



# #Receipts: A Case Study of the Sonja Ahlers Archive as Platform Feminism

Jennifer Douglas<sup>1</sup>  and Alexandra Alisauskas<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup> University of British Columbia, Vancouver V6T 1Z1, Canada  
jen.douglas@ubc.ca

<sup>2</sup> University of Calgary, Calgary T2N 1N4, Canada

**Abstract.** This paper reports on the early findings of a case study of artist Sonja Ahlers' recordkeeping to position archives as a kind of discursive feminist platform, predating the rise of digital feminist platforms but aligned in motive and function with them. This short paper represents an early phase in a project exploring archives as platforms; it aims to ground the study within a theoretical framework drawn from digital feminist platform studies, and to suggest some of the ways digital feminist studies can inform theories about records and archives, and vice versa.

**Keywords:** Archival studies · Archives · Platforms · Feminist archives · Digital feminism

## 1 Introduction: Archives and Platform Feminisms

In their recent book on digital feminist activism, Mendes, Ringrose and Keller explore how digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram provide feminists (and emerging feminists) with innovative ways to “dialogue, network and organize [in order] to challenge contemporary sexism, misogyny and rape culture” [1]. Mendes, Ringrose and Keller credit these digital media platforms with affordances that not only permit innovation, but also increase the visibility of feminist activist initiatives. Social media platforms, they argue, “have produced new spaces for debates over feminism, opportunities for feminist ‘awakenings’ and spaces to challenge rape cultures;” social media sites “offer women a platform where they can communicate, form communities of support, engage in consciousness-raising, organize direct action, disrupt the male gaze, and collectively call out and challenge injustice and misogyny through discursive, cultural, and political activism” [2].

In these arguments about social media platforms as spaces where diverse feminisms can be explored and enacted, Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, along with other scholars of digital feminism, tend to emphasize the *newness* of this type of space. This focus on the newness of digital platforms for feminist organizing and consciousness raising runs the risk of obscuring, even if not intentionally, the existence of earlier platforms that have permitted similar types of reflection and activity. In this paper, we report on the early findings of a case study of artist Sonja Ahlers' archives. We aim to position archives as a

kind of discursive feminist platform, predating the rise of digital feminist platforms but aligned in motive and function with them. This short paper represents an early phase in a project exploring archives as platforms, which is to ground the study within a theoretical framework drawn from digital feminist platform studies, and to suggest some of the ways digital feminist studies can inform theories about records and archives.

### 1.1 Platform Feminism: A Brief Literature Review

Writing about digital platforms, Rentschler and Thrift explain that “social media platforms foster different ways of doing feminism” [3] because of the platforms’ particular technological and discursive affordances. Gibbs et al. define what they call “platform vernaculars”: “unique combinations of styles, grammars, and logics, genres of communication that emerge from the affordances of particular social media platforms and the ways they are appropriated and performed in practice.” As Gibbs et al. note, affordances that are “built into” a platform’s hardware and software “delimit particular modes of expression or action,” influencing what gets communicated in different spaces and how [4].

One affordance of digital platforms facilitating feminist activism is ease of access and use; because platforms like Twitter and Instagram present relatively low barriers to participation, they shift the ability to produce and share feminist content to a wide array of creators. Clark notes how “digital media have provided feminists of color and feminists working outside of formal organizations with a new, effective means of exposing their work and connection with others.” As Clark explains, large organizations and initiatives (e.g., NOW, the National Organization for Women) “no longer [necessarily] structure communication within the feminist movement; rather, communication itself, from blog posts to Twitter hashtags, has become an important organizational structure for movement” [5]. Clark’s comments emphasize the role of platforms in communicating within feminist movements and show how the ubiquity and accessibility of digital platforms can facilitate feminist communication outside of established and institutionalized channels and discourses. As Baer notes, these new digital platforms offer “great potential for broadly disseminating feminist ideas, shaping new modes of discourse about gender and sexism, connecting to different constituencies, and allowing creative modes of protest to emerge” [6]. Digital platforms, Mendes, Ringrose and Keller conclude, provide communities – and maybe especially “marginalized communities” – with “new means through which to ‘posit counter-discourses in a way that can spread widely’” [7].

