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Curatorial data formation in exhibition practice: how archival selection shapes cultural records

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Abstract

Exhibition documentation and museum archives are increasingly shaped by non-archivists working at the point of record creation. Participatory exhibition practice has expanded the number of curators, students, staff, and community collaborators who produce and select materials destined for archival repositories. The structural consequences remain underexamined in archival theory, which has developed primarily around institutional records and appraisal by professional archivists. The article proposes curatorial data formation as an analytic concept for examining how cultural information takes structural form through selection decisions made by those who produce and curate exhibition records. Over three years (2023–2025), thirty-five student curators enrolled in an upper-level Art Exhibition Practices course organized thirteen exhibitions across diverse venues and community partnerships. In the final year, eleven student curators assembled digital archives representing each exhibition and wrote reflections explaining the selection decisions. Reflexive thematic analysis identified four logics of curatorial data formation: record density and composition, reputation-based filtering, relational ethical filtering, and bias awareness. The four logics describe how the cultural record narrows at the point of production, before any professional archivist becomes involved. The findings position student curators as one type of non-archivist voice shaping participatory exhibition archives. The concept extends archival appraisal scholarship by directing attention to the moment of record formation in participatory settings, where selection and creation collapse into the same hands.

Keywords Curatorial data formation · Exhibition archiving · Archival appraisal · Participatory archives · Non-archivist appraisal · Reflexive practice

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Introduction

Who decides what gets remembered about an exhibition? The question sounds simple. The answer shapes how entire chapters of cultural history survive or vanish. Museum archives typically resolve the question through professional routine: archivists and registrars manage exhibition records and apply appraisal frameworks when deciding which materials remain in institutional collections (Cook 2001; Pearce-Moses 2005). The professional routine assumes that records arrive at the archives after being produced elsewhere, and that trained archivists then apply systematic criteria to evaluate the records. Participatory curatorial practice has disturbed the assumption.

Curatorial practice has changed during the past two decades. Participatory models of curation expanded the number of people involved in exhibition production and documentation (Lynch 2011; Simon 2010). Artists, students, community collaborators, and visiting scholars now contribute photographs, messages, planning documents, and installation records. A practical question follows from the participatory shift: who shapes the archival record when so many different people produce documentation? The participatory turn in archival theory has begun to address the question by examining how communities, individuals, and other non-institutional actors participate in records management (Caswell et al. 2016; Flinn 2011; Flinn et al. 2009; Huvila 2008). Most of the scholarship has focused on community archives, Indigenous recordkeeping, and activist documentation. The participatory archive in exhibition contexts, where multiple voices contribute to and curate the records of temporary cultural events, has received less sustained theoretical attention.

Temporary exhibitions make the question especially pressing. Once an exhibition closes, the physical installation disappears. Archival documentation often becomes the only remaining evidence of curatorial work, collaboration, and visitor experience. When a photograph of a key installation moment is absent, or when a curator removes a chain of emails documenting a creative disagreement, the record of the exhibition narrows without anyone noticing.

Many discussions treat exhibition archives as documentation produced after curatorial work ends. The research presented here approaches exhibition archiving from a different angle: as part of the curatorial process. Curators constantly generate records while organizing an exhibition. Curatorial teams later decide which materials remain in the archive and which materials disappear. The decisions shape the cultural record of the exhibition. The decisions also occur before any professional archivist becomes involved. Whatever survives the curatorial selection process is what institutional archives will eventually receive, accession, describe, and preserve.

The article proposes curatorial data formation as an analytic concept for examining the participatory phenomenon. Curatorial data formation refers to the process by which cultural information takes structural form through the selection and organization decisions made by those who build exhibition archives. The concept draws attention to a specific moment in the life of cultural records: the point at which a curator, educator, or exhibition team decides what enters a digital folder, what gets deleted, and what gets labeled. The selection decisions precede database ingestion, metadata assignment, and any computational processing of cultural collections. The selection decisions also precede any encounter with formal archival appraisal. Cook (2001,

2005) framed the archivist as an active agent who helps shape collective memory through appraisal. Curatorial data formation extends the framing by examining a moment that occurs before the archivist arrives. The actors making selection decisions in participatory exhibition settings are often not archivists. Curators, students, artists, and educators routinely make appraisal decisions while producing the records being appraised. The appraisal activity and the creation activity happen in the same hands, at the same time, and shape the data structure that will eventually represent the exhibition. Curatorial data formation directs attention to the moment when cultural information takes shape, and to the people making the selection as consequential actors in the formation of archival knowledge.

The present study examines curatorial data formation through one type of non-archivist voice: student curators learning exhibition practice. The study sits within a broader research program examining how multiple voices contribute to participatory exhibition archives, including the voices of curators, staff, students, and visitors. Beginning with students is a methodological choice. The choice does not reflect a substantive claim that students differ from other non-archivist voices in significant ways. A three-year exhibition practices course provided sustained access to a population of non-archivists making selection decisions, with the conditions of the decisions held relatively constant across cohorts. Student curators in the course were not practicing for future exhibition work. The thirteen exhibitions organized over the three years were public events, viewed by campus audiences, community partners, and museum visitors in a major city. Student selection decisions therefore shaped real exhibition records that will represent the events to future audiences, which positions the voices of student curators as one form of community contribution to the formation of participatory exhibition archives. The course itself was not the object of inquiry. The selection decisions of the participants were the data. The findings should be read as evidence of how curatorial data formation operates in one participatory setting. Subsequent studies in the broader research program will examine other non-archivist voices and other exhibition contexts.

