Who Are We Really?

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This paper will focus on my experience conducting research in archives of Puerto Rican visual arts and culture. My nearly eight years of this research have been conducted in both public and private archives in Puerto Rico, New York, Washington, DC, and Los Angeles. I will mainly discuss my work on the Island and will expand upon other locations if time permits. During the years that I have been conducting research in and about Puerto Rico, I have had the opportunity to visit both public and private archives. Among those that I have consulted on the Island are: the Colección de las Artes and Colección Puertorriqueña, both at the Biblioteca José M. Lázaro at the Universidad de Puerto Rico, Recinto de Río Piedras; the archives at the Museo de Arte, Historia, Antropología y Arte, also on that campus; the library of the Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe; the institutional archive of the División de Artes Plásticas of the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña; the Revista del Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña; the Archivo General de Puerto Rico; the Museo Pío López at the Universidad de Puerto Rico en Cayey; the Fundación Luis Muñoz Marín; and the private archives of art historian Margarita Fernández Zavala, artist Antonio Martorell, and art historian Teresa Tió.

As stated previously, in the continental US I have consulted archives primarily in New York City and Washington, DC, and somewhat less successfully in Los Angeles. In New York, I mostly focused on The Museum Archives, Museum of Modern Art and the Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños, Hunter College, City University of New York. While in Washington, I worked at the Archives Center at the National Museum of American History; the Smithsonian Institute Archives of American Art, the Smithsonian Institution; and the Library of Congress. In Los Angeles, I worked at the archives at the Getty Research Institute and the Chicano Studies Research Center at UCLA.

Although every institution has been different, Puerto Rico’s colonial status vis-à-vis the United States and the friction that this creates take quite a toll on collecting practices for both Puerto Rican art and document archives, both...
on and outside the Island. Several socioeconomic factors have come together to create this. One is the Island’s dual political and economic dependence on the US. Many wish it were finally resolved in the form of independence or statehood, as it leads to much conflict among locals with polarized political affiliations. This, in turn, leads to internal political tensions and economic constraints. Why would this affect archives? The majority of Island archives are government sponsored. Given political tensions, depending on which of the two main political parties is in power, arts and cultural institutions face obstacles to access the materials in most local, government-funded archives. Among those obstacles are politically appointed directors who might not have the interest or credentials. Others are severe budget cuts that lead to shortages influencing staffing, organization, operating hours, acquisition of materials, and preservation, to just name a few.

These political tensions are often exacerbated when combined with the larger, global economic crisis that we’ve faced this past decade. This led to the economic crisis of 2006 when the Puerto Rican governor, Aníbal Acevedo Vilá, and the local legislature were unable to reach a budget agreement, the state government had to close down that May due to a lack of funds, and there were threats that it might happen again in 2010 and 2011. This led to a complete halt of activity on the Island, not only in the government shutdown but also in the closing of public schools, which put almost one hundred thousand people out of work temporarily. As a personal example, this was during the summer that I was going to conduct my first pre-dissertation trip. I had received a research travel grant and had all of my arrangements made, only to find out a few weeks before that I would very likely not be able to conduct research. In the end it worked out.

The economy of Puerto Rico has continued to languish. Among the outcomes of the weakened economy was the slashing of state funding for the state university and, in 2010, the governor mandated a hike in student tuition, which included a special quota added to the Universidad de Puerto Rico system. These increases were met with student protests, and countered by then-governor Luis Fortuño with the state police’s occupation of the Rio Piedras campus in 2010 and 2011.

As you can imagine, conducting research on the Island has been far from easy. The archives that I consulted there operate with various degrees of stability. What I have encountered during my research trips is that visual art and cultural resources in Puerto Rico tend to be fragile and incomplete, fragmented and divided among various locations without much rhyme or reason, and neglected in terms of organization and preservation. There have been some isolated efforts to collect and preserve often delicate and ephemeral materials that can tell us about local artistic production, exhibition and curatorial practices, and critical reception, as well as the participation of Island artists in national and international arenas.
Despite these issues, visual arts production in Puerto Rico has had a fairly robust run, especially during the postwar boom. Various art museums, artists’ workshops, galleries, and cultural institutions, such as the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, established in 1955, were developed to support and showcase artistic production. However, its materials—like exhibition files; artwork catalogs; and ephemera such as manifestos, flyers, memos, and agendas—have not been preserved. Given the economic constraints of most of these institutions, the fleeting nature of most of the organizations and events, and perhaps even due to a lack of foresight, most of these institutions have prioritized the hosting of active exhibition programs over preserving records of the artists’ work. Moreover, many of these short-lived artists’ organizations never had a physical location, but met on a rotating basis at different places and pooled funds to rent out exhibition spaces. This leads to a crucial question: Where might the records have been preserved when the organizations themselves were nomadic? Without such a repository or series of them, vital materials that would have added depth and dimension to the history of art in Puerto Rico have been lost or dispersed, along with most of the institutional memory about their events and rotating locations. This also goes for the precious few such materials that remain.

