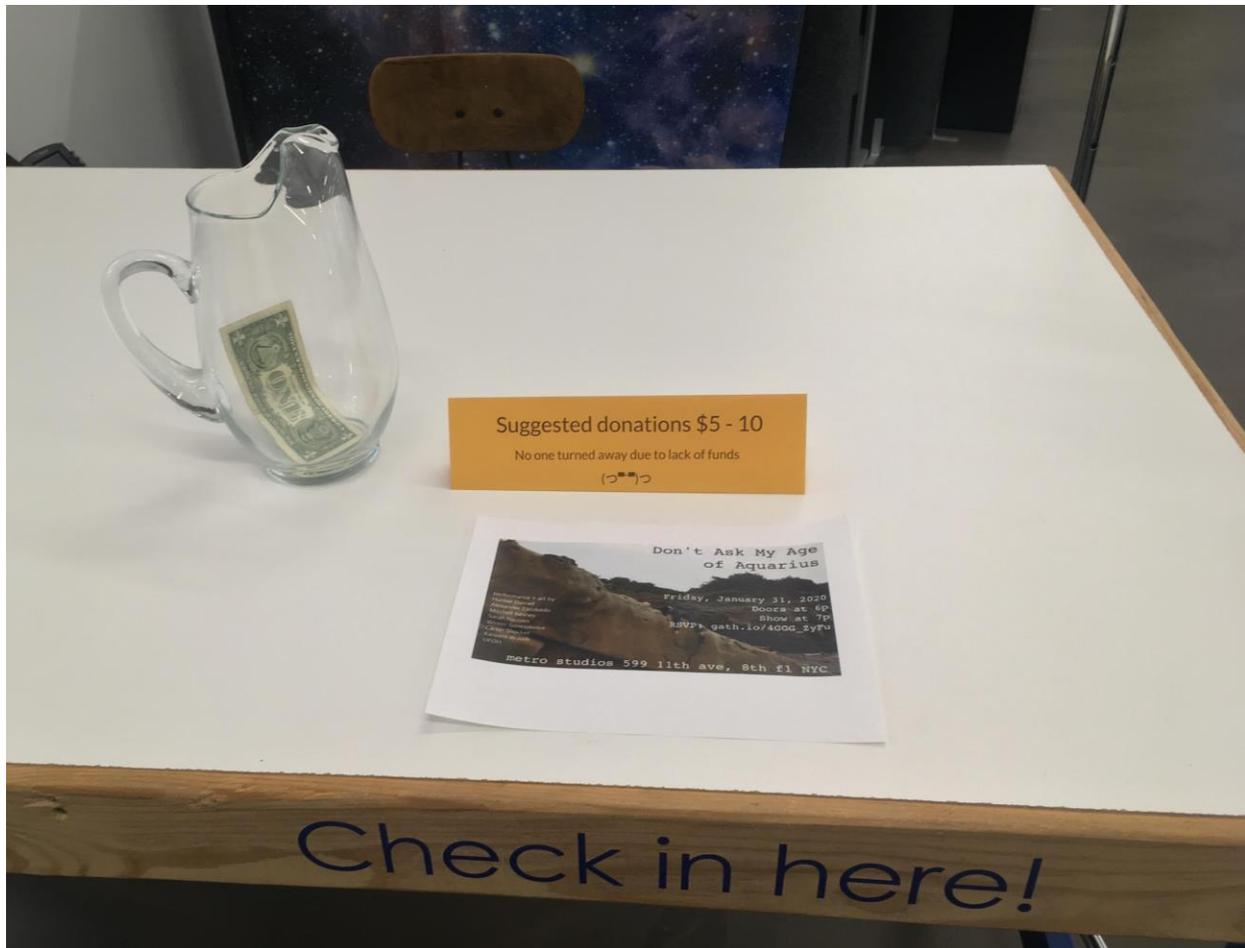


Figure 2. Donation jar was placed near the entrance where visitors were greeted for coat check and further information of the space. Here is the simple flier, signage, and donation jar.

During the marketing and outreach campaign, I collaborated with Metro staff to design the layout of the space in preparation for artwork gazing and audience socializing flow. We considered three major areas: the main conference meeting room, the kitchen, and the digital preservation area/blank wall. We intentionally closed off the open office desk area and smaller conference rooms with coat hanging racks to prevent visitors from wandering into those areas. See Figure 3 for photos of the performance and visual art spaces.

