Final pre-print version.

Published in Ben Roberts and Mark Goodall, eds, *New Media Archaeologies* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), pp. 135-54.

doi: 10.5117/9789462982161\_ch06

Collector, Hoarder, Media Archaeologist:

Walter Benjamin with Vivian Maier

‘I never counted actually. I don’t have a full catalogue, but it’s a few, some thousands of items. I think the sad part would be, you know, one day to have to sell it all in an auction because that would mean that all these pieces would travel in different ways and you would lose track of many of them. If you let these things pass by, there’s a risk that they disappear from the history, if they are unique documents and things that tell this part of the story. So that’s why I’ve been trying my best to … store these things and store them properly.’

Erkki Huhtamo, 2013[[1]](#endnote-1)

‘the person who collects is taking up the struggle against dispersion’

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

**A media archaeologist in his collection**

Even before he properly starts *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles*, Erkki Huhtamo gives the reader of his exemplary media archaeological text some vital clues about the materials and modes of its composition. His acknowledgements pages contain the usual recognition of public archives and collections, but prior to that he gives thanks to numerous *private* collectors of visual-mechanical artifacts whose ‘treasure troves’ he says, ‘I have excavated.’ (p.xiii) The metaphor stands out, but it is the matter that raises the larger question about the identity of media archaeology as a practice. Is it simply the case that the media archaeologist’s search for lost technical artifacts and ‘lacunas in shared knowledge’ (p.xviii) led him to obscure spots on paths far from conventional archives? Or is there something about the private treasure trove that is already media archaeological? Is the passion of the private collector, in contrast to the ‘elite filter’ (Belk, p. 153) of the museum, closer to the media archaeological spirit? Near the end of his acknowledgements, Huhtamo gives a special mention to David Hildebrand Wilson and his most singular Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, implying that this eccentric assemblage performs the same sort of work that Huhtamo is seeking to carry out in his own scholarship.

As Jussi Parikka has pointed out, Huhtamo is himself a dedicated collector and regular curator of his own collection of media-objects. It is an activity in which he is not alone: many media archaeologists have ‘an enthusiasm for objects, and […] many are miniarchivists themselves, frequent visitors of flea markets, antiquariums, and old electronic shops.’ (Parikka 2013, p. 12) Huhtamo’s own testimony to his collecting and its importance can be found on a UCLA YouTube channel in a video with the intimate-sounding title ‘Artifacts of Media Archaeology: Inside Professor Erkki Huhtamo's Office’. Surrounded by shelves lined with proto-cinematic optical devices, the media archaeologist handles and demonstrates in turn a zoetrope, a mutoscope, a kinetoscope. This collection of technologies of the moving image has above all a pedagogical value, Huhtamo says. Students exposed to it will learn of alternate histories, and be able to question their relation to their own ‘devices’. And yet, in spite of this optimistic orientation towards a future in which lost technical devices will be redeemed, there is a melancholic strain to Huhtamo’s presentation. Even as he displays his objects, all stored together safely in one place, he cannot help but anticipate their dispersion: he imagines one day having to sell them at an auction, after which they would ‘travel in different ways’, separate and far from each other. In the very midst of the lovingly gathered objects, then, he issues a *memento mori* to the entire project, a warning note against the media archaeological aspiration to uncover, recover, and classify the unique items that might one day make the collection complete…

**Antiquarian, media archaeologist**

This chapter takes up the question of media archaeology as a mode of collecting, and the collection as a media archaeological object. It asks whether media archaeology, in its materialist attitude, emancipates the object from a narrow textualist regime, as Wolfgang Ernst and Walter Benjamin suggest, or whether it verges towards a mere connoisseurship in its fetishisation of outmoded processes and technologies. It will take as its main example the case of the recently discovered Chicago street photographer, Vivian Maier, who left behind her an enormous cache of negatives and rolls of undeveloped film, as well as storerooms packed with other objects, some of them media-technical, others not. Maier’s example opens up the problem of the borderline between collecting and hoarding, just as the guardian of the largest part of her archive, John Maloof, presents a compelling instance of a media-archaeological tension between preservation and reanimation.