Despite several local efforts, many artists’ and institutional archives remain lost or are disorganized, and I fear that they teeter on the verge of perishing. Most of these histories are preserved in the form of memories, which could be rescued as oral histories. However, the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, or ICP for short, was created under Law 89 of 1955 by the Commonwealth government in power at the time. It was and remains responsible for the establishment of cultural policies in order to “preserve, promote, research and divulge the Puerto Rican culture in its complex diversity.” The ICP has several subdivisions to enact its purpose of preserving local history and culture. These divisions have documented the history of Puerto Rico’s art and culture since the mid 1950s through the accumulation of separate but related collections of materials. Today I will address my experiences at the División de Artes Plásticas, established in 1973, and at the Archivo General de Puerto Rico, established in 1955. Given that the subject and object of my research is the San Juan Print Biennial, held from 1969 through the present and organized by the ICP, I have spent many hours in various Instituto archives. The Biennial’s office and archives have been housed at the División de Artes Plásticas since the division’s creation in 1973. For that reason, I visit its offices quite frequently. When I first visited the Artes Plásticas’s so-called “archive” in 2006, I was surprised to find they did not have an archivist in charge of these materials, nor was any other person in charge of maintaining or managing the archive. Instead, the various staff people, completely untrained in archiving, much less preserving, took turns assisting visiting researchers.
These conditions led to the lack of an actual system with which to organize its files. Those that I needed to consult were on the first floor, in the makeshift file room of a beautiful yet leaky colonial building on the bay of San Juan. One can just imagine the humidity issues they face! In addition to the documents such as exhibition files and catalogs, and ephemera such as memos, checklists, and agendas, Artes Plásticas is also supposed to own and manage the collection of the Biennial’s winning prints. Yet, when I requested the artwork, much to my dismay, none of the employees knew the location of these prints, nor could they find documentation that they existed. As an art historian interested in visual production, these prints are a crucial portion of my research. I have summarized the problems with their archival management into a few points:

1. Management and arrangement: There was no management or organization of the records or materials, no record of which documents were kept or where they were located within the archive.

2. Access: Virtually anyone could walk in, sort through the archives, and misfile or take what they wanted from the piled boxes.

3. Physical state: The documents were in various stages of neglect, stored in high-risk, non-archival conditions. Specifically, they were kept in a humid, mold- and mildew-prone space, which will not only lead to their destruction, but poses a health hazard to those who come into contact with them. Years of water damage and mishandling of the documents made my work at Artes Plásticas quite an adventure and required the use of safety gear, such as gloves, a mask, and protective eye wear.

4. Lack of institutional memory: There was little continuity in record keeping or organizational structure. On the institutional level, this led to a fragile and fragmented history of the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña.

Another of my research locations was the Archivo General de Puerto Rico, founded in 1955 and in its current location since 1977. It is also managed by the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña and is composed of five units. It’s responsible for preserving public documents of historical importance for the Island and is the largest repository of its historic documents. Access to the Archivo General is more restricted than in most archives in Puerto Rico. It requires an interview and letter of introduction explaining the purpose of one’s visit.

The Archivo General has a team of trained archivists who assist visiting researchers. Given that the stacks and file room are closed, one is required to fill out a form indicating which boxes will be used, and these are limited to
three per request form. The first time I visited the Archivo General in 2006, I was surprised at its stark contrast with Artes Plásticas. There were cataloged binders neatly organized chronologically by the government office to which the documents had belonged. I was thrilled.

