

ARCHIVING WOMEN ARTISTS: AIR GALLERY MINUTES, 1970S-2000S

AIR Gallery was the first women's artist collective in the U.S., formed by women in response to their perceived rejection from the mainstream art world in the 1970s; AIR was based in the physical site of a gallery established in SoHo during the heyday of the artists' loft era. This paper peculiar (and dull) genre of material text, the meeting minutes. As a cultural anthropologist of urban space and social movements, I examine these minutes ethnographically, as artifacts bearing traces of larger social structures, in an approach that overlaps some of the methods of Book History. The paper reads both content, form, and handling of the minutes: how and why they are produced, what function they serve for the organization, how and why they become preserved and consulted in retrospect. AIR minutes reflect features of a culturally specific kind of group, the collective, a non-hierarchical structure that proliferated amid the social movement of the late 1960s and 1970s. Unlike mainstream women or cultural organizations, AIR, as a collective, was striving to enact social change in how it itself operated day-to-day. This social experiment, more novel for being a women's group dedicated to elite visual art, is reflected in the meeting minutes, in the minutia of practicalities (locks on doors and rent increases) or organizational identity (policy on shows and the gallery image). Minutes are artifacts bearing a peculiar value: they are recognized as important (to some degree) from their inception, yet they are still not precious, and obviously not as valued as the gallery's other textual objects like exhibit catalogues or reviews in the press. They also mix the status of private (a kind of organizational diary) and public (the voices of professional meetings). I track the AIR minutes from their office storage to their transfer to Special Collections, when they were acquired by New York University Fales collection. By presenting at *Material Cultures*, I am interested in cross-discipline dialogue from social science to humanities, as well as visual art to textual culture.

Aseel Sawalha
Associate Professor of Anthropology
Department of Sociology and Anthropology
Pace University
41 Park Row
New York, NY 10038
United States

Material Cultures
Technology, Textuality & Transmission.
Materiality & Textuality
Collections & Their preservation