Saved Drafts: Collectors of Born-Digital Material

Spencer W. Stuart

It Started With An Off-hand Comment

A couple years ago I was in a collector's study. Fanned out on the table were correspondence, autographed carte-de-visites, and drafts of 19th century European and American authors. We were taking stock of the materials, updating valuations, enhancing catalogue descriptions, and discussing upcoming opportunities to acquire new items for their collection.

The business of the afternoon dredged up historical associations. With dates and locations as markers, the distinct lives of Dickens, Whitman, Clemens, Dodgson, Thoreau and Emerson seemed to merge, mix and overlap. There was a tactile sense of time in the handwriting and groupings of experience that were taking shape with items layering on top of each other.

With these associations leading our discussions across space and time, we remarked on the extraordinary power of such material being in a single location, each one a synaptic connection through the others.

The collector then looked across the study at several cabinets of new hardcover books. "Not sure how you'd go about doing this with the email accounts of those ones," they said. I had noticed the wall of contemporary writers in the past while there on other

business. It consisted of first edition, first issues of the breakthrough novels of award-winning authors of our time. Scanning the spines and thinking of the technological transformations these writers experienced over their respective careers, I had not yet wrapped my head around what the Collector had said. The genesis and creation of significant cultural products is increasingly in digital environments and the implications of this raises more questions than it does answers — particularly when it comes to determining the value of such material. The intention of this article is to frame some of these questions around these topics and provide preliminary responses.

What Is The Significance Of Collecting Manuscripts?

Through working with clients on their collections, discussions around the practice of collecting arise. What were some of their first collections? How did they start with a particular interest? When did they move on to another? In some cases, collecting rekindles the enthusiasm they had for building collections of rocks, shells, or other such items in their youth. There are as many collections as there are collectors; the collection is a unique, kaleidoscopic perspective through which we can access the past (our own or otherwise).

In all cases, however, there is both a tactile and temporal nature to collections. The gathering of a collection not only stores the time and histories held within objects, but also that of the collector's life and experiences. This sense of the object meeting the collector halfway is what semiotician C.S. Pierce referred to as 'indexical'[1] or Walter Benjamin indicated with his notion of the 'aura'.[2] There is uniqueness in an object that opens into another dimension of time while it remains physically with us in the present. To me, this liminal experience is what most strongly fuels the spirit of collecting.

Directing our attention to manuscripts specifically, what is so intriguing is not only the unique piece of correspondence or draft, but its role as a place marker in the linear march of a body of work. It is also situated amid particular historical conditions. However, the rising ubiquity of the personal computer since at least the mid 1980s is jumbling this connection.

Indeed, there have been efforts undertaken by established writers and cultural institutions in this century to preserve the process, notes, edits and drafts of established writers. However, there is still a great deal of uncertainty in this practice and limits to financial resources moving forward to facilitate the migration of data from past storage devices (e.g. floppy discs, CD-ROMs, and external hard drives) to the ever-changing programs of the present. With this in mind, what is the role of a private collector in preserving such materials?

Speaking with collectors, the emphasis on the haptic quality of collecting is paramount; the book as object, the tooth of the paper, to follow the line of an author's hand. Often, collectors mention in the same breath that by collecting manuscript material, one is also collecting the maturation of ideas. With this as the premise, digital technology becomes yet another platform through which we convey our ideas.

Born-digital Writers: What Will There Be To Collect?

We are currently in a transition of technological usage in the writing process. For baby boomers (born 1945-60) the contents of the prospective papers they will be placing in institutions are of a hybrid nature of long-form hand, type and print outs of word-processed material. There are some exceptions to this. British writer Will Self (b. 1961) infamously rejected the use of computers, citing concerns for the way in which it would impact his process. Instead, he opted for festooning his writing room with sticky notes neatly ordered to correspond with specific chapters and a dedication to

the typewriter. Then there is Joyce Carol Oates, who was born in 1931 and thus is part of the silent generation. Oates writes mostly in longhand with some sessions lasting up to eight hours at a time. In these instances, there is a considerably larger trail of manuscript material produced during the writing process.