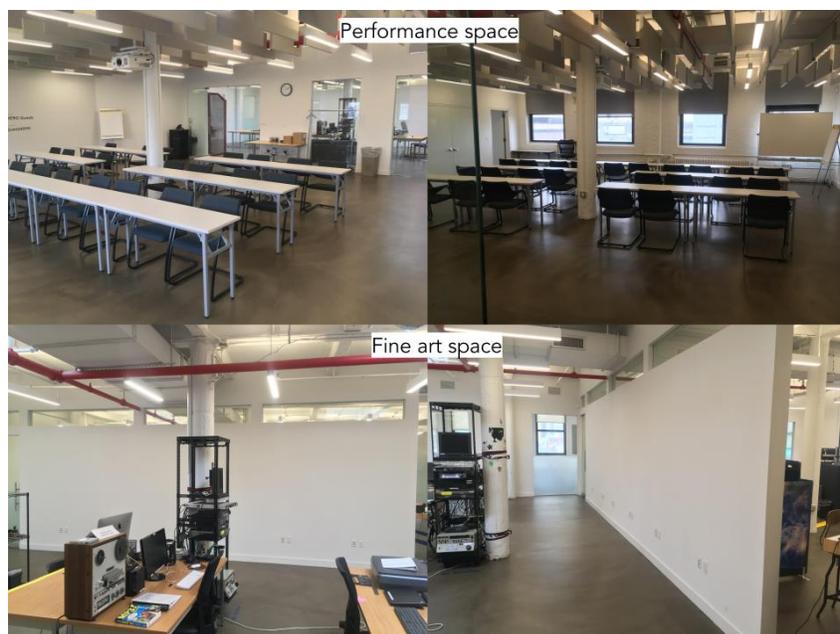


Figure 3. A collage of Metro’s studio in 2019 - early 2020. While this space is no longer available, we rearranged seating for a traditional proscenium audience-performance view and used the blank wall for hanging and projecting visual art pieces.

This form of programming with cultural institutions is not a novel idea, but we believe it is important to continue to highlight the range of possibilities that diversify the ways which visitors, guests, community members can engage with the spaces and collections that librarians and archivists manage. With the logistics of the space and communication set up, I will review through the engagements, relationships, and creative works with the artists in the following section.

Art exhibition and live performances

My intentions with *Aquarius* were to provide space and support for traditionally marginalized artists in a setting full of information, resources, and excitement to engage the community with these assets—libraries, archives, and cultural heritage institutions. This was inspired by Carbone’s (2016) research and collaborations artists-in-residence with City of Portland Archives and Records Center and is a key example of the impactful ways archival records can “evoke bodily shifts – corporeal, emotional or cognitive reactions (sensations, feelings, thoughts) in those that engage with them – reactions (effects).” She details the programming of providing artists-in-residence the accessibilities of library and archives resources and the importance of “creat[ing] new spaces for meaning-making[...] and in doing so generates new sociabilities and possibilities between the past, present and future” (Carbone, 2017). For *Aquarius*, I recruited three visual artists, three dancers, and two musicians, a total of eight early-career artists living and working in the New York City tri-state area. This non-traditional exhibition and performance space was

meant to represent a low-pressure commitment to experimenting and sharing their works but in an environment that administratively supports and evokes the caliber of, capital A, art seen in Metro's membership organizations, such as Museum of Modern Art, New York Public Library, Pratt Institute, and many more.

As I collaborated with each artist in preparation for the event, I walked them through the protocols that they could expect if they were to have their own works included in a library or archives collection. Each artist was offered time with the space, prior to the day of the event, as well as promised still and/or moving image footage of their piece(s). The image documentation required that each artist sign a release form that provided Metro with full access to use the imagery for their own promotional purposes, as well as the artists to use the imagery at their discretion. The agreement also required that all parties were required to credit the generous, volunteer photographer.

Each visual artist was given wall space to display their works, and two weeks to install their works on the wall. One of the artists, Alex Escobedo, opted for a series of framed paintings which required minimal time to install onto their portion of the wall. The second artist, Carter Shocket, shared a series of watercolors, a poem, and a chart, which similarly did not require much installation time but there was more attention paid to the technology and placement of the delicate and unframed pieces. The third artist, Winter Somnolence, created an intermedia piece that consisted of visual projections, poetry text, cotton, framed images, and sand—this required two 3-hour sessions to install the work onto their section of the wall. Next to each work was a small label pasted to the wall with metadata of the artist name, year the piece was created, title of piece, and materials used. See Figure 4 for a sample of the visual art pieces.