The study grew from three years of teaching an exhibition practices course at a large Midwestern research university. Over the three years, thirty-five students organized thirteen exhibitions in venues ranging from university galleries to outdoor spaces to a professional design museum in a major city. Community partnerships connected student curators with high school students, international graffiti artists, game designers, visiting scholars, and diaspora communities. The study asks one central question: What informational patterns, omissions, ethical boundaries, and biases appear when non-archivists assemble exhibition archives at the point of record formation?

Literature review

Archival appraisal and the politics of selection

Archival appraisal, the process of determining which records deserve preservation, has long been recognized as one of the most consequential activities in archival

practice (Cook 2001, 2005; Eastwood 2002). A foundational distinction between evidential value and informational value guided appraisal toward institutional accountability and research usefulness for decades (Schellenberg 1956). Schellenberg situated appraisal within the work of trained professionals applying systematic criteria to large record series produced by government and institutional offices. The assumption that appraisal could ever be neutral or purely technical was challenged by later theorists. The macroappraisal approach developed by Terry Cook reframed the archivist as an active agent who helps shape the memory of a society (Cook 2001, 2005). Macroappraisal does not advocate keeping everything. The approach calls for archivists to identify the most significant functions, activities, and citizen interactions within an institution or a society, and to select a small subset of records that document those functions in the most meaningful way. The shift was conceptual, not quantitative: macroappraisal redirected attention from the content of individual records to the broader context of record creation, while preserving the discipline of selection.

Postmodern archival scholarship pressed the analysis further. Schwartz and Cook (2002) argued that archives are not passive storehouses of old materials but active sites where power over memory and identity is negotiated and confirmed. Every archive is defined as much by what an archive leaves out as by what an archive contains. Verne Harris, writing from the context of South Africa during the transition from apartheid to democracy, developed the phrase "archival sliver" to describe the limited window archival records provide into broader human experience (Harris 2002). Harris produced the concept in a specific historical context. The apartheid state had systematically destroyed records of state violence in the years leading up to the 1994 election, and post-apartheid archival work involved confronting the silences produced by deliberate state action. The archival sliver, in Harris's formulation, is the partial record that remains after powerful actors have shaped what gets preserved and what gets destroyed. The concept carries political weight specific to that historical moment. The analytical insight, however, has been extended by subsequent scholars to wider questions about the partiality of archival records and the responsibilities of archivists in the face of that partiality (Duff and Harris 2002).

More recent scholarship has drawn attention to emotional and relational dimensions of appraisal. A radical empathy framework placed empathy, responsibility, and affect at the center of archival work (Caswell and Cifor 2016). Caswell and Cifor argued that archivists hold affective responsibilities toward records creators, records subjects, records users, and larger communities. The framework was developed in the context of professional archival work involving records of human rights abuse, marginalization, and community trauma. The framework is particularly useful for understanding archival work conducted outside formal institutions, where the boundaries between creator, subject, and curator often blur. Curatorial data formation draws on the foregoing archival debates while recognizing that the actors carrying out selection in participatory and educational settings often lack the professional training that archival theory typically assumes.

Participatory archiving and non-archivist actors

The past two decades have seen a major turn toward participatory archiving, in which communities and individuals who create records also participate in managing and preserving them (Caswell et al. 2016; Flinn 2011; Flinn et al. 2009). The participatory turn questioned traditional custodial models in which professional archivists served as gatekeepers. Post-custodial theory further suggested that archival authority extends beyond formal institutions and may be distributed among diverse stakeholders (Cook 1994; Ham 1981). Huvila (2008) proposed the concept of the participatory archive, characterized by decentralized curation, radical user orientation, and broader contextualization of records. The participatory archive model treats records creators, users, and communities as active participants in archival processes, not as passive sources of material. Ketelaar (2012) extended the participatory framework by examining how archives function through repeated activation by multiple users over time. Ketelaar argued that archives are cultivated through successive uses, and that the meaning of an archive emerges through the cumulative activations of records creators, users, and curators across time and space.

Researchers have studied participatory archiving extensively in the contexts of community archives (Flinn 2011), Indigenous recordkeeping (McKemmish et al. 2011), and activist movements (Zinn 2007). The participatory turn has produced rich accounts of how non-archivists shape records and how archival authority operates outside professional institutions. Less attention has been directed toward participatory archiving in exhibition contexts, where temporary cultural events generate large volumes of documentation produced by multiple non-archivist actors. Exhibition archives differ from community archives in important respects. Exhibitions are organized within institutional settings, often by people whose primary identification is curatorial, not archival. The records produced during exhibition organization are not initially conceived as archives; the records become archives through subsequent selection decisions. The actors making the selection decisions are usually the same actors who produced the records. Cultural heritage institutions increasingly grapple with questions about who decides which born-digital records merit preservation (Jaillant et al. 2025). The present study addresses the participatory archive in exhibition settings by examining one type of non-archivist actor whose selection decisions shape exhibition records: student curators.