The first modern media archaeological statement on collecting begins not with cinematic memorabilia, but with books. Collecting, Walter Benjamin admits at the end of ‘Unpacking my Library’ (1931) is a ‘passion’ that is ‘behind the times’. Because of this, he says to his reader, he will not attempt to dispel ‘your distrust of the collector type.’ (p. 66) Benjamin was a collector himself, and he knew perfectly well that collectors are widely seen as acquisitive cranks or eccentric obsessives. It was against this background that the figure of the collector, along with the *flâneur*, became one of the major characters of *The Arcades Project*, a text that remains to the end ambivalent about collecting and collectors. On the one hand the collector, by removing an object from circulation, breaks the spell of the commodity, but on the other hand through collecting things ‘bestows on them only a connoisseur value, rather than use value.’ (Benjamin, 1999, p. 9)

This ambivalence persists amongst the major theorists of media archaeology, some of whom, like Huhtamo, are enthusiasts, while others are distrustful, even while they accept the centrality of collecting to their field. So, for example, Siegfried Zielinksi invokes positively a sixteenth-century model of collecting when he says that an ‘anarchaeology of the media is a collection of curiosities’:

By curiosities, I mean finds from the rich history of seeing, hearing, and combining using technical means: things in which something sparks or glitters – their bioluminescence. (p. 34)

Here, virtually undiluted, is an appropriation of the idea of the marvels or wonders that made up the *naturalia* and *artificialia* of Renaissance cabinets of curiosity. In fact, with the one word, ‘bioluminescence’, his technical discoveries become *naturalia* and *artificialia* at the same time. Not only is Zielinski himself a scholarly collector of such technical wonders, but he collects such collectors, such as Giambattista della Porta and the Brothers Quay (first film: *Nocturna Artificialia*, 1979). And yet, in the foreword to the very same book, Timothy Druckery starkly warns against media archaeology descending into mere ‘oddball paleontologies’ and becoming a sort of ‘connoisseurship, or worse, antiquarianism.’ (p. ix) It is only one small step, Druckery implies, from the media archaeologist detecting ruptures and discontinuities in media history to the basement filled with early model Ataris.

In one of the central texts of media archaeological theory, Wolfgang Ernst in fact proposes a ‘media-critical antiquarianism’, suggesting that the apparently quaint and parochial pursuits of the antiquarian have many parallels with the work of media archaeology. This is because

Antiquarians have tried to bridge the gap [between physical presence and discursive absence of the past] by touching and tasting the immediate, material object. For antiquarians, history is not just text, but the materialist emancipation of the object from an exclusive subjection to textual analysis. Antiquarianism acknowledges the past as artefactual hardware. (2013, p. 43)

The antiquarian gives the physical object its due, and does not attempt immediately to reduce it to the discursive level of written history, and so provides a vital lesson to the media archaeologist, who needs to get the piece of hardware in his or her hands, and become ‘an amateur engineer who opens, checks physically, tests, and experiments’ with the thing. (Parikka, 2013, pp. 12-13) As Benjamin writes in *The Arcades Project*, ‘Collectors are beings with tactile instincts.’ (p. 206) But Ernst also distances himself from the oddball connotations of collecting, preferring instead the metaphor and actuality of the archive. According to Ernst,

An archive is not an arbitrary quantity, not just any collection of things can be an archive. The archival regime of memory is […] a rule-governed, administratively programmed operation of inclusions and exclusions. (2013, p. 129)

Like Druckery, Ernst wants to avoid the degrading of media archaeological work into ‘a nostalgic collection of “dead media” of the past, assembled in a curiosity cabinet.’ (Ernst, 2011, p. 240) Less fascinated by curiosities than Zielinski, and more interested in the analytic value of rigorous storage regimes, Ernst also underestimates the ‘rule-governed’ nature of the serious collection, with its strict protocols for the admission of new items, and its carefully worked out logic of arrangement and display. It is also possible that he wants to distance himself from Benjamin, who finds in the collection some of the same critical values that Ernst discovers in the archive. The following section outlines in more detail some of the key theories of collectors and collecting in order to prepare the ground for a discussion of Vivian Maier’s reputed hoarding of media objects.

**Collectors and collecting**

The origins of the modern Western collection are usually traced to the mediaeval practice of collecting relics, which were stored in church treasuries. The singularity of these objects and their sacred value found secular equivalents in the Renaissance collector’s appetite for rare objects, and in the sanctity of any collection’s principles of organisation. At the same time, the Renaissance collection also had a rational foundation. As Russell W. Belk explains, the cabinet of curiosity, or *Wunderkammer*, operated on the basis of a tension between two principles. On the one hand, it was driven by eclecticism, turning it into a storehouse of marvels and wonders, as its German name indicates. On the other hand, it served to order and classify, bringing such heterogeneous objects under the rule of positive knowledge. (Belk, p. 32) According to Patrick Mauriès, by the 1560s there was already a ‘republic of collectors, who shared the single aim of pinning down the universe in order to obtain rapidly, easily and safely a true and unique understanding of the world.’ (p. 23) The cabinet of curiosities, he goes on, ‘was nothing more nor less than a sequence of containers holding within them yet more containers in diminishing order of size, in the ceaseless quest for the allusive essence of a particular realm of knowledge.’ (p. 35) Jean de Berry, the 14th-century collector of illuminated manuscripts and other artworks, is often taken to be a transitional figure, the first to collect objects for their own sake. (Belk, p. 28) Collecting reached its apotheosis in the Baroque period, with the Kunstkammer of Rudolf II and the cabinet of Athanasius Kircher, among others.

