

Elizabeth Harnett  
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Understanding the Issues of a Feminist Archive: Examining The Feminist Art Base of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center, New Day Films and the Lesbian Herstory Archive

The practice of archiving is comprised of a series of questions: what does the archivist choose to save, how do they construct an expression of a moment in time, and how does one teach the future about the past? Goals and challenges change with each type of archive created, and each archive will have its own issues to grapple with. I am interested in focusing on the ways in which archives centered on certain theories and methodologies, specifically feminism, involve a specific creation process and why these archives have become prevalent in the past few years. Feminist archives including writing, art and moving images all stress the same goal: in order to prevent loss and absence, archives must be created for future generations to educate and inspire. This paper will be focusing specifically on three case studies: the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New Day Films and The Lesbian Herstory Archives in order to understand the specific ways that a feminist archive is formed and used. I will be using E. Ann Kaplan's essay *Unfixing: Archives of the Future* and Vivian Sobchak's essay "*Presentifying*" *Film and Media Feminism* in order to work through the issues that surround building a feminist archive, and what it means to actively build an archive for the future, instead of one that simply represents the past.

It is important to note that the majority of the archives examined in this paper are digital archives, which is a significant feature in the development of feminist archives. One of the most important factors to note in feminist digital archiving is how the Internet

plays an important role in their formation. Many of the archives that will be examined in this paper are physical archives that also have Internet components, which I believe is pertinent to the construction of a feminist archive. Most of the internet archives were created in the past five years, and this is essential for accessibility: because it is a (relatively) new subject matter it is necessary that the archives would be uploaded on the Internet in a new way of access. Unlike simple traditional museum archives, the addition of archives on the Internet (such as the New Art Base for the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center) allows for accessibility and dialogue between the viewers, artists and curators as well as the works themselves. This paper will also focus on how archives dealing with feminist issues have the same objective: a need to educate and to teach the next generation.

Reviewing collections related to general moving images show that there is always a definite interest in restoring and archiving footage. Yet devoting research, funds and time is difficult, and for women's film they have historically been given less attention as other types of film and footage. A simple overview of archival practices acknowledges this. Organizations such as New York University's Moving Image Archive and Preservation (MIAP) have events that address these issues.<sup>1</sup> The Library of Congress has a section within their Moving Image Archives addressed to the "American Women", yet it is simply the appearance of woman with the classical Hollywood context, and not an archive that is feminist coded or about the female experience. Other important organizations in the field of moving image archives show little attention, such as the

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<sup>1</sup> This event "Preserving Women's Films", addressing the importance of efforts made to this topic, took place on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2013 and included active producers in the industry as well as former students of the program. This event presented the importance of Women's Film preservation and archiving, and how it is still relative today.

University of South Carolina who have a simple tag for “Women’s history” that relates to one event. The University of California Los Angeles has just announced plans “for an online lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender moving-image research area”.<sup>2</sup> Moving image archival has become an established program and yet there is still little attention paid within these organizations to women’s (and feminist) film. However the burgeoning presence of Internet archives indicate that this will continue to change for the better in the near future.

Many feminist archives share common missions and general characteristics-most importantly a strong interest in (re)constructing women's history. As Karen Offen has put it, "earlier generations of feminists understood well that 'remembrance of things past' is important for plotting the future".<sup>3</sup> Another reason for the construction of a feminist archive is the absence of that subject matter in overall archives. For example when discussing the construction of an archive for the Fluxus movement it was stated that “despite women's prominence in Fluxus, much of their contribution has been limited to the periphery in art history and performance studies, which have often placed male figures in the center...The goal of this issue is to start a feminist archive of Fluxus by collecting and preserving new accounts by and of women artists that might become otherwise lost”.<sup>4</sup> This leads to another one of the main objectives of archiving (along

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<sup>2</sup> This archive is in collaboration with Outfest, a student organization, and the UCLA Film and Television archive. The digital portal is expected to be launched in late 2013 (<http://newsroom.ucla.edu/portal/ucla/ucla-film-and-television-archive-247401.aspx>).

<sup>3</sup> An example of this are the International Archives for the Women's Movement (abbreviated as IAV after its Dutch name), founded in Amsterdam. This movement addresses many of the issues that will be pertinent to the case studies in this paper.