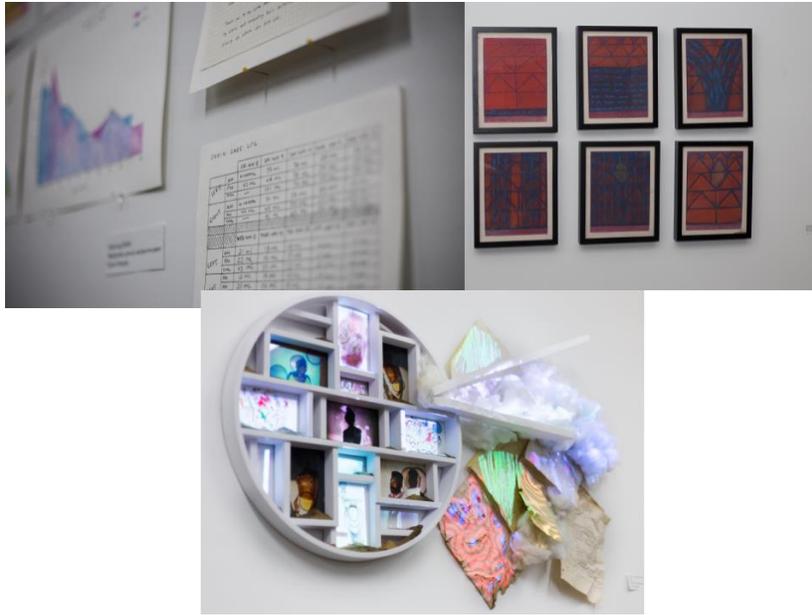


Figure 4. Three artworks by three different artists were displayed on the blank white wall of Metro’s digital preservation space. Upper left is by Shocket, upper right is by Escobedo, and bottom middle is by Somnolence. Photography by Hannah Long.

The artists were educated about Metro as an organization and how the space was traditionally used. This lesson was meant to inspire the artists to contribute their creations that resonated with their reactions to the library and archival contexts. Escobedo’s series of six paintings of pastel on paper is titled “Floods”, originating from an ongoing series of dreams and memories. Shocket’s piece included four watercolor paintings of graphs and two handwritten ink on paper documents. This is titled “Drain Log” as a form of memory work to document his experience post-top surgery. Somnolence’s piece is titled “on break ups, memory, archives, data, and a burning question”, using mixed media and projection mapping.

Part two of the event consisted of dancers and musicians. The artists were given a pre-scheduled one-hour rehearsal time in the performance space prior to the event date and measurements of the space. They were required to submit their audio file prior to the event for sound check. Musicians were given technical specifications of the sound board to ensure their own instruments were compatible with Metro’s audio set up. The dancers, myself, Hunter Darnell, and Kareem Woods, used this space to perform work-in-progress pieces. See Figure 5 for still images from each dance.



Figure 5. Still images from each dance performance. Dancers from left to right: Nguyễn, Darnell, and Woods. Photography by Hannah Long.

The first piece was created in collaboration between myself and musician Mitchell Keaney (see Figure 5), titled “a conversation to get comfortable”, which we both improvised under the prompt of minimal movements and sounds that built up to a groove beat by the end of 20 minutes (see Supplementary Materials for full video). This was a novel exploration for myself as I incorporated contemporary and hip-hop styles into one piece. Darnell was second and performed their contemporary solo work titled, “We Always Stray,” visiting themes of gender identity and familial ties throughout improvisation movement to one instrumental music track. Woods was the third performer, who created his own mix of four different songs into one contemporary hip hop piece titled, “Virulent Virgo.” He experimented his hip hop movement style with rock music throughout his choreography. The last performer was DJ UFOH (see Figure 6), who mixed groove music throughout the event, encouraging good mood vibes as people mingled, enjoyed the art pieces, and learned about Metro and its member organization.