As both storage devices and modes of transmission, cabinets were clearly media forms. Indeed, Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin count cabinets of curiosity alongside illuminated manuscripts, Dutch painting, and modernist collage as instances of hypermediacy (p. 34); and Barbara Stafford has noted the parallels between the Wunderkammer and digital media. (pp. 74-5) These parallels no doubt contribute to a revival of the cabinet, as well as the concept of curiosity, among artists in the digital age.[[2]](#endnote-2) Between the first baroque period and the contemporary repurposing of the cabinet of curiosity in the second baroque of hypertext, collecting of course continued, but Enlightenment values ensured that the collector, as Benjamin noted, became a figure of suspicion or satire.

What, then, does a collection do? According to one standard thesis, a collection preserves or rescues things that would otherwise decay or disappear. This thesis paints the collector in a heroic light as one who redeems lost objects, saving them from oblivion, or as Mauriès puts it, ‘the aim of any collection is to halt the passage of time, to freeze the ineluctable progress of life or history’. (p. 119) A more nuanced perspective emphasizes instead how the collected object is not preserved, but in fact *transformed*, first through removal from its original context, and second by being put into a new set of relations with other objects in a collection. All ‘collected pieces [….] are wrenched out of their own true contexts,’ notes Susan M. Pearce (p. 24), and the collector’s ‘impulse’, says Susan Stewart, is ‘to remove objects from their contexts of origin and production and to replace those contexts with the context of the collection.’ (p. 156) The collected corkscrew, removed from the kitchen, or bar, or restaurant, finds its place and meaning alongside other corkscrews (and also, why not, bottle openers?) in a series or sequence determined by relations between objects in the collection. We could debate whether or not the corkscrew has some original or true context, but one thing is certain: once in the collection, it will never again be used to open bottles. For this reason, Stewart claims, ‘all collected objects are … *objets de lux*, objects abstracted from use value and materiality within a magic cycle of self-referential exchange.’ (p. 165)

In his essays and fragments on the subject Walter Benjamin came to the same conclusion as Pearce and Stewart, while adding a political turn to his analysis. In ‘Unpacking my Library’ he states that a collection sets up ‘a relationship to objects that does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value – that is, their usefulness – but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate’. (p. 60) In Convolute H of *The Arcades Project*, ‘The Collector’ (effectively a notebook on which ‘Unpacking my Library’ draws), he puts it like this:

What is decisive in collecting is that the object is detached from all its original functions in order to enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind. This relation is the diametric opposite of any utility, and falls into the peculiar category of completeness. (p. 204)

Benjamin is writing within the context of a surging commodity culture, and a modernity in which the commodity, everywhere on display, takes centre stage in a phantasmagoric theatre of distraction and secular magic. The collector, who is, as we know, behind the times, not only divests the collected object of its utility, of its use-value, but, by removing it from the marketplace, drains it as well of its exchange-value. As modes of resistance to capitalism go, it is hardly the most deliberate or direct, but this does not prevent Benjamin from suggesting that in a collection ‘We construct […] an alarm clock that rouses the kitsch of the previous century to “assembly”.’ (1999, p. 205) And here perhaps is where Benjamin, or at least Benjamin’s collector, differs from the media archaeologist in Parikka’s or Ernst’s formulation. While the former takes the collected item out of circulation, emptying it of use-value, the media archaeologist wants to once again make use of the obsolete media-object, put it to the test, if not put it back in circulation.

Benjamin was not so naïve as to think that the items in a collection, emptied of one sort of exchange-value, could not be endowed with another, to be redeemed at auction or amongst traders in rare objects. The question of value, in fact, is never far away in the practice of collecting. Not only is any collection judged on the basis of the rarity of its constituent elements, but the collector’s success depends on taste and discrimination, on an expertise that can distinguish the ordinary from the extraordinary. Equally, just as Wolfgang Ernst seeks to discriminate between what he takes to be the randomness of a collection, and the more orderly and rigorous structures of an archive, so theorists of collecting will generally attempt to separate the collector from someone who ‘merely accumulates objects by failing to dispose of them,’ and who ‘may also regard the objects as usable.’ (Belk, p. 67) This person, or pathology, is the hoarder, who represents an absolute failure to differentiate, in contrast to the collector who brings selection, ordering, and arrangement to the world of things. However, as Pearce points out, the distinction between hoard and collection is not hard and fast, since the former is simply awaiting the right moment, or owner, to become the latter. (p. 21) What were the conditions that turned Andy Warhol’s notoriously crammed apartment from hoard into famous collection if not his name combined with his death? In this case it was the rarity of the owner, and not the rarity of the objects, that gave Warhol’s accumulation of Americana its precise value.

