’What does the archive let us know about the materials it contains, the histories it makes visible?’

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“Portrait of Mickey Piñero Tattooing” (c. 1988), Martin Wong, Martin Wong Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University

Martin Wong: Painting Is Forbidden was a solo exhibition dedicated to the work of Chinese-American artist Martin Wong (1946-1999) curated by the California College of Art’s Graduate Program in Curatorial Practice, class of 2015. The exhibition encompassed writing, calligraphy,

drawing, ceramics, theatrical set design, painting, poetry, and collage. Wong is known primarily for the paintings he produced while operating in the dynamic subcultures of the Nuyorican poets and graffiti artists of 1970s and 1980s New York City. Prior to this interlude in his life, Wong, who grew up in San Francisco and studied in Eureka, California, had already produced a wild and curious body of work. He was a prolific poet and ceramicist, a psychedelic painter, an artistic collaborator in the radical communal theater of the Angels of Light, and a self-described "Human Instamatic." Here, Visual AIDS republishes a contribution to the exhibition's catalog.

The Actionability of the Archive

by Tanya Gayer and Julian Myers-Szupinska

In 2014, artist and curator Julie Ault interviewed archivist Marvin J. Taylor on the nature of archival materials. The occasion for the interview was Ault's contribution to the 2014 Whitney Biennial, which drew on the archives of the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University; Taylor is the library's current director. "Taylor's activist archiving methods have ignited the archiving field,"Ault writes in her introduction;[1] the Fales' Downtown Collection, which collects documents of New York City's arts scene from the 1970s to the 1990s, she continues, "is a revolutionary archive, demonstrating the actionability of both archive and history."[2] Taylor's radicality, for Ault, comes in part by way of his complex sense of the value of archival materials in understanding the past--in particular his caution that archives often offer a partial and "disembodied" sort of evidence.

Ault quotes an earlier interview with Taylor, where he tells the interviewer that "[a]n archive is nothing but the fossil remains of experience. For the most time, disembodied evidence. The question I'm fascinated with is, what is the relationship of the archive to the body? The archive as a stand-in for the absent body, because then you could talk about the fetish of the archival object, etc."[3]

With Ault, he continues this line of thinking:

"...what disappears is the smell, the touch, all these other aspects of living that are hard to experience from written documents. What we're left with, basically, are things we can look at--at least in traditional archives. There are other objects that archives cannot collect, and that the museums tend not to collect as well, that bring us closer to the person. And I've tried to include those objects as well within the Downtown collection, because I think they have embodied meaning."[4]

As we have assembled this publication, and the exhibition that it accompanies, we have drawn substantially on the Martin Wong Papers (ca. 1982-1999), part of the Fales Downtown Collection. And as we have done so, Taylor's thoughts have been on our mind: What does the archive allow us to know about the materials it contains, and the histories it makes visible? How has the particular

nature of the Fales collections--its unconventional archival subjects, its “revolutionary” stance--inflected what it is possible for us to say about Wong? In particular we have become attuned to those “aspects of living” and “embodied meaning” that Taylor evokes--as they mark an aspect of Wong’s life and practice that even this revolutionary archive can offer only in elusive ways.

Let us give an example from our own encounter with Wong’s papers. Immersed in the material of Wong’s life--sketchbooks, artworks, photographs, clippings, journals, personal effects--we became fascinated by a sequence of sketches that Wong created of his lover, the Nuyorican poet and playwright Miguel Piñero. The sketches are undated, but almost certainly come from the years between when the two met in 1982 and the poet’s death, from cirrhosis, in 1988; and they are connected by their possible relationship to Wong’s painting “Portrait of Mickey Piñero Tattooing” (c. 1988).