Then there are those such as *Game of Thrones* author, George R.R. Martin (b. 1948), who, as Matthew Kirschenbaum examines in *Track Changes: A Literary History of Word Processing*, makes use of WordStar, a DOS-era word processing program. Surpassed by Windows in the early 1990s, Martin's use of such a dated tool raises discussion of specificity within the digital realm, exacerbated in the era of planned obsolescence where access to data in and on antiquated formats is a perennial problem. On the other end of the spectrum is British writer Zadie Smith (b. 1975) who admits to using internet-blocking apps to avoid distractions while writing. This brings into consideration the full digital ecosystem of an author's computer and its influence on composition. The personal and the professional cohabitate on the hard drive (or browser history).

The writer's process, both how they construct their work and what technologies they use to do so, is a point of fascination for collectors, academics, and the public alike. The spectrum of writers we are witnessing from the baby boomers and a segment of Generation X (1961-1980) who have a hybrid analog/digital practice or one that totally rejects computers during the process of composition will soon pass as Millennial writers (and perhaps collectors) come into the scope of institutional collections.

Independent scholar Amy Hildreth Chen frames the issue in stark relief in *Placing Papers: The American Literary Archives Market*. She identifies the challenge digital archivists face in preserving born-digital material. An author's papers, "must be acquired earlier in a content creator's life because creators are likely to lose content if it remains in their sole possession."[3]

Chen continues, citing Richard Pearce-Moses that, "in a paper environment, records were an unintended by-product of other activities; records just happened." However in the writing environment of the Millennial (and onward), "each time a document is opened, revised, then saved, the previous version disappears unless consciously preserved."[4] The trail referred to in previous generations as the sedimentary accumulation of papers an author once amassed through the process of composition and correspondence is supplanted by an unstable environment of hard drives and cloud storage, losing valuable insight into a writer's process and mechanics, particularly in the early stages of their career.

Once represented by a literary agent (seemingly mandatory within the multi-national publishing industry), the author — who early on typically prioritizes getting a publishing deal over storing drafts for posterity — often hands over document management and procedural correspondence to their agent(s). From this, Chen forecasts a constriction in the transmission of an author's papers from composition to institutions cutting out dealers and closing out the potential for a private market:

> Among professional executors, agents are more likely than dealers to be able to represent authors successfully because they better understand technology's challenges. Agents recognize that born-digital drafts are just as valuable as paper drafts and have begun to market them accordingly. After all, agents are used to managing intellectual content; format distinction is a lesser consideration. In contrast, dealers are more likely to falter when faced with the born-digital future. Their trade is predicated in print, the material qualities of paper or parchment.[5]

Is there room in this increasingly monodirectional, commercially predicated market for private collectors to acquire

born-digital material, ensuring its temporary safekeeping prior to placement in cultural institutions? How could such an opportunity to participate come about?

Is There Digital Collecting? / How Is Value Communicated?

Recently, conversations surrounding the collection of born-digital material have been dedicated to contemporary visual art, where value is communicated through Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs). NFTs provide a way of tracing the way born-digital literary material was conceived of, ensuring the authenticity of born-digital objects by using unique code to link it to the creator; in a word its 'provenance'.

To understand NFTs and their function, one must start with a blockchain. A blockchain is a distributed ledger system on a scale so large that, instead of being "a collection of information that is stored electronically on a computer system," it is "designed to house significantly larger amounts of information that can be accessed, filtered, and manipulated quickly and easily by any number of users at once."[6]

The way in which data is stored on the blockchain relates directly to claims of authenticity in a born-digital environment. As *Investopedia* explains:

> A database structures its data into tables whereas a blockchain, like its name implies, structures its data into chunks (blocks) that are chained together. This makes it so that all blockchains are databases but not all databases are blockchains. This system also inherently makes an irreversible timeline of data when implemented in a decentralized nature. When a block is filled it is set in stone and becomes a part of this timeline. Each block in the chain is given an exact timestamp when it is added to the chain.[7]