A collection’s value is determined by rarity, but among modern collectors there is the added complication that many, even most, collected items, are mass-produced, as was the case with Warhol’s cookie jars and other ephemera. Benjamin captures this complication in the briefest of notes in *The Arcades Project*: ‘Fundamentally, a very odd fact – that collectors’ items were produced industrially.’ (p. 206) In such circumstances it is still possible for the collector to acquire cultural capital and display connoisseurship, as John Davis has shown in relation to vinylphiles, and Kate Egan in relation to the collectors of video nasties. Both of these collector-types pride themselves on their specialist knowledge and can be seen as proto-media archaeologists in their fondness for supposedly ‘dead media.’ Mass production also ushered in the era of the ‘collectible’, whereby the parameters of any collection are established in advance by the manufacturer, who determines for the collector exactly what constitutes the ‘set’ and when it is complete. It is such developments that lead Belk to differentiate between the ‘taxonomic’ collector and the ‘aesthetic’ collector. Where the first might accumulate baseball cards or Panini stickers according to strictly defined boundaries, the second shows greater autonomy in choice of object and limits of the collection.

Is it any wonder that psychoanalysts, when they have addressed this issue, have concluded almost uniformly that collecting is a manifestation of the anal drive? Karl Abraham (p. 67), Ernest Jones (p. 430) and Otto Fenichel (p. 383) have all had their say on the matter, but it is Jacques Lacan, intervening later on, who brings the question of the collector’s passion back to the question of media, since he emphasizes collecting as a matter of *storage*. In his *Seminar VI:* *Desire and its Interpretation*, Lacan cites a scene in Renoir’s *La Règle du jeu* (1939) in which the Marquis unveils the crowning piece in his collection of mechanical toys. For Lacan, the collector’s passion is highly ambivalent, marked by pride, but also by shame at his proximity, as well as his audience’s, to his obscure object of desire. (p. 109) As Mauriès says, a collection is ‘a sequence of containers holding within them yet more containers’, and it is this aspect that Lacan focuses on in his seminar the following year, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. There he tells a story of his friend the poet Jacques Prévert, who collected matchboxes during the war, and with them created a snaking sculpture that threaded its way around his walls, each matchbox containing the emptiness of the previous one by pulling out its little drawer slightly to accommodate the next. (pp. 113-14) The emptiness of the boxes is critical – not only do they no longer fulfill their destiny to hold matches, but their vacancy allows them to store something entirely different. Lacan is not yet using this vocabulary in 1959-60, but we could say that the collected matchbox contains in its very emptiness the lost object, the *objet a*. Here is the treasure trove of every collection that a collector aims at, if only not to reach it. And here perhaps is why no institutional collection can match the purity of a private one. As Benjamin says, ‘the phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner. Even though public collections may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically than private collections, the objects get their due only in the latter.’ (1969, p. 67) If so many private collections are of objects that themselves once stored things, perhaps it is because the concept of storage is precisely what they are storing: for Erkki Huhtamo, after all, the main purpose of his media-archaeological collection is to ‘store these things and store them properly’.

**Vivian Maier’s Storage Lockers**

‘The internet is no archive indeed, but rather a collection’, writes Wolfgang Ernst. An archive, he goes on, ‘is a given, well-defined lot; the Internet, on the contrary, is a collection not just of unforeseen texts, but of sound and images as well, an anarchive of sensory data.’ (2013, pp. 138-9) It matters not so much that for Ernst the collection is always the slightly unruly and disorganized cousin of the archive, but that the internet brings the collection urgently back into sight as a critical media concept. Beyond the platitude that Web 2.0 makes everyone a curator, there is the fact that on the web the work of collecting, of pulling things from one context and juxtaposing them with others in a new arrangement is always and already at work, for, as Siegfried Zielinksi says, ‘In the Internet, all earlier media exist side by side.’ (p. 31) This is certainly true of the street photographer Vivian Maier, whose life and photographic work was entirely pre-digital, but whose current existence would not have been possible without the storing and collecting affordances of the internet.