Exhibition documentation and museum archives

Archiving exhibition records presents distinctive complexities. Exhibitions are by nature multimodal and time-bound: exhibitions involve physical arrangements of objects, spatial experiences, social interactions, and temporary events that resist reduction to stable documentary forms (Altshuler 2008; Staniszewski 1998). The question of what counts as a meaningful record of an exhibition remains genuinely open.

Several scholars have noted the gap between the richness of exhibition experience and the thinness of exhibition archives (Greenberg et al. 1996; Klonk 2009). Photographs, press releases, floor plans, and catalogue essays typically make up the core

of institutional exhibition files. The core materials document only selected aspects of the curatorial process and the visitor experience. Behind-the-scenes communications, planning documents, and interpersonal negotiations that shape exhibitions are frequently lost, as institutional archival practices tend to favor finished products over process documentation (Marty 2007). When viewed through curatorial data formation, the familiar gap between exhibition experience and exhibition archive takes on a more specific meaning: the gap reflects accumulated selection decisions made at multiple points by multiple non-archivists, each operating without professional frameworks to guide the work.

Curatorial pedagogy and reflexive practice

Curatorial education has increasingly emphasized reflective and hands-on learning approaches (Drabble 2014; Martinon 2013; O'Neill and Wilson 2010). Reflective writing in curatorial teaching aligns with broader trends in arts education that view reflection as a tool for developing critical awareness and professional identity (Hubard 2015; Kolb 1984; Schon 1983). The specific use of archival selection as a reflective exercise in curatorial education has received very little scholarly attention. The present study uses the archival selection task as a research instrument, not as a pedagogical intervention. The reflective writing produced by student curators is treated as archival data documenting the selection decisions of non-archivists. The literature on curatorial reflexivity (Filipovic and Ovstebo 2010; Sheikh 2015) provides context for understanding how curators engage in interpretive practice, including the interpretive practice of selecting what enters and exits the archive.

Methodology

Research context and three-year observations

The study draws on three iterations of an upper-level Art Exhibition Practices course, a combined upper-level undergraduate and graduate course at a large Midwestern research university in the United States. The course ran each fall semester from 2023 to 2025. Across the three years, thirty-five students (twelve in 2023, eleven in 2024, twelve in 2025) organized a total of thirteen exhibitions. Students came from different disciplinary backgrounds within the School of Art and Design, including studio art, art education, and art history. The three-year window provided cumulative observations of how non-archivists approach exhibition documentation under varying conditions, with the final year producing the focused dataset analyzed in detail.

The course structure required each student to rotate through multiple roles, including lead curator, assistant curator, publicist, installer, and documenter. For each exhibition, two to three students served as lead curators, taking responsibility for the conceptual and logistical direction of the show. The rotating leadership model ensured that every student had the chance to lead at least one exhibition.

Exhibition venues spanned university galleries, outdoor spaces, and external institutions. University galleries served as entry points for students new to exhibition

work, offering controlled environments ranging from a glass-enclosed corridor to traditional white-cube spaces and a technology-oriented design center. Outdoor venues, including a campus rain garden and a local public library, introduced approval processes, environmental considerations, and community-facing audiences. Two external institutions, a university museum of world cultures and a professional design museum in a major city, raised the professional stakes through formal protocols, executive-level coordination, and audiences well beyond the campus. The progression across venues built student capacity to produce, organize, and preserve exhibition records under varying institutional conditions.

Community partnerships connected student curators with local high school art programs, international graffiti artists, a Chinese anthropologist from a partner university in China, game design students from a cross-departmental collaboration, a diaspora community group, and individual artists working across multiple media. No two exhibitions were alike. Each semester brought different collaborators, different venues, and different curatorial challenges.

The three years of the course produced cumulative observations of non-archivist exhibition documentation under varying conditions. In 2023, students built public portfolio websites documenting curatorial work, with documentation oriented toward execution: what happened, who did what, and how logistics were managed. In 2024, students wrote detailed self-reflections recording contributions, challenges, and collaborative dynamics, with the orientation shifting toward voice and decision-making. Over the 2023 and 2024 cohorts, students consistently made implicit judgments about which records were significant and which were not, even before any formal archival task was introduced. The cumulative observations informed the design of the explicit archival selection task introduced in 2025, which made the implicit reasoning visible by asking students to explain selection decisions in writing.

Researcher positionality

The researcher inherited the Exhibition Practices course upon arrival at the university as a Teaching Assistant Professor with specialized expertise in museum and art education and has taught the course each fall since 2023. The interest in archival selection grew from a habit of reflective practice and from a specific encounter. The multicultural background of the researcher, having lived and worked across multiple countries, also shaped an attention to how curatorial decisions reflect the values and assumptions of the person making the decision. The present study is part of a broader research program examining how multiple non-archivist voices, including curators, staff, students, and visitors, contribute to the formation of exhibition archives. Student voices are treated here as one entry point into the broader question, valuable as archival data documenting the selection decisions of non-archivists. The dual position of course instructor and researcher creates potential interpretive bias. A reflexive journal documented analytical decisions throughout the analytic process.

