

# What Should an Artist Save?

As our culture's expectations of artists and art have changed, archives have moved on from the library and transformed into something stranger and more amorphous.



The London studio of Francis Bacon (1909-92), which was moved and installed exactly as it was to the Hugh Lane Gallery in Ireland after the gallery acquired it in 1998. Every item is cataloged in an accompanying online database. Credit...Photo by Perry Ogden © The Estate of Francis Bacon. All rights reserved/DACS, London/ARS, New York, 2019

By [Thessaly La Force](#)

Aug. 6, 2019

IT WAS THE EARLY '80S and a low point for [Judy Chicago](#). The artist had spent more than half of the previous decade creating "[The Dinner Party](#)," an ambitious work of art for which she is today perhaps best known but at the time had earned her ridicule. The

unapologetically feminist installation piece, a triangular ceremonial table with 39 place settings, each given to a prominent woman from history and lore, from [Virginia Woolf](#) to the ancient goddess Ishtar, with embroidered runners, golden chalices and plates fashioned into raised forms resembling vulva and butterflies, was unlike anything the art world had seen before. Chicago had gone into tens of thousands of dollars of debt to make it. She had intended for “The Dinner Party” to embark on a grand national tour, but instead, after its humiliating critical reception following its San Francisco [debut in 1979](#), she had it packed up and placed into storage and tried to move on.

“The Dinner Party” is a complex, meticulous body of knowledge in itself, both in terms of the crafts Chicago employed to make it (china painting on porcelain, embroidery) as well as in the exhaustive research she assembled on 3,000 women across history. Chicago put these archival materials in a separate, non-temperature-controlled facility, “’cause I had no money at the time,” she says. Unbeknownst to Chicago, Mary Ross Taylor, one of the administrators who then ran Chicago’s feminist nonprofit, [Through the Flower](#), which had raised funds for the work’s completion and later its resuscitated tour, wrote to the [Smithsonian Institution](#)’s Archives of American Art asking if it would be interested in acquiring the research material relating to the piece. They declined, finding the material of no interest.

Today, Chicago’s archives are stored across three libraries: the [Schlesinger Library of the History of Women in America](#), which is part of Harvard University; the [National Museum of Women in the Arts](#); and [Penn State University](#). She is also working with these institutions to build a digital portal of her complete oeuvre, which she plans to unveil later this year. A climate-controlled storage facility near her home and studio in Belen, N.M., houses thousands of works of art that Chicago has never sold. In the late 1990s, a curator with the Archives of American Art discovered Taylor’s initial request and flew to meet Chicago in New Mexico, begging her to reconsider. But Chicago said no. She had learned an unforgettable lesson from her initial rejection — her archive is her legacy. It is what will remain when she is no longer alive, and both its safekeeping and accessibility are of the utmost importance to her. Chicago does not intend to be erased, the way many of the women she discovered in researching “The Dinner Party” were. Chicago saw how women artists of her generation were never allowed the same sense of permanence as men, to consider their future on any grand scale. She recalled a recent gathering of her contemporaries at an art opening: “One of them stood up and she said, ‘I’m going to be in my 90s. What’s going to happen to my art?’” As important as the work itself is Chicago’s refusal to let it and any understanding of its creation disappear.



David Wojnarowicz's magic box, along with its contents, which include rocks, a fabric toy snake, feathers and other ephemera. It is part of his archive at the Fales Library & Special Collections at New York University. Credit...David Wojnarowicz, "Magic Box," n.d., mixed media, from the David Wojnarowicz Papers, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, image courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, New York

THERE HAS ALWAYS been an overwhelming curiosity about the lives of artists. [Giorgio Vasari](#)'s 16th-century "The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects" enumerated in exhaustive detail the biographies of various artists of the Italian Renaissance, noting, for example, that [Leonardo da Vinci](#) "took much delight ... in all other animals ... and this he showed when often passing by the places where birds were sold, for, taking them with his own hand out of their cages, and having paid to those who sold them the price that was asked, he let them fly away into the air, restoring to them their lost liberty." We like to know an artist's quirks, her penchants and proclivities when she isn't sculpting marble or painting princes. The details that surround the creative instincts of an artist — from what the French painter Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun read (Jean-Jacques Rousseau) to which schools rejected the young French sculptor [Auguste Rodin](#) (he applied three times, unsuccessfully, to the École des Beaux-Arts) — are captivating in themselves, facts we hope might illuminate the mystery of the artistic process. And yet the act of translating idea to form, of taking what the mind imagines and synthesizing it into reality, is not easily explained, not even by the artists doing it. "Protect your drawings," reads one of the notebooks filled with the