Ever since her story first came to light around 2009, Vivian Maier – ‘an extreme instance of posthumous discovery’ – has been treated as a curiosity. (Dyer, p. 8) Jim Dempsey, the first interviewee in Jill Nicholls’ BBC documentary *Vivian Maier: Who Took Nanny’s Pictures?* (2013), sets the tone, calling her ‘an odd bird’. Every film, book or newspaper article about Maier emphasizes the incongruity of her profession – as a nanny to wealthy families in Chicago – and her passion: taking photographs, thousands and thousands of them from the 1950s to the 1990s. To this incongruity is usually added the oddity that so many of Maier’s photographs were never printed, or even developed, although Maier safely kept the rolls of undeveloped negatives. Around these basic facts is then woven a tale of a mysterious woman who spoke with a peculiar accent, went by many different names, erased or fabricated elements of her own past, and took great risks in wandering bad neighbourhoods of Chicago and New York, Rolleiflex hanging from her neck. A Mary Poppins with a camera to some of her former child charges, she was a cruel and unpredictable figure to others. This, at least, is the story told by John Maloof and other dealers in her pictures who have a strong investment in Maier as one-off, as *naturalia*, or odd bird.[[3]](#endnote-3) Alternately, as the scholar Pamela Bannos claims, it is not particularly remarkable that Maier was a nanny, since the profession ran in her family. And the profession itself was entirely quotidian in mid-century America, which is not to say that her photographs are not a valuable record of this world of domestic work.[[4]](#endnote-4)

An inheritance in the late 1950s appears to have allowed Maier to go on an extensive trip round Europe and Asia, a trip on which she took many photographs, but most of her pictures were from the places she worked and lived in the United States, especially Chicago. Many of her photographs featured the children in her care, and she thoroughly recorded the middle-class milieu of the families in which she acted as a nanny. She also took numerous highly self-conscious self-portraits, using her own shadow in much of her composition. However, what has attracted the most attention since her discovery has been the candid photography of people in the streets of Chicago. Often taken from three to four feet distance, sometimes with the subject’s apparent acquiescence, but generally fleetingly, these photographs, mainly in black and white, have established Maier’s reputation some thirty to fifty years after they were taken. The narrator of Nicholls’ film, Alan Yentob, says that Maier was doing street photography before the term was really even invented, and one of the great proponents of the form, Joel Meyerowitz, is called upon in both Nicholls’ film and in Maloof and Charlie Siskel’s *Finding Vivian Maier* (2014) to praise Maier’s achievements as a street photographer.

Meyerowitz makes much of the risks of street photography, of the inevitable intrusion into a subject’s space that is required to effect a successful street photo. He speculates about the great courage, the *sang froid* that Maier must have possessed to get so close, so frequently, to the people that she photographed in the streets of Chicago. Some of those streets were affluent and her subjects were as well, but much of the time she was drawn to derelicts, oddballs, and men who were down and out, an unseen underside of urban America. In *Finding Vivian Maier* Mary Ellen Mark compares her to Diane Arbus, and similarities have also been noted with the photography of Robert Frank (Sekula cited in Cahan and Williams, pp. 40-41) and Weegee. (Meyers) Working their way backwards to reconstruct the scene of these photos, Meyerowitz and many others seize on the specific camera that Maier used most of her photographing life, the Rolleiflex. In most other amateur and professional cameras of the era, the viewfinder pointed in the same direction as the camera lens, so a photographer would conspicuously hold a camera up to his or her eye when focusing and taking a photo. With the rectangular box of the Rolleiflex, the viewfinder is perpendicular to the lens. This means that the photographer usually holds the camera at waist height and looks down into the viewfinder to prepare a shot.

The Rolleiflex, then, has a distinct set of ‘affordances’, and even if they do not use this term from technology studies, commentators like Meyerowitz draw on the concept to understand how Maier came to take the pictures she did. There appear to be two major consequences from Maier’s choice of camera. First, her street portraits of people who are standing are almost always taken from a low angle, because Maier has shot them with the camera at her mid-riff. As a result, the figures tend to have a looming presence – an effect of low angle shots – and rarely look into the viewfinder, their gaze straying instead above it, and so giving them a detachment, a separation, from the photo (for reasons of proportion, Maier’s images of children tend to be an exception to this rule). Secondly, with the Rolleiflex Maier could be relatively unobtrusive in situations where she was photographing strangers who might not want their photograph to be taken because she did not need to hold the camera up to her eye to take a picture. Meyerowitz calls it ‘a great disguise camera’ in *Finding Vivian Maier*. Many of her subjects may not even have realized that she was taking their picture. So, any understanding of Maier’s photography inevitably involves a little basic media archeological detective work, which is why the narrators of the films on Maier, or their expert interviewees, make sure to get their hands on a Rolleiflex, and demonstrate its quirks and workings.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Entirely unknown until just before the photographer’s death, Maier’s work is a major media archaeological find. Its first discovery in 2007 was down to the laws governing long-term self-storage facilities in the United States. Maier, described by more than one person as a ‘pack-rat’ who ‘couldn’t bear to throw anything away’, when retired as a nanny, stowed in storage lockers the belongings she could no longer carry with her from employment to employment. (Matthews) It was in these lockers that Maier kept tens of thousands of negatives, thousands of rolls of undeveloped films, a much smaller number of prints, and multiple miscellaneous other articles, including sound recordings and 8mm and 16mm films. A medium-sized storage unit (10’ x 10’ x 8’ with capacity of 800 cubic feet) in Chicago in 2016 cost between $70 to $150 dollars a month, so it was no small investment on Maier’s part, since she had several of them. (See ‘Cubesmart’) Maier kept up her payments on her various storage lockers until she was quite elderly, but in 2007 fell behind, and so the contents of her lockers were put up for auction. The web-site for CubeSmart in Illinois explains slightly euphemistically how the system works:

Self storage auctions are common in the storage industry and are typically open to the general public. A storage unit auction can be a great way to locate antiques and other unique items of interest for just a fraction of their cost. Storage auctions are held only as needed, which can make it difficult to find one in advance. CubeSmart will provide as much advanced notice as possible of storage unit auctions across all facilities throughout the country so you can find auctions in your area as they occur.

Owners of self-storage locker firms hold a ‘lien’ on the contents of lockers, which means that they can auction them off to recoup unpaid rent once they have given the owners of the contents sufficient warning and have widely advertised the auction. Maier was in hospital at the time of the 2007 auction, and so was unlikely even to have received the notices from the storage companies.

In *Vivian Maier: Who Took Nanny’s Pictures?*, it is noted that Maier regularly visited Chicago flea markets and photographed the modern-day rag-pickers who frequented those sites, as buyers and sellers. The film then remarks that it was these same frequenters of flea markets who were responsible for the discovery of Maier’s work. In *Finding Vivian Maier*, John Maloof confirms that his youth was spent trawling such venues with his brother and father and learning to detect the valuable items concealed amongst the trash, and that auctions of storage lockers are another regular stop on the itinerary of those who bring the collector’s eye to what for most are mere accumulations of stuff. It was into this subterranean economy that Maier’s possessions entered when her storage lockers began to be auctioned, and then once auctioned, to be sold on again to connoisseurs of old photos, with Maloof tracking down the lion’s share. Drawing on a familiar language, Alan Yentob almost inevitably refers to the contents of the lockers as a ‘treasure trove’, but the trove was not immediately recognized as such. Initial postings of images on the internet by Ron Slattery, who held a smaller number of Maier’s prints, did not generate much interest, and the images did not attract wider attention until Maloof posted some of his collection on a photo-blog via Flickr and received the advice and support of photo-critic Allan Sekula.[[6]](#endnote-6)

The storage capacities of the internet are so immense that the treasure in the trove can become increasingly elusive; a problem that search engines purport to solve.[[7]](#endnote-7) Maier’s story depended in the first instance on these digital storage capacities to reach a wider audience, but the virtual dissemination of her work can also be seen through a reverse optic: might it not be the case that her story attracts attention precisely because the question of storage in the digital age has become so ubiquitous, and her modes of storage throw digital storage into sharp relief? It is certainly the case that many of the interviewees in *Finding Vivian Maier* dwell at length on the question of the storage of ‘Vivian’s stuff’. Former employers explain that her boxes filled a third of their garage, or half their verandah, that Maier came, literally, with a lot of baggage. This emphasis may of course be partly the work of the film’s editors: Maloof emphasizes how ‘she had stuff, wedged and hidden, in everything she had’, and frequent shots of Maier’s battered suitcases, hatboxes, and chests are inserted into the narrative.

When storage increasingly becomes miniaturized, when the 1.44MB 3½ inch floppy disk has been displaced by the 8GB USB stick, storage methods that hungrily take up space, that have a stubborn physical presence, hold all the fascination of historical difference and disjuncture. The success of American reality television programmes such as *Storage Wars* (2010-) and *Auction Hunters* (2010-15), suggests a wider appetite for manufactured drama about such spaces, for what we might call anachronic spectacle, so far as storage systems go. It was surely programmes like these that made the discovery of Maier’s cache immediately intelligible, and the films about Maier fit comfortably within this popular genre, even if they have more highbrow ambitions. It would be too easy to reduce the appeal of such shows to the promise they offer of quick financial return from no real labour, although that clearly plays its part. The focus of both TV programmes and Maier films alike is on unearthing valuable artefacts of the past that are concealed among the belongings of ordinary people, and so it is no exaggeration to characterize them as a kind of populist media archaeology. ‘Archaeology’ Wolfgang Ernst says, ‘refers to what is actually there: what has remained from the past in the present like archaeological layers, operatively embedded in technologies [….] material objects that undo historical distance simply by being present.’ (2011, p. 241) Both the storage lockers and their contents are artefactual from this perspective.