Often when we hear of blockchain, it is in relation to cryptocurrencies which are *fungible* tokens. Of NFTs, Rekesh Sharma writes that we should "shift the crypto paradigm by making each token unique and irreplaceable, thereby making it impossible for one non-fungible token to be equal to another." Sharma continues, "NFTs are digital representations of assets and have been likened to digital passports because each token contains a unique, non-transferable identity to distinguish it from other tokens. They are also extensible, meaning you can combine one NFT with another to "breed" a third, unique NFT."[8]

The addition of further NFTs can be, in the context of digital artwork (or a collection of correspondences) the content creator's signature in the metadata to confirm its authenticity.

NFTs have the potential to disrupt the current archive market of born-digital material in that it ensures the provenance of the data through the blockchain, thus reducing risk for individuals considering such a purchase. Taking this scenario further, the addition of a new demographic of private collectors that do not find it a conceptual leap to purchase NFTs of, say, the multiple drafts of a millennial author's debut, disrupt the current model that have literary agents as brokers to the archives and special collections of institutions.

This is not to say that authors would totally avoid depositing papers with cultural institutions for researchers. What it would mean is proactive, private individual collectors, with an established system of value/authenticity of the material in place, could acquire an author's process in advance of an institution, therefore justifying its value to their collection. This is already a well-established phenomenon through patronage and, indeed, a role institutions continue to rely on collectors for.

The development brought about by NFTs would see more tech savvy authors with millions of followers (readers) through social media (such as poet Rupi Kaur, born in 1992, or Nayyirah Waheed) having a considerable advantage in negotiations with literary agents in terms of retaining control of their content.

As in the case of the widely publicized sale by Christie's of Mike Winkelmann's (the digital artist known as "Beeple") *EVERYDAYS: THE FIRST 5000 DAYS*, the blockchain of NFTs for the piece contains both the work as well as digital certificate that is signed and verified by the content creator.

In this scenario, it is possible that an author could sell NFTs of their born-digital material to either an individual collector or a group of collectors (in which case they would edition the NFTs not unlike photographic prints[9]) in advance of placing their papers with an institution, thus monetizing their process while writing a larger body of work. Considering the above, the opportunity for collectors to acquire born-digital material of authors will most likely be offered by the creators themselves at first from which a secondary market would form.

Although highly sensationalized, the auctioning off of Twitter founder Jack Dorsey's first tweet as an NFT could serve as a precedent for this. It also raises a new set of questions regarding the actual ownership of content that creators publish on social media platforms such as Instagram and Twitter.[10]

Translate Into Private Manuscript Collecting?

In discussing these potential futures with colleagues in the auction market, it should be said that all five with whom I spoke wished to remain off the record. This was, however, not out of a lack of interest in the topic but rather a reluctance to overstate the position of the respective houses they represent. Everyone in the market of literary material is curious. We want to ensure 2021 Biden inauguration poet, Amanda Gorman's (b. 1998), writing process and drafts (and perhaps audio rehearsals?) are preserved. We wonder how Ronan Farrow (b. 1987) developed as a journalist, his techniques in breaking major stories such as the sexual abuses of film producer Harvey Weinstein. What can we glean from the work of recently retired *Washington Post* editor Marty Baron (b.

1954)? These are just some of the few individuals from recent memory who have published work that have transformed public conversations about major issues.

Thinking about born-digital material in relation to the tradition of manuscript collecting (mapped broadly from autographs to archives), the closest equivalent (in terms of sheer quantity) is paper archives. Already this limits the pool of prospective private buyers and directs it back to institutional purchase, to say nothing of the dense content. That said, the conditions of storage for born-digital works are obviously less burdensome than those for a collection of manuscript materials. The major obstacle is identifying the draw to prospective buyers. As a seller, where and what is the cultural significance of this accumulation of 'data'? Furthermore, how would a collector relate to this material? Returning to the collector's table from the introduction, is the transmission of the creator's presence possible via digital technologies? Or do we need to consider an entirely new sensorial experience?