The archival selection task

At the end of the fall 2025 semester, each curatorial team received the following instructions: accumulate all materials representative of the exhibition, including visitor experience feedback, documentation of involvement, notes, flyers, photographs, emails, text messages, planning documents, and any other relevant materials, into a designated digital folder corresponding to the exhibition the team led. Students then worked together within curatorial teams to decide what to include and what to exclude from the final archive. Following the group discussion, each student wrote an individual reflection explaining and justifying the selection decisions. The reflection addressed three questions: what was included and why, what was excluded and why, and how the group reached the decisions.

Students received no formal instruction in archival theory or archival methodology before completing the task. Preparation included a one-day visit to the university archives and an introductory workshop led by a professional archivist. The selection task was designed to surface the implicit reasoning that non-archivists bring to archival decisions, not to alter that reasoning. Student selection decisions therefore emerged from curatorial priorities, exhibition experiences, and collaborative work during exhibition production. The minimal archival preparation is a feature of the research design. The study examines how non-archivists approach archival selection when professional frameworks are not available, not how trained archivists apply such frameworks. The student voices recorded in the reflections are treated as data about non-archivist selection practices, not as evidence of student learning.

Data and analytical approach

The primary data consisted of eleven written reflections submitted by student curators at the end of the fall 2025 semester. Each reflection ranged from approximately 150 to 500 words and varied in depth and detail. Supporting data included the archival folders assembled by each curatorial group, which provided additional context regarding the types and quantities of materials selected for preservation. Earlier course materials from 2023 to 2024, including portfolio websites, self-evaluation reflections, exhibition planning documents, and discussion board posts, provided longitudinal context for the study. The 2023 and 2024 materials were not collected through the same structured selection task, but the cumulative observations across the three years allowed the researcher to identify documentation patterns that persisted across cohorts and to confirm that the 2025 reflections were consistent with broader patterns of non-archivist documentation behavior observed in the course.

The data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the six-phase framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021). The Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines emphasized that reflexive thematic analysis works best when researchers explicitly describe theoretical positioning, treat themes as analytic outcomes shaped by researcher interpretation, and avoid confusing themes with mere topics (Braun and Clarke 2024). The present analysis followed the updated Braun and Clarke guidelines. The method supported flexible qualitative interpreta-

tion, aligned with a constructionist epistemology, and allowed close analysis of a small qualitative dataset.

The analysis proceeded through six stages. The first stage involved repeated reading of the reflections to build familiarity with the dataset. The second stage involved generating initial codes in a systematic manner. The third stage focused on identifying patterns across coded segments. The fourth stage involved reviewing and refining emerging themes. The fifth stage involved defining and naming themes. The final stage involved producing the written analysis. A reflexive journal documented analytical decisions and reflections on researcher positionality throughout the analytic process.

Findings

Analysis of the eleven student reflections produced four interconnected themes, interpreted here as four logics of curatorial data formation observed in this study. The four logics describe how non-archivists reasoned about archival selection when professional frameworks were not available. The first logic, Record Density and Data Composition, addresses the tension between comprehensive documentation and selective curatorial judgment. The second logic, Reputation-Based Filtering, shows how professional identity and self-presentation influenced which materials entered the archive. The third logic, Relational Ethical Filtering, describes how privacy, trust, and care toward collaborators guided omission decisions. The fourth logic, Bias Awareness, documents moments when student curators recognized archival silence and the constructed nature of exhibition records. The four logics are presented as analytic patterns identified through the data, not as universal claims about non-archivist archiving. The patterns require further study across other non-archivist populations and other exhibition contexts (Table 1).

Record density and data composition

The most consistent pattern across the reflections involved a tension about how much to preserve. Many student curators felt a strong impulse to keep everything, driven by a desire for transparency. The reflections also revealed an emerging awareness that archival work requires deliberate selection and organization of materials.

Some curatorial groups emphasized comprehensive documentation. Groups responsible for Exhibitions 3 and 4 frequently described an effort to preserve as many records as possible. Brit, a student leader from Exhibition 3, explained:

> My group chose to not omit anything from our exhibition archiving. We felt that for future viewers to understand the context of the show, they needed to see all of the behind the scenes and the whole show. If we had anything missing, it was not to our knowledge. (Brit)

Megan, reflecting on the same exhibition, shared the commitment to total preservation:

Table 1 Logics of curatorial data formation

Logic	Core question	Typical pattern	Implications
Record Density and Composition	Should the archive document the entire process or only the most relevant materials?	Some groups retain nearly all documentation; others remove redundant emails, duplicate photos, and repetitive files.	Determines the volume and granularity of data preserved about the exhibition process.
Reputation-Based Filtering	How does the archive represent the curators and their professional practice?	Rough drafts, informal artifacts, or materials perceived as unprofessional may be excluded.	Produces polished records that can underrepresent the iterative nature of curatorial work.
Relational Ethical Filtering	How should privacy and trust toward collaborators be respected?	Personal communications, private messages, and sensitive contact information are removed.	Introduces ethically motivated gaps in relational dimensions of exhibition records.
Bias Awareness	What omissions or silences may exist within the archive?	Students acknowledge that archives inevitably contain partial perspectives and missing materials.	Encourages reflexive awareness that archives are constructed records.