<sup>4</sup> The 2009 issue of the journal “Women and Performance” addressed the issues and necessities of creating women and feminist archiving in relation to many subjects, including Fluxus, a network of artists from the 1960’s working in different media.

with education): the prevention of loss. This becomes all the more important when applied to feminist studies where records are already limited.

What is unique to creating and maintaining a feminist archive is not so much the objects that are included but the theories of feminist time that surround it.<sup>5</sup> When creating a feminist archive the process ironically involves looking to the future instead of the past: what should be saved in order to create the idea and view of the feminist experience of today. In fact, Jacques Derrida writes of this in his essay *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, stating “as much as and more than a thing of the past, before such a thing, the archive should call into question the coming of the future”. This is what makes archiving in this method so revolutionary, and is similar to the work of other contemporary organizations.<sup>6</sup> Traditional archival practices collect information of a certain time and hope to find knowledge in an already established historical context. This method, however, forces the archivist to create a new historical context in which this work (such as moving images) will be placed. By acknowledging the importance of creating an archive for the future today, the archivist can determine the frameworks and methodologies needed to ascertain certain goals pertinent to their collection: mainly, how to prevent loss and how to educate others.

As a new form of archiving it is important to understand how one attempts to create an archive for the future? As E. Ann Kaplan writes in her essay *Unfixing: Archives of the Future*, “responsibility for the future of feminist film, media and cultural studies is at stake in rethinking the archive” (186). In order to achieve this, according to

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<sup>5</sup> From E. Ann Kaplan’s essay *Unfixing: Archives of the Future*.

<sup>6</sup> This is similar to organizations such as Activist Archivists in relation to the Occupy Wall Street movement, where the goal was to document and archive the events as they were happening.

Kaplan, it is necessary to rethink the idea of feminist time. There must be an “undoing (of) a normative teleology regarding feminist research” (Kaplan, 186). Rather than think of research and archives as definitive, feminist archives must remain open to the effects of time and the fluidity of materials and theory. In order to create a successful feminist archive today for the future, the archive cannot be conclusive. We must regard the different levels of the (filmic) feminist movement: from Marxist, to psychoanalysis, to post colonialism, as well as the different factors these theories operate on (political, social, national and personal), whether they are of the moment or considered passé. As a methodology that is constantly changing, it is important that the archive remain open to change as well and not look for an end goal.

Furthermore, as Kaplan eloquently states, “formulating an archive for the future suggests not only that we decide to preserve already anticipates the future or even *constitutes* the future (hence the responsibility), but that archives are unstable, arbitrary, and selective-like memory itself” (186). By creating an archive for the future, more responsibility is placed on the archivist/organization that is constructing it in the present. They are not solely dependent on records that are already provided to them. They must pick and choose what is to be saved and referenced in the future. While this may be a seemingly preferable option compared to working with incomplete archives, it in fact becomes a truly daunting task. How does one encapsulate a time period, the feeling of an era, when that period is still current? Can an archivist honestly view their archive objectively?

And what is an archivist to do with the knowledge that they are creating works and archives for the future, not just the contemporary era? Feminist works of the 1970’s,

for example, were not made with the idea of looking to the future: they were of the contemporary period and spoke to the moment. They aimed to answer questions of the time, examine issues that pertained to them, and open debates to the strategies involved in producing feminist works. By creating an archive that is knowingly looking to the future and is therefore seemingly self aware, how can it accurately capture the time period and allow for future scholars/viewers/archivists to understand the contemporary life of that period? While this would seem to make an impartial archive I would argue that these archives in fact become fuller and more complete. When the archivist understands that the objective of their collection is to teach they can develop a collection specifically for that goal.

