

## Carrier Pigeon Magazine as Metaphor for Societal Provenance

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### Author's Note

In the late spring of 2009, my mother gave me her engagement ring. Most details were ironed out in her will, and whatever heirlooms she possessed were split within our family. Items weren't formally appraised, but there was an awareness to the value of her things because we knew where they came from. It was my mother who determined the points of divergence in her collection, and the items of monetary value had been straightforward. I accepted her terminal condition when I accepted the ring, but I wasn't prepared for the ensuing discussions that arose when measuring *sentimental* value. She began to apologize for not leaving behind more valuables for us, but what she was actually apologizing for not being able to participate in our lives any longer. She had been assessing whether the traces she left behind would be meaningful or functional. Would they help us cope? Would they help us find peace? Would these mementos minimize her absence and make us feel closer to her? What would it mean for us to inherit the items that she spent a lifetime collecting and we become the custodians of her memories? After considering these questions, my mom asked me if I would like her to write me a letter.

The context of a posthumous letter, authored by an immortal voice, read and reread in conjunction with constantly evolving memories, would be dynamic. It was a provocative offer. A well designed message suspended in time would bypass the usual restrictions, and allow a direct expression from mother to daughter. I wanted the opportunity to forge a new experience with her rather than only relying on my memories of events long ago, but I wanted feedback too. Feedback could never be provided, and any sense of communication would be an illusion.

It is from this frame of reference that I begin my education in archival theory, so these anecdotes are the skeleton that I apply the theories to. My humanist approach to sort and assess

the chaos is not much different from professional archivists' tactics, because all archivists struggle with their dual role as writer and author, as insider and outsider, and being a member of a specific and stylized population. Hard and fast archival rules do not exist, and the profession continues to evolve. Conceptual frameworks and essential theories inform archivists in their daily work, but it still remains a collection of active agents sorting through bottleneck collections of papers written by mutable groupings of creators. In the face of postmodern and metaphysical themes, I wanted to focus on the most substantial concept of archives; provenance. I lost a person and gained memories and a collection of "stuff". I not only acquired items that would have sentimental value for me, but I acquired items that were sentimental for my mother. I inherited her collection, which is imbued with secondhand, derivative, sentimental value. How would this collection be evaluated through traditional notions of provenance?

## Introduction

Provenance is a necessary theoretical construct used to perform the basic functions of archival practice such as acquisition, appraisal, arrangement, description and retrieval. Functioning as the backbone to current archival theory, it is integral for archivist practices. According to this post modern framework, it is the provenance that upholds the entire structure of the profession. However, it is mutable. It changes, grows, expands and contracts. It is subject to reevaluation, and this concept has been visited and revisited by notable scholars, currently those based in Canada and Australia. There a new framework is developing, which includes a more complete, if complex, evaluation. It is a necessary attempt to include the *context* of creation within the understanding. This paper explores this burgeoning theory of contemporary provenance by viewing it through a contemporary collection of artists' activities based in New York City. The operations of the Carrier Pigeon Magazine is best understood through an expanding concept of provenance. The traditional considerations provide an incomplete understanding of what is thoroughly a post modern invention, as will be later discussed.

## What is Provenance?

Conceived in Europe between the mid 18th and late 19th centuries, provenance relates to information regarding the origins, custody, and ownership of an item or collection. The Society of American Archivists (2010) define it as a fundamental principle of archives, referring to the individual, family, or organization that created or received the items in a collection (SAA, 2010).

In addition to illuminating the context of creation and origin, provenance refers to the organization or individual who created, accumulated and maintained records throughout its lifetime.

According to the Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science (2010), in archives, the provenance is “...the succession of custodians is responsible for creating, receiving, or accumulating a collection of records or personal papers...The related principle of *respect des fonds* requires that records known to have originated from a given source be documented and retained separately from those of other agencies or persons and in their original order and organizational context, whenever possible”. So the records of a different provenance should be separated to establish a one-to-one ratio of creator and context. However, what happens when the records creator doesn’t refer to a single business or person? In the case of Carrier Pigeon, the creators are a shifting population of collaborative authors. The identity as members in Carrier Pigeon will prove to be dynamic, as members move on to different projects and new artists are absorbed into the fold. There is no clearly defined organic unit relating to this group of graphic artists.