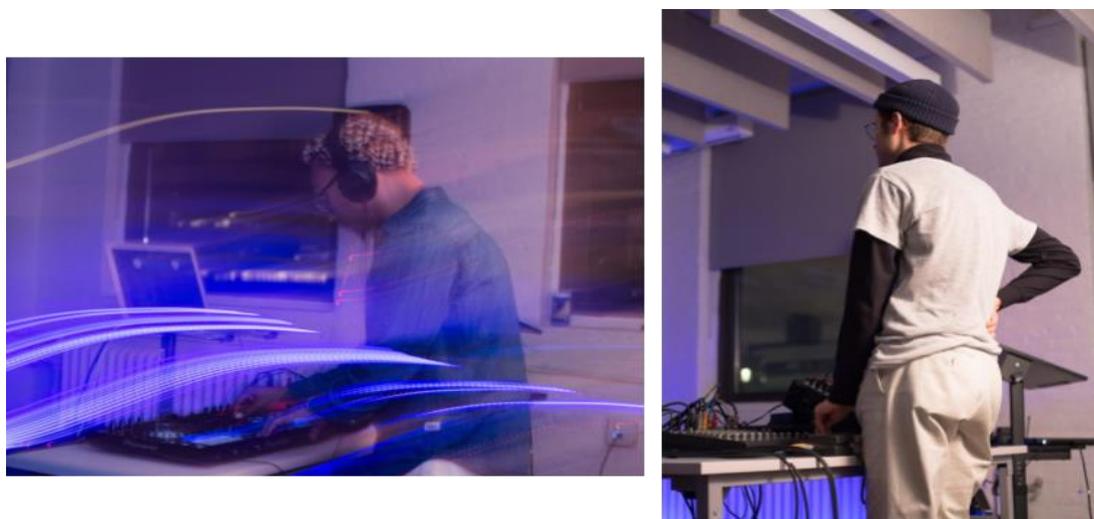


Figure 6. Still images of (from left to right) DJ UFOH, and musician Mitchell Keaney. Photography by Hannah Long.

These experimental pieces that brought up themes of intimacy, vulnerability, identity, and cross-cultural mixes were encouraged as we reimagine the third space, our libraries and archives, as resources to be activated for, by, and with community creatives. The accessibility for artists to test new material can address our need to incorporate empathy and embodiment to our daily lives and pedagogical practice. This is particularly important as I intentionally selected artists who identify with communities who have been traditionally marginalized, whether that is from race, gender, class, sex, etc.

Reimagining the future of space

The success from the event was clear from the headcount of more than 60 audience members and donations enough to compensate each artist enough for almost eleven MTA subway rides (as of 2021, NYC subway rides are \$2.75 for most riders). With that, I began to strategize with Metro staff to organize ongoing programming, such as artist residencies or monthly salons, to continue the momentum of recreating Metro's space to be open and supportive for a community of marginalized identities through performances, exhibits, demonstrations, cultural gatherings, etc. Besides the obvious benefits for artists and community members (e.g., space and time to create their own work, support to understand library and archives resources like digital preservation, representation in a safe and open space), there were also potential positive benefits to expand Metro's membership and community outreach, as well (e.g., resources for librarians/archivists to provide stable community initiatives, personal archiving workflows, inspiration from artists' marginalized stories, etc.). The COVID-19 pandemic prevented any further movement on the residencies, and we are aware that this can be seen to be a hurdle given the many hats that librarians and archivists already wear, but there is still potential in other future spaces and within new communities.

In Act II, we presented a partnership with the Metropolitan New York Library Council and their resources to provide a low barrier to entry for community artists and spectators—thus a performance and visual art exhibition and motivation was born.

Act III - Octavia of the Earth

By Adrian Applin

Octavia of Earth and Uncaged Library Productions: Archives and the librarian-as-artist

Octavia of Earth is a biographical musical about the life of sci-fi writer and “mother of Afrofuturism” Octavia E. Butler. It is the flagship program of Uncaged Library Productions, (ULP) an Oakland, CA based organization that produces collaborative music, theater, film, and data projects, with a particular focus on lifting up the

voices of queer people, people of color, and other marginalized groups. There has been a renewed interest in Butler's work after the 2016 Presidential election, with numerous articles being written in publications like the New Yorker ([Aguirre, 2017](#)) and the New York Times ([Kearse, 2021](#)). In her *Parable* series (published in the late 1990s), Butler writes about the rise of an authoritarian demagogue who uses the slogan "make America great again" ([Butler, 1998](#), pg. 24). In 2020, Butler made the New York Times Best Sellers' List for the first time ([George, 2021](#)). Though there have been no television or film adaptations of Butler's work to date, in just the past few years work has begun on six major studio projects ([Schaub, 2021](#)). Butler's prescience about the political, economic, social, environmental struggles of our times has caused her work to resonate with many people. But while there is much discussion of her work, not as much is known about her as a person. *Octavia of Earth* was created to show her more human side.