Two examples from academic institutions come to mind: Salmon Rushdie's papers at Emory University and Susan Sontag's papers at Stanford. In both cases, these institutions have made use of emulation software so that visitors may experience the author's computer as it was arranged by them (with some restrictions). As Chen observes of its application to Rushdie's computer (equally applicable to Sontag's), such lengths do little to make the born-digital material accessible for research purposes, aiding them to, "understand Rushdie not from the perspective of the content in his born-digital files but from how [the researchers] experience navigating his digital space."[11]

Increasingly outmoded within the academic research context, this format of relating to an author's digital environment, and the content within it, seems to occupy a conceptual space within close proximity of physical manuscript collecting. However, the issue of quantity remains, as auction professionals remain limited in the lead up time toward preparing for an auction. The conceptual

leap required in cataloguing such material makes it a challenge to communicate its rarity to prospective buyers at present.

This impasse, however, might be surmountable if the buyer is a so-called 'Digital Native' and is aware of the logistical requirements to acquire and continually stabilize such material. In that case, the descriptive runway required shortens considerably and then trade and auction professionals are having a different conversation with the buyer.

NFTs provide a viable option for ensuring a link between the collector and the content's creator. There is then the discussion of how the collector interacts with said content. Although (relatively) immaterial in relation to paper archives (its closest physical equivalent within the collector community) considerations as to how to 'activate' the content have yet to be defined. Following Chen's description of the exclusive relationship between literary agents and collecting institutions, she provides an intriguing suggestion for dealers (and auctioneers) looking out onto this uncharted territory,

> While translating the value of print into a digital realm is difficult, it is possible. Computers, phones, and other machines do carry traces of their owners through their unique patterns of wear. Savvy dealers will need to identify and exploit the physical properties of these machines to help their businesses prosper.[12]

The form that may take is unclear, though it brings to mind memorabilia offered as markets exhaust available paper material, Sylvia Plath's Hermes 3000 with which she wrote *The Bell Jar* (1963)[13] or Virginia Woolf's writing desk at Duke University.[14] Another consideration in this collecting direction is privacy. As alluded to in the example of Zadie Smith's internet-blocker, the personal and professional blur in our use of digital technologies and make such objects not only archives of working papers but also intimate diaries of 'notes to self' and web searches.

At the core of this discussion is the potential role of the collector as a custodian for current creators who have not yet secured a literary agent who has in-roads to placing their papers with research institutions. In connection with the earlier statements of book and manuscript collectors as collecting ideas as much as they are objects, this is not a novel concept. The medium has just changed.

At present, the digital amnesia actively taking place with future creators is generating a gap and, as a culture, we run the risk of losing the vital perspective of early career writers and cultural contributors. The situation is dire. We occupy a time of blind optimism that all will be stored in the Cloud when, in reality, bit rot and obsolescence are doing away with vast swaths of cultural expression housed in born-digital environments. At a time of great enthusiasm toward individual expression online, there is little consideration of conservation of such expressions for posterity.

Conclusion: Collecting Networks

We are in the process of crossing a threshold when it comes to humanity's relationship to digital technology. As we develop technologies that mediate our relationship to the world, we are, ourselves, affected in the process. We are in a paradigm shift where modes of understanding the world and the stories we tell ourselves are guided less by central figures who embody ideas and more across networks of events within systems.

It is not that figures will leave the picture entirely. Popular media and modes of storytelling fixate on individuals as entry points into an event, but we are in the midst of developing forms of representation that depict *networks*. Where and how the collector relates to this mode is yet to be defined. It will not be encapsulated in discrete objects but rather threads. There is no longer a Walden; the writer is in amongst the networked society. Like the millennial writer, the millennial collector has a different perception of self and

their relationship to this society, which influences their collecting practice.