automatic writing and subconscious drawings of the Swedish mystic painter [Hilma af Klint](#). “They are pictures of drenching waves of ether which await you one day when your ears and eyes can apprehend a higher summons.” What remains of the artist’s life, of her process — loose notes, correspondence, drafts, sketches, the books she read and other free-floating ephemera like the spare change you can find in an old coat pocket — becomes entombed as what we now understand to be the archive: the artist’s post-life, if you will.

The word “archive,” from the Latin *archivum* or *archium*, traces back to the Greek word *arkheion*, which referred both to the physical space where archival documents were stored as well as to the archons, or citizens, deputized to manage it. It is both the primary source, the literal remnants of what existed from a time and place, as well as the physical location where such documents are kept. Archives are unique to a person, to a government, to a period of history — no two are ever alike — and they are often available to browse but not necessarily open to the public like a library might be, nor are they reproduced or, in most cases, moved. Their purpose is almost more useful to grasp as an idea than as a practicality: Here lies everything we can’t remember but should never forget. Archives possess an inherent power — they are the authority on what or who will remain within the historical narrative.



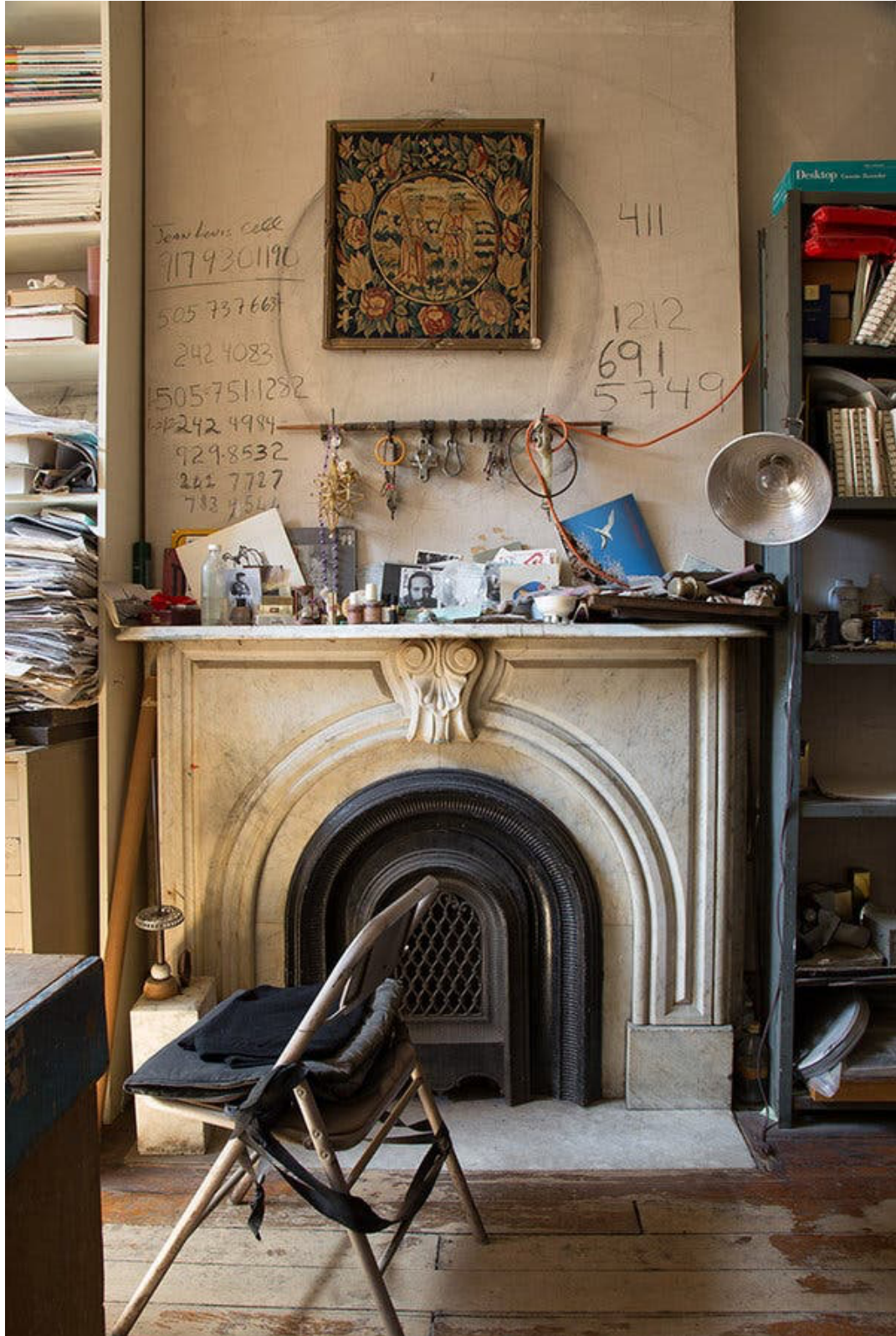
The Noguchi Museum in Queens, N.Y., featuring (from left) Isamu Noguchi’s “Break Through Capestrano” (1982), “Shiva Pentagonal” (1981), “Cloud Mountain” (1982-83), “Garden Seat” (1983) and “Deepening Knowledge” (1969). Credit... Photo by Nicholas Knight. © The Isamu Noguchi Foundation and Garden Museum, N.Y./ARS.