Because of movements like these that are so marked by time it is understandable that knowledge of time would be an issue. Feminist practices from the past dealt with the issues of the time, just as current feminist practices focus on the issues of today. It is impossible to foretell what the issues of the future will be and how (or if) our current feminist dealings will be applied. However it is still important to maintain a record of our current understandings for the future. And, when dealing with feminist time, this archive must not be looking to an end point. Rather, feminist time points to a cyclical notion that will constantly be returned to, what Kaplan calls a “sisterly time” as opposed to the idea of “patriarchal time” introduced by Derrida.<sup>7</sup>

By adopting this sisterly time the archivist can achieve the “liberated version of scholarly feminism” that Vivian Sobchak calls for in her essay “*Presentifying*” *Film and*

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<sup>7</sup>Jacques Derrida introduced the idea of patriarchal time in his essay, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, and views patriarchal time as linear in progression (compared to the cyclical nature of sisterly time).

*Media Feminism* (65). Because of the change of media and cultural studies in contemporary scholarship, new methodologies and practices can be applied to the subject matter, which allows for new interactions. The importance of a specifically feminist archive allows for specific goals to be achieved that would otherwise not be addressed. Because of sisterly, or feminist, time, there isn't necessarily a goal because there is no end point to be reached. Rather it is a continuing development of the movement. As Kaplan puts it:

That is, this archive brings perhaps forgotten works and films into the present to act of the future. Works crucial to queer, gay/lesbian, and race (ethnicity, indigeneity) studies are central in this archive, not only in terms of "bringing into the present" along the lines just noted but also constructing future feminist agendas. My image for an "Archive of the Future" is a place for a plethora of theories and practices for scholars and others to draw on from whatever feminist time, unfixed and organized as a sisterly network of ideas rather than progression. (189)

A feminist archive allows for a more fluid exchange of ideas. It resists placing records into succinct categories but rather allows them to interact with each other. Because it is an archive of the future, it is ironically not stuck in the past. It has become a new, revolutionary form of archives (I believe that this can be applied to further methodologies that are currently being studied, such as GLBTQ or post colonial studies).

Vivian Sobchak also discusses the need of creating an archive for the future in the same terms that Kaplan discusses. In order to engage students in the studies of the past it is necessary to use contemporary examples to spark their interests. In her essay

*"Presentifying" Film and Media Feminism* she writes

That is, insofar as we embrace the integration and diffusion of film and media feminism and the intellectual freedom, diversity and expansiveness that this allows us in our scholarly research, we have a certain obligation (as we always do) to remember and to teach (not sell) the historical past. But we now have to do this different-for parts of our own lived historical past are long past and were not lived by our students. Thus we cannot successfully make students care about or-

more importantly-engage in either the past or the future of feminism and its relation to media unless we begin *in the present*. (67)

Ultimately the objective of an archive is to teach and to engage the viewer in its subject matter. An important factor that Sobchak mentions is obligation: the obligation that teachers or those with knowledge of the past have to spread and share their knowledge. The archive is a conduit for this action. It becomes a way in which these ideas can be exchanged. In order to be responsible, no matter what subject, the archivist must create the past for the future.

Sobchak goes on to argue that this scholarly and intellectual freedom that has been achieved means there is a definite responsibility when creating these archives-it is a power that should not be taken for granted. By creating an archive for the future even more research and study can be continued on the subject. As Sobchak says “discipline (scholarly or otherwise) should be focused less on policing intellectual borders than on encouraging rigorous thought and reanimating what might seem the rigor mortis of deadened (but not dead) ideas” (68). As long as it allows for new interactions with the material and new ways of learning then the archive is a success. This is why the collections that will be examined later in this paper are successful in achieving their individual missions, with details such as different types of search methods and interactions with the curator and artists themselves.

After examining the theories of Kaplan and Sobchak it becomes very clear that archiving is indeed a feminist issue.<sup>8</sup> As Rachel Moseley and Helen Wheatley write in

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<sup>8</sup> This question is addressed in Rachel Moseley and Helen Wheatley’s excellent article “Is Archiving a Feminist Issue?: Historical Research and the Past, Present, and Future of Television Studies” in which they studied the BBC archives and the presence of women within them.



their article, “our question ‘is archiving a feminist issue?’ draws attention to the ways in which archiving practices affect and produce the kinds of histories that can be written” (153). This is what becomes important with regards to this specific type of archival practice: in order to not control and limit what histories can be written the ways in which an archive is created become all the more important. Moseley and Wheatley go on to discuss why archiving is specifically a feminist issue because of the “relative absence of texts traditionally coded as feminine from publicly accessible archives, and that is an absence that needs to be addressed” (156). I would go further and say that this absence needs to be prevented, and this is what the following archives examined in this paper aim to do. The main goal of these archives is not a prevention of loss, but rather a completion of missing information.