Four logics shaping curatorial data formation in exhibition archiving

> Because every category of material added something unique, we did not omit any items. Nothing felt redundant or unclear, and even informal documents such as text screenshots or rough planning notes offered valuable insight into how the group worked together. We agreed that preserving the entire collection provides the most accurate representation of our decision making, collaboration, and the overall evolution of the exhibition. (Megan)

The language used by the Exhibition 3 and 4 students deserves close attention. Terms such as "transparency," "complete," and "accurate representation" reveal an implicit understanding of archiving as objective documentation, a faithful recording of events without alteration. Within the curatorial data formation framework, the completeness orientation generates high-density data records, increasing the volume and diversity of materials entering the archive. Large accumulations of undifferentiated records, however, can complicate retrieval and interpretation by obscuring the relative significance of individual documents. The students were not applying an archival framework when reasoning about completeness. The students were extending a curatorial impulse toward transparency into the work of archive formation.

Other groups adopted a more selective approach. Rochelle, reflecting on Exhibition 2, articulated a clear logic for omission:

> We also didn't keep certain emails as it was also just reoccurring information so there was no reason for us to keep it in the document. We also went through the photos and deleted any photos that looked the same. However, we kept most of the files as we felt that it was very important that the entire process was documented. (Rochelle)

Liz, documenting Exhibition 1, gave a particularly detailed account of selective archiving applied to photographs:

> In terms of omission, we decided to omit about 158 photographs. This mostly came down to redundancy; we had multiple student curators taking pictures at the same time so there was overlap in subject matter. In addition to this, multiple photos from the same photographer of the same subject were omitted as long as just one photograph was included of that subject. Finally, some photos were irrelevant to our exhibition. (Liz)

The selective logic produces lower-density data records organized around relevance and narrative coherence. Schellenberg (1956) distinguished between evidential value, derived from the importance of the activity that produced the records, and informational value, derived from the significance of the data the records contain. The distinction was developed for institutional records and trained archivists. The student decisions documented here did not derive from Schellenberg or any other archival framework. The decisions emerged from practical curatorial concerns about redundancy, storage, and narrative coherence. The two orientations, total preservation and selective curation, produced exhibition archives of fundamentally different structural character.

Reputation-based filtering

Professional identity also shaped archival selection. Several student curators described the archive as a space where professional ability and curatorial values became visible. Robert, reflecting on Exhibition 3, explained that the curatorial team intentionally excluded a planning document perceived as low quality:

> However, I chose to leave an exhibition map I crudely made with Yixin out of the archive because it was crudely designed and the final exhibit layout didn't reflect the planned design. We didn't think it was necessary to include but the rest of the group didn't know about the existence of the document but assumed they included everything. (Robert)

The description of the map as "crudely designed" signals an aesthetic and professional standard used to evaluate archival materials. Documents failing the perceived quality threshold were excluded from preservation even when the documents

recorded important aspects of the curatorial process. Robert also noted that the rest of the group "didn't know about the existence of the document." The statement reveals how individual actors can shape archival records through private omission. Ketelaar (2001) introduced the concept of archivalization to describe the conscious or unconscious choice, shaped by social and cultural factors, to consider something worth archiving. Archivalization precedes the act of archiving. Before any document enters a folder or a database, someone has already decided whether the document deserves to be there. In the case of Robert, the decision was shaped by an aesthetic and professional standard operating below the level of group discussion. The map failed the standard and was excluded. The rest of the group never knew the map had existed. Within curatorial data formation, reputation-based filtering removes traces of process imperfection, struggle, and informal collaboration from exhibition archives before any institutional review takes place.

Amika, reflecting on Exhibition 2, revealed a similar filtering logic tied to perceptions of professionalism:

> Text Thread: I felt that the text thread did not provide relevant information for archival. It was more of a personal, unprofessional text just asking and answering a question within our group chat. (Amika)

The reflection of Amika identifies a distinction between personal communication and professional documentation as an appraisal standard. The decision excludes a form of communication that often contains evidence of collaborative decision-making during the curatorial process. Schwartz and Cook (2002) observed that the choice of what to record and the decision over what to preserve occur within socially constructed frameworks. The professional standard applied by Amika was absorbed from the broader cultural context in which the student was developing an identity. The reflection of Yixin presented a clear articulation of the self-presentational logic and framed archival selection as a creative act:

> In this way, choosing what to include and what to leave out is a type of "re-curation," or a way of curating our own process. I hope that anyone who looks at this collection in the future can readily see how our group developed an idea into a genuine display over time. (Yixin)

The term "re-curation" reflects an understanding that archiving functions as an active process of meaning-making. Archival selection operates as a second layer of curatorial work shaping how the original exhibition will be interpreted by future audiences. Constructionist approaches to archival theory described archives as spaces where meaning continues to develop through interpretation and selection (Cook 2001; Ketelaar 2001, 2012). The student articulation of re-curation echoes the constructionist insight from a different angle: the curators themselves recognize the meaning-making work of archival selection, even without the vocabulary archival theory provides.