I first got involved with the production back in 2017 when I was tapped to sing the lead role of Octavia Butler on studio recordings of the first few songs written for the show. Since then, my work on *Octavia of Earth* led to me becoming a board member and the artist-in-residence for ULP. *Octavia of Earth* and ULP show how librarians, archivists, and other information professionals are not just facilitators of creativity, but can also be practitioners whose work is informed by their connection to Library Science. *Octavia of Earth* is an evolving work that continues to grow. After completing the demo recordings, we put on a series of live performances through the SafeHouse Arts AIRSpace Fellowship for queer and trans artists of color (SAFEhouse for the Arts, n.d.). Each performance added new songs to the show, fleshing it out to complete Act I and add material for Act II. The current iteration of the musical consists of nine songs and 10 short films. We recorded a studio album of those songs and are now collaborating with other musicians in the community to expand Act II and III. We have also gained fiscal sponsorship from Independent Arts & Media and are raising funds to turn *Octavia of Earth* into a feature film. In 2020-2021, we held a series of virtual events to bring *Octavia of Earth* to a broader audience.

The following sections will highlight *Octavia of Earth* in three key ways: archives as generative sites for artistic practice, the documusical format and the unique perspective information workers bring to artistic practice, and activating library spaces for the performing arts. The section concludes with descriptions of three video clips from the musical that are included with this article.

There is a growing body of work about the ways in which librarians, archivists, and other information workers can collaborate and build relationships with artists. Magee & Waters (2011) detail the University of Stirling Archives and Glasgow School of Art's partnership with artists and designers to create work based on their collection. Lazar (2013) highlights how historical society collections may be underutilized by artists and how librarians can help forge more robust connections. Residency programs are another avenue for connection and relationship building

between libraries, archives, and artists. This is exemplified by Carbone's (2016) discussion of the City of Portland Archives and Records Center residency and Nguyễn's creation of the Metro Artist-in-Residence program as discussed in Act II of this paper.

However, there hasn't been much written on information professionals as artistic practitioners themselves. The premise underlying much literature on librarian/artist connections is that artists are unfamiliar with the inner workings of libraries and archives and need to be introduced to that world. This is a valid issue, and it is important to overcome barriers and bring new people and new perspectives into these spaces. It is also worth considering the librarian-as-artist rather than solely as a facilitator. As Chow (2019) asks, "can we, like the creative practitioners we engage with, be truly creative? And if so, what could this look like?" (p. 13). *Octavia of Earth* serves as an example of this idea put into practice.

Octavia of Earth began with a trip to the archives. In 2016, ULP's artistic director Anand Jay Kalra and early collaborator and UC Berkeley professor T. Carlis Roberts visited the Huntington Library to explore the Octavia E. Butler Papers housed there. This visit inspired the first three songs, which were performed as part of a keynote presentation at Cal State Northridge's 2017 Speculative Futures of Race Symposium (California State University, Northridge, 2017). *Octavia of Earth* shares much in common with the "archival impulse" in contemporary art that Foster (2004) describes as stemming from a desire to "make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present" (p. 4). In the stage version, I portray Butler through song and dance rather than spoken dialogue. In the film version, Butler herself does not appear on screen (and in the final version there will be several performers appearing only in silhouette). These omissions are intentional; they serve as a reminder of the gaps in our knowledge of Butler, the inescapable incompleteness of archives, and the ways in which we project our own ideas onto her absence.

Qualmann (2017) explores the idea of producing art with a "library aesthetic," a multifaceted aesthetic that includes "ideas of order and chaos... practices of classification, cataloguing and organization; and relational aspects of library interaction—both interpersonal and between people and things, places and spaces" (p. 12). *Octavia of Earth* is presented in a format we call the "documusical," an approach that shares overlap with the idea of the "library aesthetic." This plays out most clearly in the way the show is structured, how the different components are classified, and the ways they relate to each other. In addition to the way the musical's overarching structure acknowledges and grapples with archival gaps, the show is further organized into three main categories: a) the everyday world (depicted through more standard type musical songs), b) the world of the imagination and the subconscious (depicted by more experimental dance pieces), and c) narration and documentary film elements. The documentary element functions as a kind of stand-in for the work that librarians and archivists do,

serving as a bridge between the other two elements into a whole that is legible and understandable to viewers. It is a means for the librarian-as-artist to serve as a conduit between the order of the everyday world components and the chaos of the imagination components. The perspective of the librarian-as-artist is part of the underlying structure and “this conceptual base holds a strong link even when the visual manifestation of the artwork may not bear any connections to ideas of the library” ([Qualmann, 2017](#), p. 14).