We might also note in this context David Edgerton’s warning words about the innovation-centrism of most histories of technology, that too often give priority to technological novelty. ‘Technology-in-use’, Edgerton argues, is a much better way of understanding the overlapping of old technology with new, the continued presence of old technology in daily life; and technology studies, he suggests, should pay attention to mundane matters such as maintenance as much as invention. (2006, pp. ix-xviii)[[8]](#endnote-8) At a very practical level, the circulation of Vivian Maier’s photography online and in books and films depended on technical equipment and skills that are fast approaching obsolescence: the chemical development of negative-based film. With approximately 150,000 of Maier’s negatives in existence, not to mention the 2700 rolls of previously undeveloped black and white and colour film, the old medium of film remained very much ‘in-use’. The added complication, of course, is that the retro vogue for analogue film means that chemically-based photography is paradoxically once again ‘new’ media.[[9]](#endnote-9)

**The thrilling hoard**

Early on in *Finding Vivian Maier*, John Maloof enters an empty room, installs a camera in the ceiling, and proceeds to drag out boxes of Maier’s belongings, which he arranges carefully on the floor below. The process is repeated throughout the first half of the film, with Maloof neatly displaying ‘the stuff that she collected’: bus tickets, train cards, buttons and badges, hats, uncashed income tax cheques, receipts, audio tapes, and of course film negatives. ‘She was obsessed with saving bits of memories, of moments in time’, reflects Maloof, who brings order and some of the collector’s penchant for display to decades of accumulated possessions. Was Vivian Maier a collector? Or is it only Maloof and other curators who bring that level of arrangement to her work?

Most of those who encountered Maier’s habits called her a hoarder. One of her employers, Linda Matthews, reports that Maier returned from daily excursions with miscellaneous objects – ‘broken umbrellas, strangely shaped bits of wood or metal, old toys’ – perched on a child’s stroller. (Matthews) In *Finding Vivian Maier*, Matthews quotes Maier saying of her alleyway finds, ‘Is this art, is this not art? What is this? Oh, this could be useful, this could come in handy some time.’ Most remarked upon was her hoarding of a specific media form: the *New York Times* and other newspapers. Among the material in Maier’s storage lockers were albums of cuttings from these newspapers, but she also amassed complete issues. In her rooms at more than one employer, she had newspapers stacked from floor to ceiling, leaving only a tiny space to walk through to reach bed and desk, the weight of the papers leaving a permanent dent in the floor. In Matthews’ house, the newspaper hoard spilled over into hallway and basement. In addition, among Maier’s photographs are many of newspaper headlines, newspapers in garbage cans, children holding up newspapers.

In *The Hoarders: Material Deviance in Modern American Culture*, Scott Herring usefully explains that the compulsive saving and storing of newspapers is one of the most typical manifestations of ‘Diogenes syndrome’. (p. 117) Masses and masses of newspapers were found in 1947 in the Harlem mansion of the Collyer Brothers, two of the most notorious twentieth-century hoarders. Herring is skeptical about Diogenes syndrome and all the other pseudo-medical concepts that have been devised to diagnose hoarding along pathological lines. Instead he situates the discourse on hoarding in relation to practices such as hygiene reform and scientific housekeeping, but especially mid-century collectibles culture. It is the latter that has been set up as a normal against the supposedly deviant relation to objects at work in hoarding. Through a system of cataloguing and classification, collectibles have a recognized value within a structure of exchange. Hoarders in contrast, Herring writes, ‘appear to disregard both affective and socioeconomic worth as they gather about themselves things that do not…usually count as collectible goods.’ (p. 81) It follows from this that the hoarder challenges existing regimes of value in commodity culture, collecting and keeping items that one day ‘might come in handy’ but that have no immediate use.

Walter Benjamin wrote that ‘the person who collects is taking up the struggle against dispersion’. Who is to say that Erkki Huhtamo’s orderly media archaeological collection takes part in this noble cause, but Vivian Maier’s disorderly Chicago hoard does not? One main difference is that Huhtamo’s collection has an institutional context, a context that brings legitimacy to a set of objects that might be viewed in another light if encountered outside the institution. The same might be said for Maier’s worldly possessions, which may only have taken on the connotations of a hoard because she was a peripatetic and property-less domestic servant without any permanent space in which to distribute her belongings. Spread those articles out through an average bourgeois interior, and would they still retain the connotations of a hoard? In any case, Maier’s hoard now does have legitimacy, sustained by among other institutions, the ‘Maloof Collection’. As Susan Pearce says, every hoard is just waiting for the moment that, pupae-like, it is turned into a collection by the right owner or set of circumstances.