There are two questions surrounding artists and their archives. Why do artists keep them? And what is worth keeping? Legacy and ego certainly play a part in answering the first question, as does an acute awareness of one's mortality. But in the last century alone there has also developed a clear distrust of institutional integrity, an overall unhappiness with what white cube galleries and museums can offer. A creative desire has arisen — as the sculptor [Isamu Noguchi](#) experienced when he [opened his own museum](#) in 1985 — to preserve the context of an artwork alongside the work itself. In 1977, [Donald Judd](#), who saw the paintings of a previous generation of artists scattered across collections or neglected, with little effort toward genuine conservation, [wrote](#), “My work and that of my contemporaries that I acquired was not made to be property. It's simply art. I want the work I have to remain that way. It is not on the market, not for sale, not subject to the ignorance of the public, not open to perversion.”

The answer to the second question is more complicated. At least in contemporary terms — as art has entered various new, confounding mediums and the market has so inflated the value of work that artists can entertain ideas of their legacy, at least financially, on far more ambitious terms than they would have even 50 years ago — archives themselves have become a kind of competitive commodity. Saving early work or rejection letters is a rare feat of foresight bolstered by a healthy ego. ([Andy Warhol](#) famously kept [a 1956 letter](#) from the Museum of Modern Art in New York declining a drawing called “Shoe” and informing him that the work “may be picked up from the Museum at your convenience.”) Do major artists simply have a premonitory confidence in their work? Or are they major artists in part because, in saving everything, they are able to compile a fuller view of themselves? Still, what we accept for the historical record has expanded over time to be more holistic than not. What we deem worth keeping now seems to include everything.



A view of the parlor in Louise Bourgeois's home on 20th Street in New York City, 2016. Credit...© The Easton Foundation, licensed by VAGA at ARS, N.Y., photo by Jean-Francois Jausaud