The following archives are three case studies that will be examined to understand the different methods used in feminist archival practices. These are the Elizabeth A. Sackler Institute at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, New Day Films and the Lesbian Herstory Archives. I am interested in these three organizations (one an internet component as part of a museum, one an internet and library collection, and one a newly developed internet archive based on a physical collection) because they are focused on this new idea of feminist film, and collecting footage (whether it be narrative, documentary, formal, etc.) pertaining to the topic. Because these organizations have limited themselves to this focus it is clear that their goals are: that of preserving art and films related to the female experience. The needs of each organization are different (though they still have the same goal in mind). Also, New Day Films and the Lesbian Herstory Archives is predominately based on film, whereas the Elizabeth A. Sackler

Institute focuses on feminist art from all different medias, not just video. Examining these three archives will provide us of examples of current feminist archives and the ways in which they are achieve the main goals of feminist archives: prevention of loss, and education for the present and future.

### **“The Feminist Art Base” at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art**

The Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art is based out of the Brooklyn Museum of Art and is one of the few centers within a museum context to focus on Feminist artistic practices. The center was opened in March 2007, and because it is less than ten years old it is a prime example of the ways in which archives and collections are developed. Because the center is in a museum context there is a wide range of art included, from traditional art (sculpture, painting) to new media.<sup>9</sup> The introduction of new artistic forms such as film and video was exemplified in a contemporary video art exhibition entitled "Reflections on the Electric Mirror: New Feminist Video" (2009-10). The Elizabeth A. Sackler Center itself can be viewed not just as a museum space/exhibition, but also as a larger archive as well because of its missions and goals, which are related to the feminist issues previously discussed.

As the mission statement articulates, “The Center's mission is to raise awareness of feminism's cultural contributions, to educate new generations about the meaning of feminist art, to maintain a dynamic and welcoming learning environment, and to present

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<sup>9</sup> According to the website, “Among the most ambitious, influential, and enduring artistic movements to emerge in the late twentieth century, feminist art has played a leading role in the art world over the last forty years. Dramatically expanding the definition of art to be more inclusive in all areas, from subject matter to media, feminist art reintroduced the articulation of socially relevant issues after an era of aesthetic "formalism," while pioneering the use of performance and audiovisual media within a fine art idiom”.

feminism in an approachable and relevant way”.<sup>10</sup> There are already similarities between the Center’s goals and those of the feminist archives that have been discussed by Kaplan and Sobchak: educating new generations on this topic that is constantly changing.

Because the Center is devoted to education it allows the curators to raise awareness to the impact and cultural contribution of feminism within the arts. When asked in an interview about how the center both historicizes feminist art as well as maintains current exhibitions, curator Catherine Morris answered

We are trying to find a balance. One of my goals is to develop a long-term program through which we can describe the broad influence of feminism and how that can be applied to understanding older art. Right now, we have the Kiki Smith exhibition that has much to do with one artist's particular take on feminism and [she] has clearly stated her commitment to feminism and the impact of feminism on her work. I think we have these various generations; we have older work that dates before the common usage of the word "feminist," the period of artists who designed the word.<sup>11</sup>

These issues are similar to those made when establishing a feminist archive, such as how does one combine their knowledge of the past with what is happening currently? What also makes a feminist archive interesting is having to attribute a term that was not used frequently until about forty years ago to works created when that term was not in place. This relates to the sisterly time addressed by Kaplan: that the nature of feminist time is cyclical, and there is no definitive strategy for analyzing and defining it. Objects and records will continue to interact with each other even outside of traditional contexts.

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<sup>10</sup> From the Elizabeth A. Sackler Website, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/>.

<sup>11</sup> From Harry J. Weil’s interview “Great Women Artists: A Conversation with Catherine Morris”.