The use of hashtags on social media posts is an example of this kind of counter-discourse circulation, facilitated by the affordances of particular platforms. Scholars who study “hashtag feminism” [8] explain how the ability within social media platforms to aggregate posts (e.g. tweets) about the same topic or event creates a critical mass of experience and commentary that if not brought together this way, can be more easily dismissed as the experience or opinion of a few (complaining) feminists. In this way, a hashtag can acquire “significance in its own right as a memetic disruption of dominant discourses;” for example, a hashtag like #YesAllWomen denies the “misogynist violence” inherent in assumptions that violence against those who identify as women is rare and isolated [9]. Gibbs et al. discuss how hashtags are used “across a wide variety of online platforms,” showing how “the affordances and performances that constitute a

vernacular are not necessarily specific to a [single] platform;” however, they also assert that “every platform has a vernacular *specific to it* that has developed over time, through design, appropriation, and use” [10]. In our emerging work on archives as platforms, we are interested in exploring how archives function as platforms, the kinds of platform vernaculars that are specific to archives, and how archival creators perform these vernaculars for particular – and particularly, feminist – discursive and communicative purposes.

## 1.2 Archives and/as Platforms

Despite their insistence on the importance of the context of an archives’ creation, its relationship to its creator’s activities, and its authenticity and reliability as evidence of past facts and acts, archivists have paid scant attention to the ways an archive as a whole might perform a communicative function. Exceptions to this include MacNeil’s exploration of archives as a particular kind of *text*, which by virtue of the particular processes by which archives are compiled, organized and re-organized, function and should be read as “embodied arguments” [11, 12]. In this view, archives are not just randomly collected together at the end of a creator’s life or the time of donation to a repository, but are assembled together as the result of deliberate decisions and actions and for particular purposes. In a similar vein, Douglas and MacNeil consider the ways that archival collections function as lifewriting texts. Douglas and MacNeil argue that by making decisions about what materials to include (or not) in their archives, how to organize them, and what stories to tell about them, archival creators are engaging in autobiographical acts, using the archives to tell a particular story [13].

In her work on the archival turn in feminism, Eichorn discusses how “feminist scholars, cultural workers, librarians and archivists born during and after the rise of the second wave feminist movement” have begun to understand “the archive as an apparatus to legitimize new forms of knowledge and cultural production” [14]. Eichorn’s view of the archive as legitimizing apparatus and the emphasis on archives as texts seen in works by Douglas and MacNeil direct attention to the ways archives – like the digital platforms examined by Ringrose, Keller, Mendes and others – function as a particular means of making arguments and communicating them across time and space. In the next section, we explore this type of function in the context of a specific archival case study.

## 2 A Case Study: Sonja Ahlers

Sonja Ahlers is a visual artist and poet from Victoria, B.C., whose art practice and works are difficult to categorize. In the 1990s, Ahlers was a key figure in feminist zine networks and is best known for her artist books, including *Temper Temper* (1998), *Fatal Distraction* (2004), and *The Selves* (2010). Her latest book, *Swan Song*, was published in 2021. These books fuse collage and text with a zine aesthetic and diaristic sensibility in a style that has been referred to as graphic poetry. To compile these texts, Ahlers has drawn extensively on the significant archive she has amassed as a lifelong collector. Brought together and arranged within the pages of each book, these archival materials perform a particular kind of feminist, social analysis. In conversations with us, Ahlers described being deeply influenced by the *idea* embodied in the title of Alice Munro’s prototypical feminist novel, *The Lives of Girls and Women*: in her art practice and in her archives, Ahlers attempts to document how girls’ and women’s lives are defined and

documented for them in mainstream culture. Both her art and her archives are ways of talking back to that dominant culture.