In theory, this more networked understanding of how events transpire is endemic to the collector; it is their way of being. The table with the manuscripts spread across it was a random selection of materials from which we drew patterns. This is what collectors do — select contextually similar objects (a subject) that convey ideas. However, through the collector's act of relating individual materials with one another, new significance is generated. It generates a unique impression of a time. In a mostly superficial fashion, this is now the default mode by which people online represent themselves and the world, as can be seen on social media. Online, instead of the collection of materials being the representation of an idea, it is the formation of one's fluid identity; one's profile.

One strategy for avoiding this uncanny reflection has been to develop more localized and rarified collections within the physical world. As the digital subsumes the physical content of the present it simultaneously unearths and commodifies with more granularity the local inflections of global cultural expressions. The collector of today will have an opportunity to play an active role in the advocacy and preservation of contemporary writers and engage in new models of acquisition that will reimagine the collector's relationship to society at-large for the 21st century.

About the Author

Spencer W. Stuart provides advisory services to private collectors as well as institutions aiding in the design and execution of collection development, inventories, catalogues, and collection appraisals as well as deaccession strategies. He holds a master's degree in the History of Art from the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, England (recipient of the Director's Award). Upon graduation he took a position with Bonhams Auctioneers where he worked closely with the North American Rare Books and Manuscripts department in Toronto and New York.

Spencer is an alumnus of the Colorado Antiquarian Book Seminars and completed course work through the Rare Book School (University of Virginia).

In concert with his advising, Spencer is an active writer and lecturer on histories of the printed word for a variety of publications including The Book Collector and Amphora as well as with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (http://spencerwstuart.ca/media/).

Endnotes

[1] Mary Ann Doane. "Indexicality: Trace and Sign: Introduction." Differences. Volume 18, no. 1 (2007): 1-6. As an aside, on defining Pierce's notion, Mary Ann Doane describes it as, "On the one hand, the term seems to specify signs on the order of the trace - the footprint, the death mask, the photograph (where the object leaves its imprint on a light-sensitive surface). […] On the other hand, Peirce emphasizes that the shifter in language - a category including pronouns such as "this," "now," "I," "here" - is an exemplary form of the index." (Doane, 2).

[2] Walter Benjamin. "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations.* 217-252. Edited by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 222. Benjamin characterizes the effect of the 'aura' "as [a] unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it might be."

[3] Chen, Amy Hildreth. *Placing Papers: The American Literary Archives Market* (Amherst/Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020), 98.

[4] Chen, 99 – Pearce-Moses

[5] Chen, 126.

[6] Luke Conway. "Blockchain Explained". *Investopedia.* Last updated on June 1, 2021. https://www.investopedia.com/terms/b/blockchain.asp#what-is-blockchain

[7] Ibid.

[8] Rakesh Sharma. "What Is a Non-Fungible Token (NFT)?" *Investopedia.* Last updated on March 18, 2021. https://www.investopedia.com/non-fungible-tokens-nft-5115211

[9] James Tarmy. "NFTs Are Booming, But They're Nothing New in the Art Market". *Bloomberg Businessweek*. Bloomberg.com https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-03-02/nft-art-boom-is-the-same-concept-as-the-photography-market?sref=M8H6LjUF

[10] "Twitter founder's first tweet draws $2.5 million bid at auction". *DW Akademie*. March 7, 2021. https://www.dw.com/en/twitter-founders-first-tweet-draws-25-million-bid-at-auction/a-56797125

[11] Chen, 103.

[12] Chen, 126.

[13] Rebecca Rego Barry. "Sylvia Plath's Typewriter Headed to Auction". *Fine Books & Collections*. February 2018. https://www.finebooksmagazine.com/blog/sylvia-plaths-typewriter-headed-auction

[14] "Virginia Woolf's Writing Desk". *Duke University Libraries*. No date. https://library.duke.edu/exhibits/2015/baskin