Outside of the actual physical space of the center is the online archive, “The Feminist Art Base.”<sup>12</sup> Continuing the goal of education in feminist art, the archive contains images, video and audio clips as well as biographies, resumes and Artists’ statements. According to the mission on the statement:

Our goal is to make this groundbreaking archive a comprehensive resource for artists, curators, scholars, and the general public. We see this database as an integral tool for accomplishing the mission of the Center: to present feminism in an approachable and relevant manner, to educate new generations about the meaning of feminist art, and to raise awareness of feminism's cultural contributions.

In today's world accessibility is very important, and it is even more important when it is a subject matter that is new to a student who is trying to learn and understand it. In order to make the subject matter interesting it is necessary to allow them to access it (and then hope that they are interested enough to visit the space itself and continue to study the topic). What is also significant about this archive, more so than visitor accessibility, is the accessibility of the artist. The archive notes that artists update their profiles daily, making this a “living archive”. It is not set in stone and not unchangeable: it is fluid and moving. This allows for a dialogue between the artist and the public and allows for more learning, engagement and an exchange of ideas.

The archive is searchable through three different methods: popularity tags, alphabetical lists and a basic search engine. Therefore, whether the visitor knows specifically what they are looking for or just has a basic idea of what they’re interested in they can find the information needed. The archive contains both image and video, allowing for a well-rounded experience. For the purpose of this paper I will be focusing

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<sup>12</sup> The Feminist Art Base Online Page:  
[https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist\\_art\\_base/index.php](https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/index.php)

on the video/video artists pages. The home page of the New Art Base does have a note that it is not for people under eighteen years of age without permission of the parent, however it is easily accessible without it. This relates to the archives goal of having a wide audience and not limiting or censoring it.

Each page for each video installation contains a title, the video itself as well as the artists' name, the title of the piece and the year it was created. There is a description, the medium and tags that go with the film (eroticism, transgression, experimental, etc.) that allow the viewer to see related videos. There is also contact information (address, email) provided for active artists, as well as links to their websites and workspaces. Because this archive is curated by the center, and because it is so young, the metadata of the website is articulate and useful but not overwhelming. The archive is well organized, which is imperative for introducing archives based on methodologies and theory, and is easy to use.

What makes the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center and its corresponding Internet archive so important is the ways in which it is radical. Not only has feminist art been underrepresented in museums (this is one of the first spaces to allow for it), it also means that the Internet archive is one of the first online archive spaces pertinent to feminist art. As the Center continues to grow it can continue to build the archive and create an archive of the future, which we now know is critical to feminist art. And, as new objects are donated and added to the collection, the element of cyclical time can continue to be achieved.

**New Day Films & The Rubenstein Library**

Similar to the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center's Feminist Art Base Internet archive, the New Day Films archive is based on women's experience and focuses on films produced for and about women. Unlike the center, however it was started much earlier in 1971. New Day Films was first focused on distributing films specifically by, for and about women. However with the introduction of the website they now have an Internet archive as well as a physical archive which will be discussed further.<sup>13</sup> According to the mission statement of New Day Films, "New Day films have been effective vehicles for social change, helping to expand consciousness about human rights, sexual roles in society, environmental concerns, aging, and other issues". Like the objects of the Feminist Art Base, the goal of the project is to inspire dialogue and relate women's experiences.

In 2012, New Day Films worked with the Rubenstein Library at Duke University in order to create a physical archive of the collection, especially the earlier works created by the founding members. According to the press release after the acquisition,

Documenting a pioneering film Distribution Company and collective, the first to distribute feminist films in the early 1970s, the New Day Films Collection is an important record of both New Day's formation and the Feminist Movement.... The Rubenstein is committed to preserving the New Day Films Collection for future generations to make this record of the evolution of progressive independent American filmmaking available for teaching and research.

In this case, because of the large amount of records and material, it was necessary to work with an outside organization in order to effectively create the archive. The archive documents a pioneering film distribution company that was the first to distribute feminist films and therefore the collection is an important record of the Feminist Movement and

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<sup>13</sup>The New Day Films website, <http://www.newday.com/index.html>

should be included in a discussion of feminist archival practices. Not only does it prevent loss but it also fills a gap by containing work that is the first of its kind.