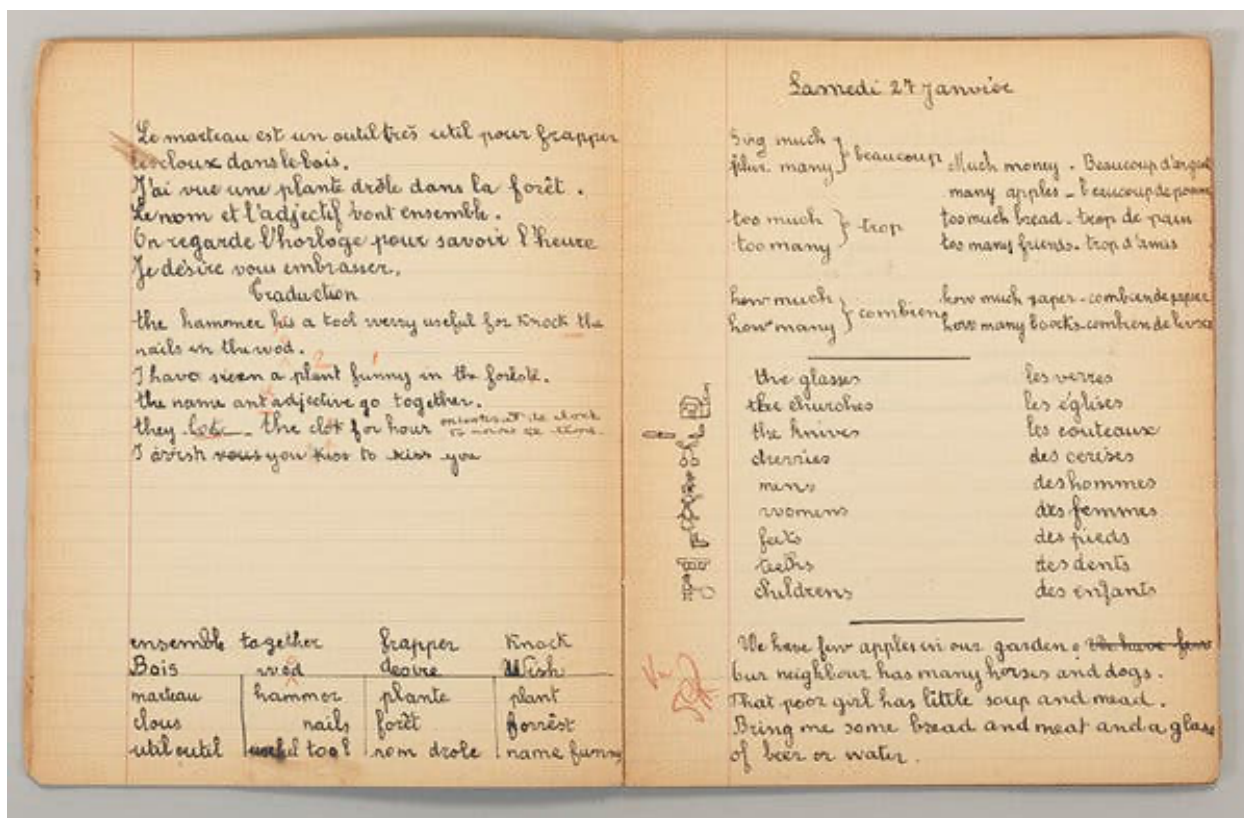
The mantel in the front room of Louise Bourgeois's home. Credit...© The Easton Foundation, licensed by VAGA at ARS, N.Y., photo by Jean-Francois Jaussaud

IF CHICAGO IS an artist who had to learn to save everything for herself, then [Louise Bourgeois](#) was an artist who never threw anything away. Until [her death](#) in 2010, Bourgeois had lived in the [same New York City townhouse](#) that she moved into with her husband, the art historian [Robert Goldwater](#), in 1962. On the garden level was a small studio where Bourgeois made her work; on the parlor floor, she kept a living room of sorts and entertained in the couple's dining room alongside the kitchen. She slept in the second bedroom on the third floor, having moved out of the master bedroom in 1973, after the death of Goldwater. In the last three decades of her life, Bourgeois's assistant and close friend, Jerry Gorovoy, looked after her and her work. In a 2014 interview [with New York magazine](#) he described the experience: "It's possible to see Louise's work unfold in chronological order, but its evolution is more like a spiral that circles back around to the same theme, yet expressed in totally different materials and forms. She had no signature style, and she worked in many different mediums at the same time. ... There was no separation between her art and her life." Close to the eve of Bourgeois's death, her foundation, the Easton Foundation, purchased the adjoining townhouse, which now serves as a research center for Bourgeois scholars, while her home, at the suggestion of Gorovoy, has remained as she left it. (Neither are open to the public.)

Visiting Bourgeois's house — where phone numbers are still written onto the peeling walls in her looping script, where her diaries are squirreled away on an old wooden bookshelf and where boxes of fabric and clothing, from which Bourgeois fashioned her fabric sculptures, remain packed in the basement — is a somewhat haunting experience, as if the artist herself might suddenly emerge from the garden to greet you. The mark of her existence is indelible. Bourgeois believed in psychoanalysis, which she practiced throughout her adult life, and was fond of saying that "pain is the ransom of formalism." As Gorovoy said, "One day the work seemed to emanate from an inner violence, and the next day her work would be a reparation or an expression of her guilt. Her goal, certain days, was simply to survive."