We became interested in a particular drawing, in which Wong pictures Piñero in the act of writing his 1974 play Short Eyes. The writer’s body floats on the page without a background or environment, his body depicted by a loose, single outline, in profile view. A cigarette burns in one hand, while the other hand holds a pen to page. His stout arms are crooked as though they are resting on an invisible table. Piñero’s fingers take up much of the frame, out of proportion to the rest of his body. Tattoos of script are visible on his upper arm and forearms, reading “Mala,” “Mi Vida” and “Adelina.” Wong pays great attention to Piñero’s frazzled and curly hair, his beard, and the scars on his arms, using heavy lines that give him character and life. Textual commentary within the sketch states, “1974 Mikey writing ’Short Eyes’ Felix Camillo’s drama class Ossining State Correctional Facility (Sing Sing) Westchester County”[5]--which indicates Wong’s attempt to recapture the time and place of Piñero creating his monumental work.

The complexity of this act of representation will already be evident. The sketch seems observed, drawn from life, while the moment it aims to represent is from a different time entirely: Piñero wrote the play while in Sing Sing prison, where Wong had never been, and did so in 1974, years before the artist and poet met. The drawing’s details therefore support a sort of mythic view of Piñero’s character, across time: here a pen symbolizes his accomplishments in writing, while tattoos, muscles, and scars display his rough prison background. But to whom do these details aim to speak? The sketch is from Wong’s private notebooks; this mythography has no definite audience, except the artist himself. Perhaps presenting Piñero’s rougher qualities in conjunction with the tender focus on his hair and face was a romantic gesture, referencing an erotic relationship only known in certain circles. Or, perhaps Wong simply drew them without a purpose other than to observe and record.

In another sketch, also undated, Piñero looks down upon a sheet of paper with cool concentration. Hard, sinuous marks describe his hair and beard. Face and arms are disconnected from each other, hanging in dreamlike fragmentation. Here, again, are Piñero’s attributes--cigarette and pen--this time appearing only as slender cylinders. A single diagonal line moves from the left edge of the drawing through his hand, inferring (through deft use of negative space) the paper on which he writes. And indeed we find this airy and disembodied quality in a third sketch of Piñero as well:

here, details are implied only through comparison--that is, it would be impossible to know what was being represented, without first seeing the other sketches in conjunction. What differentiates this sketch from the others is that the hands and face are traced multiple times, giving the impression that the poet is in motion.

Turning now to the painting to which these sketches seem to relate, we might discover them in a curious relationship to the better-known work. In the painting, the figure of the poet floats against the background of a prison block, enveloped in white paint that gives him a ghostly quality. Time and space are compressed, and his figure is disembodied from its surroundings, even as his familiar characteristics (cigarette and pen, rumpled hair) remain the same. Meanwhile, his tattoos drift from their placement in the sketches as free-floating fragments of language.

The elaborated backdrop in the painting, though, which locates the poet in his prison environment, is new. Elsewhere in the archive one finds articles from Time magazine that Wong saved from the early 1980s, reporting on America's toughest prisons. In one article, a two-page photographic spread depicts a young prison guard with a gun. He stands in front of a three-tiered prison block and watches prisoners waiting for their cells to open. The guard's left hand rests on a metal banister while his other hand grips the handle of his gun. In another clipping, a long corridor of prison cells is shown with a brick wall at the end. From one cell, two hands emerge: one hand holding a peace sign, the other clasping a small mirror.

It was only after poring over these clippings that we realized their elements had been arranged in a collage-like form into the finished "Portrait of Mickey Piñero Tattooing." The background of the painting reproduces the space from the magazine cutout with the prison guard--though Wong omits prisoners and guard. It appears as though Wong used this article as a template to provide the scenography needed for this painting, to situate the man he knew in a world that he could only envision in mediated form. But so, too, does he alter the scene of the photograph: in Wong's interpolation, Piñero is in solitude, as if in an empty prison; and his activity shifts as well: now he is not writing a play, but giving himself a tattoo.

The act of comparing the sketches, clippings, and painting leads to questions about Wong's practice and inspiration that cannot be securely answered by the archive. Is Piñero, in the painting, truly in the act of tattooing, as the title suggests? Why would Wong paint his lover giving himself a tattoo when he so often sketched him writing? Did Piñero write while in the presence of Wong sketching him? And which came first: the sketches, the magazine clippings, or the painting? Does it matter?