This organization is an important inclusion when discussing feminist archives because of the similarities in its goals and principles. New Day Films allowed for a new space in which to display and show their art, which is an issue addressed by the other two case studies. The Rubenstein Library's interest in archiving this material shows the importance of it, and the fact that it has happened so recently shows why archiving addressing this subject matter has become so important. When addressing a new device of archiving pertaining to theory such as feminism the changes will only be addressed much later (in this case, forty years after its inception). Unlike the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center (and as will soon be analyzed, the Lesbian Herstory Archives) this is not so much a creation of an archive for the future. Rather it is more traditional in its focus of the past and bringing it to the present. The New Day Films archives succinctly represent how feminist goals can still be applied to traditional archiving practices.

### **Lesbian Herstory Archives**

An Internet archive that has only been created five years ago, the Lesbian Herstory Archives represents an accessible Internet archive that allows for search and interaction. Not only is it an archive that can be seen as feminist, but it also acknowledges a sexuality aspect, therefore a well-rounded feminine experience. Like New Day Films it was created in the early 1970's, an era where much new discourse was coming to life and people were becoming more open to the subject matter-again it was important that an archive be created at the start of this movement so viewers today can learn about the progression of feminist practices over time.

Though the Lesbian Herstory Archives is based on the Lesbian experience (unlike the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center, which focuses on feminist experience) it is important to compare the two because both have similar goals in their mission statements.<sup>14</sup>

According to the mission of the Lesbian Herstory Archives,

The Lesbian Herstory Archives exists to gather and preserve records of Lesbian lives and activities so that future generations will have ready access to materials relevant to their lives. The process of gathering this material will uncover and collect our herstory denied to us previously by patriarchal historians in the interests of the culture, which they serve. We will be able to analyze and reevaluate the Lesbian experience; we also hope the existence of the Archives will encourage Lesbians to record their experiences in order to formulate our living herstory.

There are two important similarities within this mission statement to the idea of feminist archiving as well as viewing the archives as living archives. First, the need to create an archive distanced from the patriarchy. The history of archiving has been a patriarchal practice because it was (and still is) commonly men who formed these archives. The Lesbian Herstory Archives allow for a new space to “analyze and reevaluate” and construct their own history.

Another important similarity is what they call “our living herstory”. I mentioned with regards to the Feminist Art Base at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center how that was a living archive: new footage was added daily, and the artists themselves could contribute and interact with their archives. This also relates to the idea posed by Kaplan and Sobchak: creating an archive today is also creating one for the future. The Principles of the Mission Statement go on to address breaking free from the “traditional elitism” of Archives, which after examining these three case studies is a common goal of a feminist archive.

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<sup>14</sup> From the Official Website, <http://www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org>.



Like other archives this contains many different types of records, including writing, artwork and video. As recently as 2010 they have started to upload their work to a digital archive, which reflects the importance of these non-traditional archives to make their information accessible.<sup>15</sup> Because most of their work is based on volunteers and interns (and they do not have the same resources as a museum/distribution company) the process is slow. The majority of the digital archives as of the writing of this paper include photographs and audiotapes. Compared to searching in the Feminist Art Base there are much fewer records to search through. However for each record the metadata is specific with title, description, type, creator, location, publisher and contributor. It also has tags which allow for easier browsing, as well as citations (representing the research nature of the archives themselves).

## **Conclusion**

The practice of feminist archiving shares the two main objectives that other archives have: they complete a gap of information, and they aim to educate others. However the theories behind these undertaking a feminist archive are much different: rather than be focused on the past the archivist must look to the future. The archive must be accessible, engaging and open. Feminism, even in today's world, is a word that still connotes something undesirable and is not completely accepted by society. By creating these archives the issues of feminism can continue to be addressed. Feminist archiving, and archives that have addressed the female experience, have only recently become

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<sup>15</sup> According to the website, "This website is the product of a digitization project undertaken by graduate students enrolled in the Projects in Digital Archives courses taught by Anthony Cocciolo at Pratt Institute School of Information and Library Science. In conjunction with the Lesbian Herstory Archives, students have worked to digitize audio recording from the 3,000 audiocassettes in the Archives' collection. The project began Fall 2010".

acknowledged. Their digitization has become even more recent (all of which have happened within the past ten years). It emphasizes the fact that this is a type of archival practice different than the traditional: a new and current model.

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