If survival was her goal, then this act of total preservation is a strange, sometimes overwhelming success. The shelves of the house are still filled with Bourgeois's personal book collection, her clippings and catalogs, VHS tapes of panels and lectures and symposiums, and also her own free-form psychoanalytic writings. All together, its accumulation and presence — a kind of free-floating, unstructured archive — offers an uncanny suggestion to how Bourgeois may have accessed herself in order to create her work. "Some of us are so obsessed with the past that we die of it," began Bourgeois in her Artforum visual essay "[Child Abuse](#)" that was published at the same time as her MoMA retrospective in 1982. She continued: "[Artists] might want to reconstruct something of the past to exorcise it. ... Everything I do was inspired by my early life." She references her own biography constantly but in various, unpredictable ways, as if it were only possible to dip in and out of the stream of the unconsciousness that rushes forth, a feat impossible to conquer with chronology or logic. In insisting on preserving Bourgeois's house, Gorovoy is essentially suggesting that all of it — the Shalimar perfume boxes, the tables and desks where she wrote, the glass cups now sitting on the kitchen shelves — is crucial to understanding both her and her work, and therefore possesses an implicit value.





Louise Bourgeois's school notebook for English class at the Lycée Fénelon, Paris, 1923. Credit... Photo by Christopher Burke © The Easton Foundation/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y.

Historical re-creations are not new — Trotsky's clothes still hang in a closet in his house in Mexico City, as if he's just left to walk his dog — but Bourgeois's archive is more than just costume. Gorovoy's approach to maintaining her archives is entirely interconnected in its understanding — it allows for the idea that her leisure reading material (the main bedroom still has three copies of "Dianetics") or personal collection of photographs, notebooks, agendas and correspondence is the key to understanding the artist. Rifle through her kitchen cupboards long enough and perhaps you will unlock the truth of her existence. It's an argument that acknowledges our contemporary obsession with identity and authenticity in today's political and cultural discussions — as well as the idea that an artist's intent can be discerned by who and what she was as much as what she makes. As data and our digital existence continue to expand, where every keystroke and every step of our lives can be counted and saved, objects themselves have also become suffused with a curious preciousness, a value both sentimental and otherwise.

But not all artists are in possession of such custodians. And not all artists are able to preserve their home and studio in amber. There is a corollary example in the archives of [David Wojnarowicz](#), which were acquired by the [Fales Library & Special Collections](#) at New York University after [his death](#) from AIDS-related causes in 1992, when he was only 37. Wojnarowicz was a painter, photographer, writer, filmmaker, collage artist,

performance artist and musician, as well as a vocal activist in New York City during the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. His archives do more than just conserve an object — a painting, say, or a drawing — or hierarchy of objects. They also allow for a looser structure, one that is more inclusive of a variety of formats and mediums and that better mirrors the myriad relationships — professional, personal or both — in Wojnarowicz’s life. A person appearing in Wojnarowicz’s archive could have been a collaborator on a work of art, someone who appeared in his films or his performances, or part of the larger downtown art world (a gallerist or a curator, for example) of which Wojnarowicz flowed in and out. His archives have become the first major project open to the public at NYU’s [Artist Archives Initiative](#), led by two professors, Glenn Wharton and Deena Engel, who seek to create an open-source, web-based organizing structure for using and working with Wojnarowicz’s archive. (They are currently creating something similar with the visual artist [Joan Jonas](#), an early pioneer in working with video across its evolving formats.) Wharton, who has a conservator background, found that the hierarchal nature of museums and libraries made it difficult to categorize information in contemporary art. Classical archive methods functioned if you were counting all the paintings [Rembrandt](#) made, but they were far less effective for an artist like Wojnarowicz, who experimented with different mediums and people, who found collaboration as essential as meaning and who left behind objects like what he called the “magic box,” a crate filled with seemingly invaluable objects such as dried flowers, nail clippers, a bag of seeds and a Buddha figurine.