Ahlers' archives include a large body of her own collage and poetry work, files of collected source materials, drafts, and binders of project documentation. The archive also includes personal materials such as journals, family records, correspondence and materials sent to her from a significant number of friends and penpals. Like many artists' archives, Ahlers' archive is both part of her art practice – a space she draws from and works with to create new works – and the documentation of that practice, the material evidence of her work, and also of her personal life and relationships. She is currently in the process of working with the archives as part of a planned retrospective exhibition at the same time as she is preparing materials for potential donation to an archival repository.

Traditional archival theory posits archives as aggregations that accrue through the unselfconscious actions of their creators; in contrast, Ahlers' work creating, sorting, pulling from, using, re-using and preserving her archives is an example of an archives as a site of creative activity and deliberate self-fashioning. In previous work, we introduce the concept of "records work" to describe the "active roles" creators play in compiling their archives; the term "considers how people work with records as well as how records themselves work (i.e. what work they perform and what they accomplish or do)" [15]. In the next two sections, we explore two types of records work performed by the Sonja Ahlers archives that help us to also position Ahlers' archives – and archives more generally – as a particular type of communicative platform.

## 2.1 The Archives as 'Crime Scene'

In an interview with curator Godfre Leung and the second author, Ahlers discussed the function of her archives in her life. "My identity is wrapped up in my archives," she explained. "The archive is evidence I exist." Ahlers describes a "forensic" process by which she investigates her own archives, uncovering and recovering materials that help her make sense of her "fractured" past selves and provide source material for her work. "The archive is evidence to me," she reiterates. "I can't not do something with it, because it exists. It gives me source material that I can't deny." The archive is "like a crime scene," and by going back to it in her forensic manner, Ahlers finds ways to "connect more dots," to "see things in a whole new light" [16]. In an interview with the first author, Ahlers explained how by looking through her archives she can see harmful patterns in relationships that she did not understand at the time they were unfolding. The archive provides evidence of how she was being groomed, gaslighted and 'negged,' terms that did not exist (or were not commonly used) in the 1990s and early 2000s to describe the experiences of those who identify as girls and women. A piece in Ahlers' upcoming exhibition titled "Men Explained Things to Me" mines the archives to refigure these relationships that felt like flattery but in fact were "grooming and predatory" [17]. In these examples, we see how Ahlers works with and through the archives to both affirm and understand past relationships and to reconfigure them in ways that allow her to take control of the narrative.

## 2.2 The Archive as Feminist Platform

Ringrose, Keller and Mendes discuss digital feminist activism in the context of #metoo and rape culture. Citing Alcoff's work, they consider how within rape culture, women are "denied presumptive credibility," required always to plead their case in a context of "structural disbelief" [18]. In the parlance of hashtag feminism, those who identify as women and girls need to keep #receipts. In some keyways, Ahlers' archives are also #receipts. As described in the previous section, Ahlers has characterized her archives both as documentation of the lives of girls and women in particular socio-cultural contexts as well as a "crime scene." As such, the archive provides evidence – the #receipts – of how she experienced life as a girl and woman. As "source material [she] can't deny," her personal archives provide her with a discursive space in which she can gather, create, preserve and make public evidence of the lives of girls and women in ways that both foreground and talk back to how that evidence is disregarded in other spaces. Ahlers worked for several years as a page at the Yukon Archives in Whitehorse, Canada, and, like the feminist activist archivists Eichorn talks to, understands how archives are discursively aligned with evidence, valued for their evidentiary qualities, and treated as spaces to preserve, uncover and publicize the 'true' history of an individual, organization or event.

Eichorn's analysis of how feminists use archives as a legitimizing apparatus acknowledges the role archives can play – and the use feminists can make of them – in shaping discourse. Creating archives is an agential act in the shaping of particular narratives, stories and histories that have a specific relationship to legitimacy and authority. In her art practice and in the preparations, she is making for archival donation, Ahlers seems aware of the legitimating and evidentiary affordances of archives. Eichorn argues that "rather than simply reflecting a desire to understand the past, the current archival turn [in feminism] reflects a desire to *take control* of the present through a *reorientation to the past*" (emphasis added) [19]. If we consider archives as platforms, with vernaculars specific to them, we can see how Ahlers and the feminists interviewed and studied by Eichorn take advantage of the particular affordances of archives – their association with evidence and legitimacy – not only to tell stories about their pasts, but also to preserve and present the #receipts necessary for a feminist retelling of the lives of (those who identify as) girls and women.