The meaning of provenance as it applies to graphic or fine arts varies slightly. The concept illustrates the custody and ownership of the item or collection. Beginning at the inception of the artwork, the master printer notes the factors involved in pulling the print. Details like type of paper, dimensions of paper, type of matrix, dimensions of matrix, type of print process, ink type and color, edition size, title, name of the artist, name of the printer, publisher, name of the print studio, year of creation, title, etc. Any master printer follows this procedure of noting such details at the time of creation, so when a print gets sold or changes

owners the document of authenticity goes with it (personal communication, Master Printer Kathy Caraccio, September, 2007). This change of owner or custodian is then added to the document of authenticity, or the provenance. In a way it's similar to breeding papers for purebreds, and this standardized process establishes authenticity and corresponding value.

Bastian (2006) comments on this expanding view of provenance and the position it puts archivists in:

Archivists, as well as post-colonial scholars, have recognized the limitations of narrow interpretations and are testing the borders of provenance, looking beyond the physical record creator to discover context in place, in ethnicity and in collective memory...(They) are turning to a reinterpretation of provenance as a way of accommodating a more complete and complex view of societal memory. (p. 281)

Carrier Pigeon records creators exist in several dimensions simultaneously, as they exist together and apart in print studios, in print, and in a variety of digital venues. As mentioned, their collective identity is likely to shift and so the collaborative product will experience changes with every generation. Perhaps the qualifiers to be a participant in this group will broaden, and an alternative culture will join. These artists live in, comment on, react to, are a part of New York City. They are content creators but not impervious to the reactions from their locale, and the relationships between the society and the records are interactive. Carrier Pigeon is *Causa sui*.

The pitfall of deriving the provenance strictly from the fonds is that only fragments of the entire collection remain. These remnants still provide considerable knowledge about the origins of a record, but the meaning of the document is contingent on further awareness of a wider array of neglected factors. The issue becomes a willingness to perceive the documents through this

broader framework, and the acceptance that provenance is more fluid than originally pegged. It changes as it incorporates greater complexity and layers of understanding.

Rather, archivists can adopt a framework of examination through creator history, records history, and custodial history (Millar, L. 2003. pg. 2). This paper will utilize these three histories Millar proposes in determining the provenance of a particular society, the Carrier Pigeon Magazine. The creator history, or the story of who created, accumulated, and use the records over time cannot be defined as a single word, or even persons. The background of how this self identified artist group and small press came to be is more complicated, and in a way reflects a larger zeitgeist.

The records history, or story of the physical management and movement of the records, include such information as how the records are created and used, who had them, when, where they are and why they are moved or destroyed, enhanced or altered. Carrier Pigeon's product, a magazine, is already a vessel for information exchange. In addition to the paper product which is commodified for public consumption, the staff of Carrier Pigeon maintains a website, blog, Facebook page and YouTube account. These alternate venues reflect the content put forth in the pages of the magazine in addition to some behind the scenes footage. The overall effect is that of an artist community that shares itself and encourages interactivity from its audience.

Carrier Pigeon's custodial history is also more complicated than can be addressed in a traditional framework. Custodial history explains the transfer of ownership of the records from the creator to the custodian in an archival institution, but Carrier Pigeon functions as it's own records manager. The authors are the writers, the magazine is their megaphone. They are hyper aware of their narrative. They create content that is ephemeral in nature, almost resembling a

scrapbook, yet they are objects of high value at low cost. Each magazine includes a fine art print, hand signed and couture.

Carrier Pigeon reflects the contemporary sensibilities at play in all of their aesthetic and administrative practices. From their medium of images and text in a magazine, their particular members, physical location, digital locations, funding structure, crafted mission statement and self awareness, those core and satellite members to Carrier Pigeon demonstrate a progressive and innovative approach to carving out their own niche in the art world.