The problem, however, became quickly apparent once I began requesting boxes. I realized that the box numbers and allegedly chronologically arranged contents did not correspond with each other. Although most of the boxes did correspond to the government agency—the ICP—the contents did not follow any kind of rational organization. After much confusion, I set out to find an archivist to help me decipher the system. She then admitted that the arts were not an archival priority, and that the boxes were in the same state and order as when they were sent to the Archivo back in the 1970s. Despite my profound disappointment and difficulties in the archive, the majority of archivists with whom I interacted were extremely helpful. One of them, against protocol, even allowed me in the back with her to search through the disorganized document boxes.

As the national repository of government and national governments, the Archivo faces severe challenges. Even though it seemed organized at first, and was staffed by a trained group of archivists, it has been plagued by severe budget cuts, constant changes in leadership, and shutdown threats. These occur almost every time the Island’s government changes and are more or less severe depending on the incumbent governor’s agenda. These shortages and administrative changes impact productivity and the institution’s profile, including a range of concerns, from whether the archive should even remain open, to which documents merit priority over others. Moreover, the lack of organization of ICP documents shows that arts and cultural archives are not a priority within the institution that, ironically, should study, preserve, diffuse, and enrich Puerto Rican national culture and values. These are problems that sadly plague most government-funded cultural institutions.

I will add that this archive is incredibly difficult to access during the summer and winter break periods, the actual moments in which most of us academics can set aside time for research. On several occasions, I tried contacting a specific division director via phone and e-mail and never received a response. I realized that in addition to the abundant holidays on the Island during the summer and winter, staff coordination was not the archive’s forte. When I attempted to schedule an appointment in one of their units, I was told that the archivist and her assistant had both left for vacation during the same dates and for the entire summer. Thus this unit was left closed and unstaffed for requests for the months of June and July.

However, not all has been bad. One of the most organized archives that I have worked in was that of the library at the Centro de Estudios Avanzados de Puerto Rico y el Caribe. The Centro de Estudios is a private institution for research and higher education. It became an academic institution in 1976 under
the leadership of archeologist, anthropologist, and historian Ricardo Alegriá, who was also the founding director of the Instituto Cultural Puertorriqueña. This is one example that shows how tightly everything is connected in Puerto Rico, for most of the archives reflect back to Alegriá’s work and to one of the political parties of the 1950s.

The library of the Centro houses a small, immaculately organized archive of many of Alegriá’s documents dating back to his years as director of the ICP. Ironically, it was here I was able to access ICP documents, such as press releases and correspondence between Alegriá and other intellectuals connected to the US Congress and US art collections. Such correspondence, as with the Library of Congress and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, was not available in any of the various institutional archives of the ICP. As organized and crucial as this archive was to my work, it showed fragmentation of its historical materials and lack of communication among archives. It further points to the problem that the ICP does not recognize the historical value of its own institution. It thus fails to accurately archive or document its own production: exhibition catalogs, newsletters, and other ephemera related to their operations and activities. The findings at the Centro helped me fill in gaps in the research I conducted at previous institutions. Even so, I am still troubled by the fact that one such as the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, which preserves the Island’s cultural patrimony, does not have a developed organizational structure. It is also disturbing that most of its employees, who are political appointees, seem indifferent towards the purpose and mission of archives and libraries.

The state university, the Universidad de Puerto Rico (UPR), Recinto de Río Piedras, houses several important collections. The Colección Puertorriqueña and Colección de las Artes are both at the Biblioteca José M. Lázaro, and there is also an archive at the Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte de Río Piedras. All three are wonderful resources for rare documents and ephemera. Yet, as part of the state university, they are also haunted by local government problems. Like all government-funded cultural institutions, their budgets are constantly under threat and diminishing, while fairly constant administrative changes at the presidential and rectorial level make productivity all-around unstable. Although many employees are apathetic and seem to only be there for a paycheck, there are indeed some amazing librarians and archivists who work with incredibly meager budgets and a limited staff and somehow make them work.

Mentioned above, the art museum at UPR, Río Piedras’s Museo de Historia, Antropología y Arte is noteworthy. Housed in a leaky, mid-century modern building near the campus’s main entrance, this tiny institution runs on a shoestring budget with a mostly part-time staff. Aware of many of the aforementioned political and economic problems, the museum’s director, Flavia Marichal, has implemented a modest system to ensure the preservation of an
archive on modern and contemporary art in Puerto Rico. The director herself is a vast resource of knowledge because she grew up in the midst of the post-war Puerto Rican art boom and is the daughter of an influential printmaker, Spanish exile Carlos Marichal. However, despite her efforts, there is virtually no institutional support and the museum facilities are falling apart. Due to limited staffing, it is also difficult to access the archive from afar. One must be on the premises in order to consult their catalog, given that they haven’t the budget to digitize it.