Relational ethical filtering

Ethical considerations also shaped archival selection. Several student curators described an ethic of care toward artists and collaborators whose personal information appeared in exhibition documentation. Madyson, co-leader of Exhibition 4, provided a detailed explanation for excluding private communications from the archive:

> We also made some omissions. Private one-on-one communications with artists were excluded to protect privacy and because they did not significantly influence the group's collective process. We also omitted lengthy unedited video footage, since the final edited film captured the exhibition more clearly and professionally. (Madyson)

Jason shared the same concern, with a specific reference to protecting the personal contact information of artists:

> The items we have chosen to omit include text messages between curators and artists, some email communications to and from individual artists, and extra footage from the video documentation. We have omitted these materials because they do not lend themselves to the overall understanding of the show or its process to fruition. We, also, want to protect the private information of the artists who have entrusted us with their phone numbers. (Jason)

The phrase "entrusted us with their phone numbers" deserves close attention. The wording frames the curatorial relationship as one grounded in trust and responsibility. Personal information shared during professional collaboration carries an expectation of confidentiality. The radical empathy framework positioned relational and emotional dimensions of records management at the center of archival ethics (Caswell and Cifor 2016). The framework was developed in the context of professional archival work involving records of vulnerable communities. The reasoning of students working with collaborator phone numbers and private text exchanges does not carry the same weight as the situations Caswell and Cifor describe, but the reasoning reflects a related ethical sensibility. Students recognized that personal information shared during collaboration creates obligations toward collaborators. The recognition is significant for archival theory because the recognition occurred without formal training. Non-archivists working in participatory exhibition settings build ethical filters into the archive at the moment of formation. Within curatorial data formation, relational ethical filtering produces intentional gaps in exhibition archives where private exchanges and interpersonal communication occurred. The resulting records emphasize collective and public-facing documentation and limit the presence of personal communication.

Bias awareness

The fourth logic addresses moments when student curators shifted from describing selection decisions to reflecting on the nature of archiving. Robert began with a description of a specific omission and then articulated a broader principle:

> This shows how in any archive there are some silences and every archive has a constructed bias. (Robert)

The claim that "every archive has a constructed bias" reflects a constructionist understanding of archives: records emerge through decisions about inclusion, omission, and interpretation. The observation of Robert echoes a long tradition of archival scholarship that has examined how archives produce knowledge through selection (Cook 2001; Schwartz and Cook 2002). The student arrived at the recognition through direct experience: the archive did not record everything, the gap was invisible to others, and the gap was a product of a decision. The reflection of Robert then described how the silence operated within the group:

> We didn't think it was necessary to include but the rest of the group didn't know about the existence of the document but assumed they included everything. (Robert)

The observation reflects a concept discussed in archival theory as the invisibility of absence (Duff and Harris 2002). Materials excluded from an archive often remain invisible to subsequent readers of the archive. Members of the curatorial group believed the archive was complete only because the omitted document remained unknown to other collaborators. The recognition reached by Robert through direct curatorial practice does not equate to the systematic analysis of power and silence developed by archival theorists working in contexts of state violence and structural oppression (Harris 2002). The point is more focused: a non-archivist building an exhibition archive recognized that selection produces partiality, and recognized that the partiality often remains invisible to subsequent readers of the archive. The recognition is significant for archival theory because the recognition emerged from the act of selection itself, not from training or instruction. Bias awareness, when surfacing among non-archivists, may function as an internal correction within the curatorial data formation process.

Within curatorial data formation, bias awareness represents the most reflexive of the four logics because the logic involves critical reflection on the data formation process. The reflection of Rochelle revealed an awareness of how the archive would function as a resource for future users:

> When future students see what we have archived, I think that they will be able to clearly see our process and understand why the exhibition was as successful as it was. (Rochelle)

Jason similarly expressed a recognition that archival practice feeds back into curatorial practice:

> Developing an archive based on a show will help me in the future to more effectively develop a show itself; it allows me to reflect on my curatorial principles. (Jason)

Discussion

Curatorial data formation as a conceptual framework

Curatorial data formation refers to the process by which cultural information takes structural form through the selection and organization decisions made by those who build exhibition archives. The concept draws attention to a specific moment in the life of cultural records: the point at which a curator, educator, or exhibition team decides what enters a digital folder, what gets deleted, and what gets labeled. The decisions precede database ingestion, metadata assignment, and any computational processing of cultural collections. Whatever enters the archive at that moment shapes what future audiences, researchers, and information systems will encounter. Curatorial data formation reframes exhibition archiving as more than a documentary exercise. Exhibition archiving operates as a practice through which the raw material of future cultural knowledge is formed.

The concept extends archival appraisal scholarship in several directions. Schwartz and Cook (2002) argued that archives are sites where social power is negotiated, contested, and confirmed. Cook (2001, 2005) framed the archivist as an active agent whose appraisal decisions help shape collective memory. The arguments emerged in the context of institutional archives and professional archivists. The participatory turn in archival theory extended the analysis to community archives, Indigenous recordkeeping, and activist documentation, examining how non-institutional actors participate in archival processes (Caswell et al. 2016; Flinn 2011; Huvila 2008; McKemmish et al. 2011). Curatorial data formation extends the participatory analysis to a particular setting and a particular type of non-archivist actor. The setting is participatory exhibition practice, where multiple voices contribute to and curate records of temporary cultural events. The actor examined in the present study is the student curator, treated as one type of non-archivist voice whose selection decisions shape the resulting exhibition archive.