#### Carrier Pigeon: Illustrated Fiction and Fine Art

Carrier Pigeon is an independent press/ contemporary fine arts magazine based in New York City. They publish their magazine on a quarterly basis which is distributed commercially. Those staffing the project and contributing content are New York City based graphic artists and writers, who participate in this project for the sake of expression their art directly and unmitigated. Those involved in establishing the project from the initial pre planning phases sketched out a statement of intent for which to shape the future structure:

Carrier Pigeon is a magazine of illustrated fiction and fine art. By giving full creative control to the artists, illustrators, designers and writers this magazine hopes to level the conventional perception of the singularity of each artistic discipline. Carrier Pigeon provides artists with a venue for telling stories in an undisturbed environment by offering the chance to show full bodies of work and unconditional artistic freedom in both direct subject matter and the interpretation of text.

The endeavor hit a chord and received adequate support from the community, and on August 6, 2010, Carrier Pigeon: Illustrated Fiction and Fine Art successfully raised its funding goal of

\$10,000 through Kickstarter. According to their website, Kickstarter (2010) is a funding platform for creative projects where those proposed projects gain exposure to ten of thousands of people who then pledge money in support of them. Those projects that have the most appeal, that tap into the community zeitgeist, that are developed without any distorting financial pressures owed to investment lenders.

Through the initial investment, the artists behind this endeavor were able to pursue their vision of dismantling some of the traditional boundaries between “high art” and “low art”. These printmakers, illustrators, graphic designers, and other artist professionals customarily marginalized by the fine arts community, collaborated to create a platform for their artworks. Rather than endorsing the conventional art-on-walls-in-a-Chelsea-gallery framework, this artist subculture made a magazine of portfolios and illustrated stories. It is not quite the traditional artist book as these magazines are meant to be published and distributed commercially. Yet these magazines aren’t quite ephemera either, because each are hand signed and totally couture. Within each copy is an original fine art print, like those from the presses of master printer.

The pages of the magazine offer an unmitigated platform for artists to share their portfolios and personal statements. There are no external pressures to withstand and complete creative control is given to the artist. The artist alone determines the content, and the magazine as medium is a neutral megaphone. The magazine promises the artists a direct line of communication, so that their individual voices and perspectives can be communicated. In this case the writer is the author and the author is the writer. Members try to express their individual artistic vision while simultaneously moving beyond that individual identity to a collective

identity. There is an interplay between a collective social memory and each member's personal memory.

Common to all members is a shared experience of being marginalized. Carrier Pigeon is terrifically counter culture. As previously mentioned, certain mores exist in the fine art world that omit the graphic designers, illustrators and graphic artists. These artists react to the social inertia of the many social constructions of the New York City artist gallery world. They are developing new rituals and more flexible and inclusive frameworks; this magazine demonstrates the attempt. The current Chelsea-gallery-on-23rd -street-model is too narrow and rigid in the same way that the current framework of provenance is too narrow and rigid. It too quickly puts art into arbitrary categories like "high art" and "low art", but this is not a context that reveals a fuller context or a deeper truth. According to their Kickstarter webpage (IBID), a primary tenet of Carrier Pigeon states:

Our main goals are to allow artists complete freedom and to have the magazine commercially distributed. We believe the gallery wall should not be the only place left for sincerity in the art world. There are taboos put up between fine art, illustration and design that we would love to destroy by allowing everyone involved in Carrier Pigeon the chance to present a narrative in an undisturbed fashion. We also believe that people are smart enough to understand art that is not packaged for the lowest common denominator but that those people have nowhere to go for such an outlet in the commercial print world. We hope to be that outlet." And low art has traditionally been marginalized.

These artists reject the art world of New York that they are not fully a part of, and through their reactions, they provide social commentary. This social commentary is a well edited fine art

magazine, which is then distributed primarily in New York based bookstores for which the audience is presumably the culture they are commenting on and reacting against.

### Creator History

The creator has been defined as the person or persons who created, accumulated, and used the records over time. This definition is seemingly straightforward, but the true meaning of creator history is more difficult to define as will be evident by observing the Carrier Pigeon model. The community of participants involved with the magazine are not conveniently bound entities. As they describe on their Kickstarter profile page, “We are a group of New York-based artists, illustrators, writers and designers”. The founding members were self selected, and then collectively decided who their satellite contributing members would be. Will the group change over time? Who will curate the group once the core members leave? Will the group be the same if the core members leave, or would their magazine have to be considered another magazine entirely? This collection is complex it is therefore impossible to put in discrete categories.