Activating library spaces for performing arts

When we completed the *Octavia of Earth* studio album in 2019, we began planning a live event to mark the album’s release. We felt it was important to create an event that maintained ties to libraries and archives and connected these spaces to our local community and the audience we had built up through our run of live performances. We found the perfect partner in the African American Museum & Library at Oakland (AAMLO), a special division of the Oakland Public Library system. AAMLO’s mission is to preserve and share documents focused on African American history in California, especially the San Francisco East Bay Area. Their archives contain a variety of resources, documenting people, social organizations, political movements, and arts and culture. The Museum portion of the library regularly hosts exhibitions centered on African American history. *Octavia of Earth* was born out of an archival visit; it seemed only fitting that we formally release the album in a similar space.

Octavia of Earth was a great fit with AAMLO’s mission and we planned our album release to be part of AAMLO’s Saturday afternoon event series (Oakland Public Library, 2019). These events all start with a tour of the space by AAMLO staff. In this way, people who aren’t regular users and are visiting the space for the first time can be introduced to its resources before the event itself begins. This is a great way to create a welcoming environment for newcomers and encourage them to return. The event was well attended and included a Q&A portion after the performance and screening. Our audience had the opportunity to learn more about what AAMLO has to offer and AAMLO’s audience was introduced to new creative work being produced in their local community. Our partnership with AAMLO showed how “artists and designers themselves can act as ‘archival ambassadors’ promoting 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” ([Magee & Waters, 2011, p. 283](#)).

Performance clips

Included with this article are three video clips from the *Octavia of Earth* workshop performances at SAFEhouse Arts in 2018. All three are songs from Act 1 of the show, set during Octavia's childhood through young adult years.

The Devil Girl from Mars:

This song is set during the 1950s when Octavia was 10 years old. "The Devil Girl from Mars" was a sci-fi B movie she watched as a child. It made a big impression on her, but not because the movie was good. The movie was so terrible that it inspired Octavia to write her own stories; even as a small child she knew that she could create something better.

Hypnosis:

Hypnosis is a dance piece based on Octavia's experience of attending a self-hypnosis seminar while in community college. The seminar helped Octavia to overcome some of her intense shyness and to harness her creative power. The dance conveys this experience by utilizing repetition and sharp synchronization between three of the dancers in contrast with an asynchronous Octavia, struggling to get into the rhythm.

Patterns:

"Patterns" is set during the 1970s, while Octavia worked in manufacturing during the day and wrote what would later become *Patternmaster* late at night. Patterns is a duet between Octavia and one of her prototypical characters, expressing frustration at the struggles of daily life and yearning for creativity and connection.

Conclusion

In effort to empower librarians, archivists, and other information professionals to create their own works and build new performance venues, we present to you *More Than Just Cataloging, in Three Acts*. We hope that these performances and events will help librarians consider new ways to engage with collections and communities. Far from being passive, quiet, and peripheral to the creative process, information professionals are artists, creatives, influencers, and community catalysts. We would also like to posit the potential of art to expand the way information professionals engage with one another, particularly in professional settings, such as conferences like the LACUNY Institute. *More Than Just Cataloging, In Three Acts* literally symbolizes a breaking of professional norms. Instead of just PowerPoints with graphs and text, this presentation was a performance showcasing the work of artist-librarians exploring what it truly means to innovate with library materials and resources. As we continue to redefine the library and librarianship, we should also champion new ways to present and share the unique talents and excellent work of the professionals in the field.

Supplementary Materials and Performance Videos

Conference Presentation Slides <https://archive.org/details/more-than-just-cataloging>

It Happens <https://archive.org/details/it-happens>

Don't Ask My Age of Aquarius

https://archive.org/details/20200131_ageofaqua_snguyen_mkeaney

Octavia of Earth

- “Devil Girl From Mars”: <https://vimeo.com/276808513>
- *Patterns*: <https://vimeo.com/276808513>
- “Hypnosis”: <https://vimeo.com/276808513>

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