Does it have meaning? Wojnarowicz inscribed an intent to “put Magic Box in installation,” according to one note he left in a personal journal, but he never actually did. His partner Tom Rauffenbart said he would play with the magic box from time to time at home, and there is something powerful in seeing such a childlike universe of objects after considering Wojnarowicz’s more famously powerful works of art, such as “[Untitled \(One Day This Kid ...\)](#)” (1990-91), which comprises a portrait of him as a young boy framed by a written narrative of the homophobia he faced throughout his entire life. The Artist Archives Initiative’s more amorphous organization offers a way for contemporary artists to consider their work in relation to their lives — to create a less rigid system that allows room for context, loose connections and emotion without requiring anyone to save their entire house for time immemorial.



Ruth Asawa's "Sumo Wrestlers" (1943). Credit...© The Estate of Ruth Asawa, courtesy of the Estate of Ruth Asawa and David Zwirner

WHAT IS CONSISTENT, though not entirely indicative of any larger movement or thematic purpose, is a similar impulse that all of these artists — from Bourgeois to Judd to Wojnarowicz to Chicago — possess: the desire to chronicle, to document. The art can be the archive. Or the archive can be the art. Just in the way [Marcel Duchamp's "Boîte-en-Valise"](#) (1935-41), a series of miniature reproductions of his own work, was a playful compendium rendered in small-scale, so Chicago's "The Dinner Party" is itself an archive, one that suggests new hierarchies that foreground women. On a larger scale, the drive to chronicle is something that possesses all of us, not just artists; how that act is determined as art is also worth examining. The curator [Massimiliano Gioni's](#) 2016 [New Museum](#) show "[The Keeper](#)" was an examination of the collections not just of artists but of ordinary people, from a farmer named Wilson Bentley, who insisted on documenting every snowflake that fell across his Vermont yard to the curator and artist Ydesa Hendeles, who has assembled the largest [collection](#) of historical portraits of people photographed with teddy bears — a toy whose birth and subsequent popularity overlapped with the rise of American imperialism and Nazi Germany. Among the thousands of such pictures are those of families proudly dressed in their Nazi uniforms. Hendeles has pointed out how difficult it was to find those particular images in her

exhaustive search. But it's not because so few of them existed. It's because today there is a shame in acknowledging them.

All too often, the gaps in an artist's life are just as startling to discover — the unspoken moments that inform the work, that speak to “its presence in time and space,” as Walter Benjamin put it, “its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.” The artist [Ruth Asawa](#), who died in 2013, famously studied at the progressive Black Mountain College with [Buckminster Fuller](#) and [Josef Albers](#). Her hanging wire sculptures are beautiful and sensuous pieces; their woven forms appear to breathe like creatures if disturbed by a gust of air or the accidental touch of a viewer. Asawa was incarcerated with her family as a teenager during the 1940s at the Rohwer concentration camp in Arkansas. Had she not faced discrimination as a Japanese-American, it is possible she may never have found herself in the more radical and experimental mountains of North Carolina, where prejudices against her race were largely nonexistent. What was it like, then, to be a teenager in what was essentially a hastily erected, dusty prison, to have one's existence henceforth marked as some kind of threat? Surely Asawa was creating her earliest work, learning to express the deepest parts of herself on paper or with craft. There are only two surviving watercolors by Asawa from her time in the camp with her family. One depicts a sumo wrestling match; the other, a landscape of the swamp surrounding the camp. There is one photo of Asawa with her English teacher and her fellow classmates on a field trip outside the camp, where it is possible she drew the landscape. In a 2002 interview, Asawa said she wasn't interested in making art that confronted the experience. “Just surviving was much more intense,” she said of her regular life as part of an immigrant family in the United States. Perhaps she refused to allow the experience of incarceration to define her. Perhaps she wanted to discuss the experience on her terms. Or perhaps, when looking at all of these archives, as W.G. Sebald so beautifully understood, the indirect gaze can make for a more potent examination of the injustices of life, writing, as he did, not about the atrocities of the Holocaust but about the silkworm production of the Third Reich (1933-45): a historical detail seemingly accessed on a walk across the Suffolk countryside. We value archives because we value the life that preceded them. But artists are not perfectly self-aware, and they owe neither us, nor posterity, an explanation for what they value or what they choose to ignore. What always remains is the work, and then the archive. For those of us who are left, we can only attempt to read between the lines.