Wurl (2005) and his contemporaries in Canada recommend encompassing ethnic communities into their understanding of creatorship. By extending this facet of provenance, archivists disrupt the conventional values of ownership and custody. Those artists previously marginalized by mainstream fine art have coalesced into this entity. Their purpose is not to hijack ownership of Art, whatever that is. They simply want to be a part of the narrative, and they want to break down the arbitrary walls that have been erected by this season of tastemakers. These fashionable few forget how temporary they are, and that they are only stewards in a line of many others. Carrier Pigeon creators see themselves as a reactionary community, or as Bastian (2006) states, “group of people who share common elements or identities and who think of

themselves in terms of these common elements. They recognize that they are part of this common group while at the same time, each may belong to many different groups” (p. 282). Bastian’s version of provenance as community is derivative of Terry Cook’s societal provenance, which describes the dynamic relationships between institutions, communities, and individuals. Alternately, Tom Nesmith writes about similar social and intellectual contexts in thinking about the creator.

Because of complications in creator history such as these, archivists should re-examine it in relation to the context and content of the record. Bastian makes the argument to consider context in place, ethnicity, and collective memory. In her 2004 article, Bastian illustrates how an artists’ colony in New Hampshire took on that collective character which operated in the full Gestaltian sense. Wurl (2005) comments “The colony became more than a physical gathering place for artists; it became a place of "collective remembering" and, as such, a form of provenance that commanded attention in the way archival sources were developed and described” (p. 68). Carrier Pigeon also exemplifies Bastian’s “community of records”, because the group is the memory frame which contextualizes the records it creates. Carrier Pigeon magazine expresses the expansive and interactive relationship between a society and its records. Members create visual content of the world they live in; they communicate that message to a New York audience, and participate in an alternative New York art world.

### Records History

Millar’s second history to describe provenance is records history, which concerns the physical management of the records. It also deals with how the records are created, used, who had them, where they are, and why they were ever moved, destroyed, enhanced, and altered.

Carrier Pigeon monitor their own record keeping and are diligent about writing their own narrative. At the individual level, the artists themselves are record keepers. They are the founders on Kickstarter and since their successful origination they have maintained an active Facebook page and blog.

Carrier Pigeon exists as a magazine, but it also has a website and blog that communicates what they are and what they are about. It often features content from the pages of the magazine such as their mission statement, biographies of their contributors, photos from exhibitions, art studio creations, and book launches. They exist together physically, they exist online, and they exist on paper. Their audience exists in these three realms, as well. So, would there be three separate provenances? According to the traditional notion of provenance, yes: there's a one-to-one relationship between the record and its creating administration. However, to truly understand the nature of their records history, one would take into account their temperament has always been DIY. They do their own record keeping while simultaneously interacting with their audience and creating new content for upcoming subscriptions. Theirs is an exercise in expression in the face of an exclusive minority, albeit across several venues. Rather than witnessing it is separate slices of reality, one should couch them as a tightly woven network of connectivity. The threads exist together and inform one another, themselves and their public.

In a way, these auxiliary modes of records history operate as a visual scrapbook. Carrier Pigeon's philosophy is deeply rooted in the role of images in collective memory. Images are a vehicle which "constitute a cogent means of tackling the past and making it work for the present. But how we remember through images remains powerfully different from how we might remember the same event were images not involved" (Zelizer, 2004, p. 158). The visual differs

from the verbal in that it behaves like a snapshot and captures an event midstream, simultaneously to the event unfolding for onlookers. This means that visual work often involves catching the sequencing of events or issues midstream, strategically freezing it at its potentially strongest moment of meaningful representation (IBID). A bond is forged between the spectator and the visual memory.