## 3 Archives as Platform: Building Theory of What Archives Do

Our research in this area is in its early stages, and we continue to explore Ahlers' archives as well as other archives we have identified that function similarly (i.e., where their creators are active agents using archival creation as a mode of feminist communication and activism) to further develop this theory of archives as (feminist) platforms. While archives are commonly described as preserving the past, this is not their only, or even their most important role [20]. Thinking about the discursive affordances of archives as platforms invites us to think about how personal archives are assembled and deployed for particular communicative aims, as well as how feminists have found means to assert agency and publicize #receipts prior to the ubiquity of new social media platforms. Interpreting archives through the lens of digital feminist studies – trying to understand

archives as feminist platforms – requires a shift in thinking about what archives *are*, to what archives *do*. This shift could prove productive for thinking about what archives are for, more broadly, and has implications related to what, why and how we preserve. Positioning archives as feminist platforms may also prove productive for scholars of gender studies, rhetoric, communication and/or media studies, when there is an emphasis on archives not simply as accumulations of source material, but as MacNeil argues, rhetorical texts in their own rights.

While their focus is entirely on digital platforms Mendes, Ringrose and Keller advise that “digital feminist activism can only be comprehensively understood via affective, material, technological and cultural lenses.” Digital feminism, they argue, “should not be merely understood via digital artifacts, but through social and cultural processes and their entanglement with technologies” [21]. In our work, we take this argument seriously by focusing on the social and cultural processes of archives creation, and the archive as a feminist technology and platform. As we continue to develop this research, we hope our work will contribute to a broader understanding of the technologies, including archives, digital or not, by which personal, political and activist discourses are created, preserved and circulated, as well of the cultural and affective contexts in which these activities occur.

In his analysis of queer uses and effect on Tumblr [22], Cho shows how the “particularities of Tumblr’s sociotechnical affordances” create “distinctive affective registers that are an integral part of the Tumblr experience” [23]. While both archives and digital platforms provide opportunities for feminists to protest and raise consciousness through increased visibility and publicity, a particular sociotechnical feature of archives as platforms relates to their unusual status as theoretically publicly accessible but in practice also cloistered in archival reference spaces, whether physical or online. Eichorn highlights this aspect of archives, explaining, for example, how in the Riot Grrrl collections at the Fales Library in New York, the capacity for materials to be public but “*within limits*” (emphasis in original) was appealing to the grown up grrrls who contributed their records [24]. Keenan and Darms further explicate this appeal with an analysis of Fales’ reference rooms as a “safe space” [25]. For Ahlers, the archive is a safe space that affords her a unique genre of communication; it is a means of safekeeping *and* of sharing stories, which, when she was younger either could not be told or were not heard, so that they can speak in other ways. With its associations with evidence, truth, permanence and legitimacy the archives as platform becomes an affectively powerful staging ground for a particular kind of calling to account in the lives of girls and women, one that provides opportunities to talk back to “structural disbelief.” Archives provide another, different way of *doing feminism*. As we continue to explore the idea of archives as feminist platforms we expect to deepen understanding of these sociotechnical and affective affordances of archives, to be able to characterize the *platform vernacular* of archives, and to strengthen the case that archives matter not only for what they contain, but for what they are and do in the world.