The concept differs from established appraisal frameworks in one significant respect. The macroappraisal framework developed by Cook (2001, 2005) positions a trained archivist as the evaluating agent who assesses records in relation to the broader functions and activities of an institution or society. Curatorial data formation shifts attention to a different actor and a different moment. The people building exhibition archives in participatory settings make selection decisions while simultaneously producing the records being selected. The appraisal activity and the creation activity happen in the same hands, at the same time. The framework therefore complements, but does not replace, established appraisal theory. In Cook's formulation,

macroappraisal ideally occurs before records arrive at the archives, and preferably before records are created, by identifying the most significant functions and activities as targets for documentation (Cook 2001, 2005). Curatorial data formation addresses how non-archivists evaluate the records they themselves produce, before any institutional review takes place. This earlier moment of selection can inform archival practice: by attending to the logics through which non-archivists already shape records at the point of creation, archivists might adapt macroappraisal approaches to better ensure the capture of valuable records in participatory and museum settings. Inquiries into curatorial data formation thus offer one pathway for bridging the conceptual gap between community/participatory archives and institutional archives.

The concept also connects to the radical empathy framework developed by Caswell and Cifor (2016). Curatorial data formation makes visible how the affective responsibilities Caswell and Cifor describe operate when the archivist, the records creator, and the records subject converge in the same person or group. The relational ethical filtering identified in the present study reflects an everyday version of the affective responsibilities, operating without institutional supports. The convergence raises a question for archival theory: how should the profession understand the responsibilities of non-archivists who shape cultural records before institutional review begins? Ketelaar (2012) argued that archives are cultivated through repeated activation by multiple users. Curatorial data formation extends the cultivation concept to the moment before institutional cultivation begins, examining the activations that shape what an archive becomes available to be.

The four logics identified in the study describe how curatorial data formation operates within the population examined here. Among the four, record density and data composition functions as the most structurally consequential. The decision about how much to preserve determines the volume, granularity, and diversity of materials that enter the archive. Exhibition 4 teams retained all documentation, including visitor feedback, planning notes, artist communications, and informal text exchanges, on the grounds that each category of material offered a distinct view of the exhibition process. Exhibition 2 teams removed duplicate photographs, recurring emails, and materials deemed redundant. Both approaches produced archives, but archives of fundamentally different character. The first approach produces high-density records in which the iterative, relational, and contingent dimensions of curatorial work remain visible. The second approach produces lower-density records organized around narrative coherence and relevance. When the resulting archives enter digital repositories, the structural differences are what information systems encounter and process. The density of a cultural record is not incidental. The density is the data.

The remaining three logics describe the forces that drive selection decisions toward lower density. Reputation-based filtering removes materials that curators perceive as unprofessional or unfinished, producing systematic disappearance of process documentation in favor of polished outcomes. Relational ethical filtering removes private communications and personal contact information, producing intentional gaps in the relational dimensions of the exhibition. Bias awareness, the most reflexive of the four logics, surfaces when curators recognize that the selections have introduced silences into the record. The four logics describe a layered process in which density is established first, then shaped downward by professional, ethical, and cognitive

pressures. The resulting archive is not a neutral record of what occurred. The archive is a data structure whose properties were determined before any archivist, database administrator, or computational system encountered the data. Curatorial data formation names the moment when the data structure properties are determined: the consequential work of shaping cultural records happens at the point of production, by non-archivists, in ways that leave no trace of the decisions made.

Exhibition archiving as curatorial practice

The archival selection task prompted students to make explicit the implicit reasoning that operated during exhibition organization. Students had to decide which records would remain in the exhibition archive, and the responsibility of preserving materials beyond the semester appeared to deepen engagement and reasoning. The term "re-curation" articulated by Yixin points to a useful insight for curatorial data formation. Archiving functions as a second layer of curatorial activity. Curators who archive exhibitions revisit earlier decisions, reconsider curatorial choices, and reinterpret the development of the exhibition. The re-curation activity is also a moment of data formation: the second layer of decisions shapes the structural properties of the archive that will represent the exhibition to future audiences. Each photograph retained, each email deleted, each folder labeled contributes to the data structure that downstream users and information systems will encounter.

The three-year development of the course produced consistent observations about how non-archivists approach exhibition documentation. In 2023, the primary orientation of student documentation was toward execution: students recorded what happened, who did what, and how logistics were managed. Reflection from 2023 focused on the labor and complexity of exhibition production, with little explicit attention to what was being preserved or why. In 2024, the orientation shifted toward voice and decision-making. Students began to record not only what occurred but why particular choices were made, how collaborative tensions were resolved, and what the exhibition meant to the people involved. By 2025, the explicit archival selection task made visible the reasoning that had been operating implicitly in earlier years. Across all three cohorts, similar patterns of documentation behavior appeared in the cumulative observations: a tendency toward completeness paired with reputation-driven omission, ethical filtering applied to personal communications, and occasional recognition of archival partiality. Although the four logics were articulated through the structured 2025 reflections, the consistency of these broader patterns across the three cohorts supports the analytic claim that the logics describe a recurring feature of non-archivist exhibition archiving in this setting, not idiosyncratic behavior of a single group of students. The 2023 and 2024 materials, while not collected through the same archival selection task, provided longitudinal context that allowed the researcher to recognize these patterns retrospectively.