Scrapbooks work in the same manner, using visuals to connect to a memory. Scrapbooks are the genre of the self and the stories are all self narration. Though personal, scrapbooks are meant for display and sharing for future appreciation. Their coherence and significance hinge on visual organization. This actually describes both the content of the magazine pages as well as the Facebook posts and blog entries. As their data accumulates in their several spheres, it will be interesting to note who shoulders the responsibility. They are self aware as they keep records while simultaneously creating new content and attracting new contributing artists. Here is what Nesmith (2006) calls an “ongoing process of understanding” (p. 261). Carrier Pigeon documents its own founding, growth, and development. Details concerning accepted submissions, submitted biographies, gallery paperwork, invoices, published works, and notes about collection development are all shared. Therefore, “One of the key insights from postmodernism bearing on the reconceptualization of archiving is that it should be seen as an ongoing process or action” (Nesmith, 2006, p. 261).

### Custodial History

Custodial history explains the transfer of ownership of the records from the creator to the custodian in an archival institution. Bastian (2006) suggests archivists to move towards a post-custodial continuum of records which places records in a broader and more comprehensive

context. Her “vision of provenance and community seeks, weighs and accommodates all the voices of a society by re-imagining the many facts of its recordness as a synergistic and integral unit” (p. 269). The community does weigh in heavily on Carrier Pigeon’s activities, as evidenced by their Facebook, YouTube, blog, and Kickstarter page.

From the very start, this artist group demonstrated community relevance, which is how they earned the funding to get started. The community has remained an active onlooker to their practices, and not only do they purchase magazine copies, but they participate in the records history. Here is an interactive relationship between the society and its records, which could be described as a feedback loop. The magazine communicates the artists’ individual voices, their perspectives of NYC, and the (art) world at large, which is then sold to NYC and the world at large. They are of and for the same entity, the audience is also the muse. They are the product of their environment and they’re selling their artwork (product) back to the environment (that which has shaped them.) So there’s this chain, which also loops, and also gets convoluted.

Suppose this author attempts to participate in the Carrier Pigeon arts group and gets accepted. Any subsequent visual work would be derivative of the investigation and evaluation necessitated by this paper. And, how is the content of the magazine affected by someone who was once an outsider suddenly welcomed to be a contributor? Anyone who interprets, insider or outsider, is a part of the chain of understanding the custodial history. The history of the record is also how it is managed over time. Nesmith (IBID) asserts “This overall history of the record is the provenance of the record...Acknowledging this more complex view of provenance brings archival theory and practice into line with the broader intellectual life” (p. 359).

All of the complexities and questions raised by examining provenance through this post modern lens contributes to a better understanding of the records. Records as nuanced as those produced by Carrier Pigeon, and other dynamic contemporary collectives, should be perceived in these measures.

### Conclusion

These emerging schemas raises the bar for archival pursuits, but it points out that our best efforts will only yield more questions, not answers. We are grasping at straws as it is, trying to piece together an objective reality of the past when all we have are partial remnants as evidence. There are simply too many unknowns and too many contexts present to ever make a confident assertion of the past especially when the archivists are removed physically, temporally, or philosophically from the records creators.

Many resources have been invested in developing best archival practices, and a certain level professional success has been realized. Many questions *have* been answered through steadfast intellectual pursuit. However, suggesting a viewpoint that embraces more questions than answers feels like a step in the wrong direction so this expanding view of provenance seems counterintuitive.

Broadening a fundamental archival concept such as provenance is to compromise the skeletal structure of the profession. But, provenance as it relates to fine art printmaking is simpler than provenance is it relates to archives. As previously mentioned, the master printer in a printmaking studio follows established protocol every time she runs a series. Details like materials, contributors, and location are specifically noted and well tracked throughout every milestone of that print's lifetime. Every time it changes ownership or goes on exhibition, it is

well documented. These rituals are widely observed and well practiced; the effect is organized cooperation which yields neat categories. But there are burgeoning entities outside these established categories, such as fine art printmaking based magazine.

Carrier Pigeon is a collective group who emerges in direct opposition to the established social mores of the art world. They are deliberately behaving unconventionally, and the effect is fractured and convoluted... archivally speaking. Their efforts reflect a changing zeitgeist where there is more blending and less chronological delineations. They are active, self aware, multidisciplinary, visual, networked, influential, dynamic, and current. They are a fluid web of associations and to understand their provenance is to give credence to the ever changing contexts.

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