We do learn important things from this constellation of materials: that, for example, Wong's paintings are likely combined, as in photomontage, of versions of existing material; or that the artist, once he found a visual arrangement he liked, was prone to repeating it, with different variations, across mediums, as if testing its form against different settings--until, in painting, a satisfying figure/scenario relationship emerged. But these inferences are haunted by things it is now impossible to verify: the order of the works'elaboration, for example, or whether a particular sketch is observed, imagined, or repeated from a previous work. To venture more--to imagine the

artworks as the product of romantic play between artist and his subject--is to find our desire for the archive's "absent bodies" beginning to distort the evidence at hand.

In the discussion mentioned above, Ault warns that archives may well offer "false evidence," even as she emphasizes the project of history itself, of "getting things as right as possible." (The exchange is important; we hope the reader will forgive us quoting it at length.)

> Documents and artifacts are not intrinsically truth telling; they are fragmentary and often disconnected from context. Archives can mislead through omission. Essential pieces of information, which might answer questions and redirect research, are not necessarily tangible or archived.[6]

> Meanwhile, uncovered and rediscovered artifacts, such as a letter found in an abandoned basement, a manuscript that surfaces at a flea market, or a diary that suddenly comes to light, have the potential to radically alter historical narratives. The rediscovered document that no one knew existed can provide crucial facts that close gaps and unlock mysteries, and possibly suggest alternative accounts of events. In this way, the archive often feels like a minefield of latent surprises that can result in all degrees of misrepresentation.[7]

And finally, how can this square with getting things as right as possible in history writing? I mean it's not all subjective; there are degrees of historical accuracy and degrees of mythologizing.[8]

Taylor responds,

I always tell students that "archives lie." They are by their very nature incomplete, fragmented, censored ...events--and archives--are messy. History is linear and rational because it is a fabricated narrative. All we can do is agree on the most logical and well-argued narrative based on the "facts" we have. Archives exist, in the end, for citation verification. We may not have facts, but as long as we're looking at the same documents, we can have a discourse about them. Cold comfort, I'm afraid.[9]

By selecting and assembling materials from this archive of Wong's work, in this book, and in the exhibition it accompanies, we are inevitably engaged in a process of historicization: these materials elaborate on old narratives and propose new ones. In particular we have aimed to unfold the narrative of Wong's production in California in the 15 years before he moved to New York City, making public materials from this time that have been little seen before now. This project reveals

certain continuities and discontinuities between two distinct moments of his work, and his life. We draw together these works and ephemera not to fetishize the archive, or to argue the "truth value" of these materials; instead, perhaps we might argue for the "use value" of displaying the archive, for producing an image of the artist in the present, and contesting other narratives of the artist's practice currently being assembled.

In doing so, Ault's concept of the "actionability" of the archive and history has been of central importance. The persona and work of Martin Wong, for us, is in his continuous becoming: located in between sketch and painting, conversation and translation, and within the crossed out and re-written narratives in his sketchbooks. And that ongoingness, that ability to act on the past, and within its ambiguous limits, is what we can truly know of Martin Wong. "We may not have facts, but as long as we're looking at the same documents, we can have a discourse about them," Taylor says. For us, this discourse offers more than "cold comfort."

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[1]Julie Ault, "Active Recollection: Marvin J. Taylor in Conversation with Julie Ault," whitney.org (PDF), 2014, accessed November 27, 2014, p. 1.

[2]ibid.

[3]Emily Colucci, "The Dirty Scene of Downtown New York," Hyperallergic, August 10, 2012, accessed on January 23, 2015.

[4]Ault, p. 3-4.

[5]Wong renders Miguel Piñero's nickname variably as "Mickey" or "Mikey."

[6]ibid., 24

[7]ibid., 24-5

[8]ibid., 25

[9]ibid.