Implications for museum practice and participatory archiving

The findings engage ongoing discussions in museum management concerning exhibition documentation and participation in documentation processes. A recurring

tension appears between comprehensive documentation and selective preservation. Museum institutions frequently face the practical challenge of maintaining detailed records while working within limits of storage capacity, staff time, and institutional priorities (Marty 2007). The patterns documented in the present study suggest that participatory documentation programs require explicit attention to the kinds of selection decisions non-archivists make. Without such attention, institutional archives that incorporate participatory contributions may inherit systematic biases produced by reputation-based filtering and reputation-driven omission. The biases are not the fault of non-archivists who make selection decisions in good faith. The biases reflect the absence of frameworks supporting non-archivists in the consequential work the non-archivists are already doing.

Relational ethical filtering holds clear relevance for museums collaborating with living artists, community partners, and external organizations. The reflections of students indicate an awareness that exhibition documentation carries responsibilities toward collaborators whose personal information appears within project materials. The radical empathy framework proposed by Caswell and Cifor (2016) aligns with the care-based reasoning observed in student reflections, though the stakes for student archivists working with collaborator contact information differ in scale from the situations Caswell and Cifor describe in professional archival settings.

Museums and galleries may learn from the present findings. When curators and exhibition teams participate in documenting their own projects, the resulting archive can include richer contextual knowledge about how exhibitions develop. Self-archiving can also introduce risks. Reputation-based filtering can remove records that reveal uncertainty, revision, and informal collaboration. Institutional archives may benefit from models that combine the contextual knowledge of exhibition teams with the methodological oversight of professional archivists. The combination would draw on the strengths of participatory archiving while protecting the archive from the systematic biases that arise when selection happens entirely at the point of production. The participatory archive model proposed by Huvila (2008), characterized by decentralized curation, radical user orientation, and broader contextualization, offers a starting point for designing the combined model.

Exhibition records now enter digital repositories and searchable databases where the structure of archived data shapes discoverability and interpretation (Colavizza et al. 2021). Record density decisions influence whether digital systems encounter detailed process documentation or primarily finalized exhibition outputs. Reputation-based filtering may lead digital repositories to overrepresent polished outcomes while obscuring the iterative processes through which exhibitions develop. Biases embedded in cultural heritage data can move from source records into classification systems, reinforcing historical blind spots (Foka et al. 2025). Curatorial data formation therefore carries consequences extending beyond the archive.

Conclusion

The study examined how non-archivists navigate archival selection when documenting exhibitions. The setting was an exhibition practices course at a large Midwestern research university, observed over three years from 2023 to 2025. Reflexive thematic analysis of eleven written reflections from the final year identified four logics of curatorial data formation: record density and data composition, reputation-based filtering, relational ethical filtering, and bias awareness. The four logics describe how the cultural record narrows at the point of production, before any professional archivist becomes involved.

The study contributes to archival theory in several ways. First, the study extends participatory archive scholarship to exhibition settings, where multiple non-archivist voices shape records of temporary cultural events. Second, the study proposes curatorial data formation as an analytic concept for examining the moment when selection and creation collapse into the same hands. Third, the study identifies four logics that describe how the moment operates in one type of participatory setting. The four logics are presented as patterns observed in this study, requiring further validation across other non-archivist populations and other exhibition contexts.

Limitations include a small primary dataset of eleven reflections from the 2025 cohort, a single course context, and a population of students new to formal archival thinking. The 2023 and 2024 materials provided cumulative observations across three cohorts but were not collected through the same structured selection task. While the findings do not directly generalize to professional museum practice, where trained archivists apply formal appraisal frameworks under institutional supervision, they point to opportunities for archival practice to engage more directly with records creation processes. Drawing on macroappraisal's emphasis on functions and activities prior to record creation, and on the affective responsibilities articulated in radical empathy frameworks (Caswell and Cifor 2016), professional archivists and museum staff might develop collaborative models that support non-archivists in the consequential selection work they already perform. The study does not address how visitors and community participants might contribute to or complicate the archival formation process. The present study is the first in a broader research program examining how multiple non-archivist voices, including curators, staff, students, and visitors, contribute to the formation of exhibition archives. Future research within the program will examine other non-archivist voices and other exhibition contexts to test and refine the four logics identified here.

The eleven student curators in the 2025 cohort demonstrated that the smallest archival choice, whether to keep or delete a single photograph, carries weight. The reflections of the student curators suggest that learning to archive is learning to take responsibility for the data structures that will represent cultural work to future audiences. Curatorial data formation names the moment when the responsibility takes practical form, regardless of whether the person making the decision identifies as an archivist.

Author contributions S.L. designed the study, collected and analyzed the data, and wrote the manuscript.

Data availability The qualitative data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available because the data contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants. Anonymized excerpts from the data are included in the manuscript. Additional data may be available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Declarations

Conflict of interests The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical approval and consent to participate The University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Institutional Review Board reviewed the study under protocol IRB26-0404, titled "Archive, Museum, and Exhibition Practices in Art and Design Education," and determined that the study qualified for exempt status. All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the IRB-approved protocol, the U.S. Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46), institutional policy of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign governing the use of student coursework as research data, and the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and later amendments. Verbal informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Written documentation of informed consent was not required under the exempt determination for protocol IRB26-0404. Student names were replaced with pseudonyms and all excerpts were de-identified prior to analysis.

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