## References

1. Mendes, K., Ringrose, J., Keller, J.: *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture*, p. 2. Oxford University Press, Oxford (2019)

2. Mendes, K., Ringrose, J., Keller, J.: *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture*, pp. 12–16. Oxford University Press, Oxford (2019)
3. Rentschler, C.A., Thrift, S.C.: Doing feminism: event, archive, techné. *Fem. Theory* **16**(3), 239–249 (2015). Qtd in Mendes, Ringrose, Keller, p. 32
4. Gibbs, M., Meese, J., Arnold, M., Nansen, B., Carter, M.: #Funeral and Instagram: death, social media and platform vernacular. *Inf. Commun. Soc.* **18**(3), 257 (2015)
5. Clark, R.: ‘Hope in a hashtag’: the discursive activism of #WhyIStayed. *Fem. Media Stud.* **16**(5), 789 (2016)
6. Baer, H.: Redoing feminism: digital activism, body politics, and neoliberalism. *Fem. Media Stud.* **16**(1), 18 (2016)
7. Mendes, K., Ringrose, J., Keller, J.: *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture*, p. 7. Oxford University Press, Oxford (2019)
8. Clark, R.: #NotBuyingIt: hashtag feminists expand the commercial media conversation. *Fem. Media Stud.* **14**(6), 1108–1110 (2014)
9. Thrift, S.: #YesAllWomen as feminist meme event. *Fem. Media Stud.* **14**(6), 1090–1092 (2014)
10. Gibbs, M., Meese, J., Arnold, M., Nansen, B., Carter, M.: #Funeral and Instagram: death, social media and platform vernacular. *Inf. Commun. Soc.* **18**(3), 257 (2015)
11. MacNeil, H.: Archivalterity: rethinking original order. *Archivaria* **66**(1), 17 (2008)
12. MacNeil, H.: Deciphering and interpreting an archival fonds and its parts. In: Gilliland, A.J., McKemmish, S., Lau, A.J. (eds.) *Research in the Archival Multiverse*, pp. 161–197. Monash University Publishing, Monash AU (2017)
13. Douglas, J., MacNeil, H.: Arranging the self: literary and archival perspectives on writers’ archives. *Archivaria* **67**(1), 25–39 (2009). See also MacNeil, H.: Understanding the archival fonds as autobiographical text through three discourses. *Italian Journal of Library and Information Science* **10** (3), pp. 47–58 (2019) and Douglas, J.: The archiving ‘I’: A closer look in the archives of writers. *Archivaria* **79**, pp. 53–89 (2015)
14. Eichorn, K.: *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order*, p. 4. Temple University Press, Philadelphia (2013)
15. Douglas, J., Alisaukas, A., Mordell, D.: ‘Treat them with the reverence of archivists’: records work, grief work and relationship work in the archives. *Archivaria* **88**(2), 101 (2019)
16. Ahlers, S., Alisaukas, A., Leung, G.: The archive is evidence I exist: a conversation with Sonja Ahlers. *Reissue*. <https://reissue.pub/articles/the-archive-is-evidence-i-exist-a-conversation-with-sonja-ahlers/>. Accessed 28 Aug 2022
17. Interview with Douglas, 10 September 2021
18. Alcott, L.: Finally heard. *The Independent*, 22 December 2017. Quoted in Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, p. 7. Accessed 28 Aug 2022. <https://independent.org/2017/12/finally-heard/>
19. Eichorn, K.: *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order*, p. 7. Temple University Press, Philadelphia (2013)
20. Mendes, K., Ringrose, J., Keller, J.: *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture*, p. 6. Oxford University Press, Oxford (2019)
21. Caswell, M.: *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*. Routledge, Abingdon (2021)
22. Cho, A.: *Queer reverb: Tumblr, affect and time*. In: Hillis, K., Paasonen, S., Petit, M. (eds.) *Networked Affect*. MIT Press, Cambridge (2015)
23. Mendes, K., Ringrose, J., Keller, J.: *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture*, p. 32. Oxford University Press, Oxford (2019)
24. Eichorn, K.: *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order*, p. 105. Temple University Press, Philadelphia (2013)
25. Keenan, E.K., Darms, L.: Safe space: the Riot Grrrl collection. *Archivaria* **76**(2), 55–74 (2013)