I’ve also been able to access a few private archives of mostly art historians and artists, though I’ve been denied access to others by their families. Given their private nature, these archives vary in content, but all include materials that add detail and texture to the histories of visual culture in Puerto Rico. The selection of newspaper clippings, drafts, letters, and other ephemera that I encountered usually documented moments of conflict that were virtually forgotten or selectively omitted from institutional archives. Although not as extensive as the government-funded archives, for obvious reasons such as funding and space, these private collections have been meaningful to my understanding of Puerto Rico’s art and cultural history, nonetheless. In addition, though oral histories are sometimes forgotten in such research, those I gathered while working in the homes of various artists and curators have been invaluable. Together, they add to a better understanding of local artistic production, exhibition practices, and critical reception, among other things. Yet, I wonder what will happen to these archives once their owners pass away? Will they be discarded or will their inheritors acknowledge their value and either keep them or give them to a repository?

The overall lack of conscientiousness I’ve discussed is indeed regrettable and inexcusable. I have a few suggestions as to how to get back on track before it’s too late, these archives deteriorate, and opportunities to acquire or expand collections disappear. Before I delve into those ideas, an infamous example was Teodoro Vidal’s collection. The Vidal Collection is considered the most comprehensive set of holdings of Puerto Rican material culture from the seventeenth through twentieth centuries. Due to political and economic constraints, this collection was donated to the Smithsonian National Museum of American History instead of being kept at a local institution. Scholars still lament the loss of national patrimony, which should have remained on the Island. Losses such as that of the Vidal Collection show us that we need to begin by cultivating a respect for history and national patrimony, not only among academics and archivists, but in everyone, especially politicians. This collective amnesia about the Island’s history can still be remedied through collective efforts. In order to battle institutionalized ignorance we need to increase awareness and knowledge of archival practices, to reach beyond the archivists and researchers who use their collections and services. There should also be coordination and cooperation among local archives. Finally, I recommend
conducting a survey of existing resources, collections and initiatives, and ideally making it available through a website or wiki page that features at least an index or table of contents.

A shift in increasing awareness and interest in Latino/a and Latin American art in the continental US has created a forum or model that Puerto Rico can either join or follow, respectively. Due to its access, one the most successful and best known of these is the International Center for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA) at the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston (MFAH). This multiyear, multi-institutional, digital archiving project, titled “Documents of 20th Century Latin American and Latino Art,” is led by MFAH Curator of Latin American Art, Mari Carmen Ramirez. Its primary goal is to “provide access to primary sources and critical documents tracing the development of twentieth-century art in Latin America and among Latino populations in the United States.” Ramirez’s team has been collaborating with other professionals throughout Latin America and the US to build this archive. The majority of this project has been funded by soft money grants and receives institutional support from the MFAH. The ICAA and other projects in the continental US—such as the Smithsonian Institution’s Archives of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art Library in New York, and the Chicano Studies Research Center at the University of California, Los Angeles—have helped increase awareness of and access to research materials and collections. Not only have they made crucial recovery efforts to document the arts, but they provide useful resources on the production of Latin American and Latino visual culture to scholars, researchers, and the community at large.

Though on a much smaller scale, another positive development comes from a small group of us, including art historians, artists, and archivists. We have been meeting via Skype both to create a network and comprise a list of young art historians, archivists, critics, and artists that either work in or conduct research on Puerto Rico. The idea is to create a digital bibliography and visual resources depository that will pool work and facilitate access to materials in order to encourage research, curatorial projects, and collaboration.

NOTE

1. The bill drafted by Governor Muñoz Marín was filed in the House of Representatives by Ernesto Ramos Antonini (PPD), president of the body, and defended by Representative Jorge Font-Saldaña (PPD). See the ICP website (http://www.icp.gobierno.pr/quienes-somos/acerca-del-icp) for basic information on their mission and history. For a detailed history, see Alegría (1996, 7–9, 257–260). See also Dávila (1997, 39); Flores Collazo (1998); Hernández (2002, 160); Benítez (1988, 83); Maldonado (2006, 352–53); and Debates (1955).

REFERENCES