Another difference between Huhtamo and Maier is of course their gender. Media archaeology is not without its eminent female exponents, but amongst its leading masculine lights, how often are questions of gender brought to the fore? It is a division that is mirrored in the modes of collecting most typically found among men and women. Pearce drily tells us that most common among male collectors ‘are those who collect machine parts of various kinds, including complete machines. These are the oily handed collectors who spend most of their free time working on their material in sheds and garages.’ (p. 213) As Joel Meyerowitz’s emphasis on courage and danger in street photography shows, Maier was practicing a photographic form typically gendered masculine. And yet, in spite of her masculine penchants, or perhaps because of them, critics have worked hard to paint her back into one recognizable feminine corner or other. But as Terry Castle observes, ‘None of the […] stereotypes projected onto her — Mary Poppins with a Rolleiflex; frail spinster-genius à la Emily Dickinson; frumpy victim-beyond-the-grave of grifters — match up with the brisk, eagle-eyed, no-nonsense, and frequently intransigent figure.’

Castle also invokes the received view of the photographer as a hoarder, but gives the familiar metaphor another meaning:

She was waiting for us to find her, perhaps, to get *her* in focus. Now that we have — Tut’s secret chamber stands open, revealing the heaps of gold — it’s intoxicating. Like joyful marauders, we take our selfies, mug for the camera, and proceed to ransack the nanny’s thrilling hoard.

A hoard has come to mean a vast collection of trash, but it once referred to an accumulation of wealth, and it is this meaning that Castle confers on Maier’s storage lockers with the image of a ‘thrilling hoard’ to be ransacked. No longer a pathology, but instead a regal and archaic site, Maier’s hoard comes into its own, Castle implies, at the moment when everyone has become a street photographer, a self-portraitist. It is a vital media archaeological observation. If media archaeology, as Wolfgang Ernst argues, must pay attention to the continuing physical presence of old and abandoned media, it must also take into account the ways in which the abandoned takes on its significance in juxtaposition with contemporary, active media. Putting it another way, Thomas Elsaesser suggests that ‘the insistence on the relevance of the old and obsolete may well be the necessary double of the celebration of the new we have been living.’ (p.206)

Maier’s storage of her great wealth, her removal from circulation of her goods by immobilizing them in containers within containers within containers stands in stark contrast to the revolution in the movement of goods brought about by another storage mode developed in the same epoch that Maier was making photographs: the humble shipping container. It is easy to forget this revolutionary storage medium when by far the most attention is directed towards the proliferation of mobile ‘black boxes’ with inbuilt obsolescence whose inputs and outputs have been mastered by millions, but whose insides are understood by few and accessible to even fewer. (See Parikka, 2015, pp. 146-50) From this perspective, perhaps the most important text of media studies in the past decade is Marc Levinson’s *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger*. These containers, eighteen million of them and counting, circulate silently round the world’s oceans, reducing the cost of transport, increasing the speed of movement, and ensuring the uninterrupted flow of the commodities that will make up the hoards of the future.

**Works Cited**

Karl Abraham, *Selected Papers on Psychoanalysis* (London: Hogarth Press, 1927).

‘Artifacts of Media Archaeology: Inside Professor Erkki Huhtamo's Office’ *UCLA Daily Bruin*, Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ks9tyaft7Gs>. Published March 19, 2013. Accessed March 21, 2016.

Russell W. Belk, *Collecting in a Consumer Society* (London: Routledge, 1995).

Walter Benjamin, ‘Unpacking my Library: A Talk about Book Collecting,’ in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 59-67.

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA.: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1999).

Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999).

Peter Buse, *The Camera Does the Rest: How Polaroid Changed Photography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

Richard Cahan and Michael Williams, eds, *Vivian Maier: Out of the Shadows* (Chicago: CityFiles, 2012).

Terry Castle, ‘New Art’, *Harpers*, Feb 2015. <http://harpers.org/archive/2015/02/new-art/2/>. Consulted March 31, 2016.

Kevin Coffee, ‘Misplaced: ethics and the photographs of Vivian Maier’, *Museum Management and Curatorship* 29: 2 (2014), 93-101.

‘CubeSmart’, <https://www.cubesmart.com/illinois-self-storage/chicago-self-storage/long-term/> Consulted March 30, 2016.

John Davis, ‘Going Analog: Vinylphiles and the Consumption of the “Obsolete” Vinyl Record’, in *Residual Media*, ed. by Charles R. Acland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), pp. 222-36.

Timothy Druckery, ‘Foreword’ , in Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*, trans. Gloria Custance (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), pp. vii-xi.

Geoff Dyer, ‘Foreword’, in *Vivian Maier: Street Photographer*, ed. John Maloof (New York: powerHouse Books, 2011), pp. 8-9.

David Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old: Technology and Global History since 1900* (London: Profile, 2006).

David Edgerton, “Innovation, Technology, or History: What is the Historiography of Technology About?,” *Technology and Culture* 51, no. 3 (2010), 680-97.

Kate Egan, ‘The Celebration of a “Proper Product”: Exploring the Residual Collectible through the “Video Nasty”’, in *Residual Media*, ed. by Charles R. Acland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), pp.200-21.

Thomas Elsaesser, ‘Media Archaeology as Symptom’, *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 14:2 (2016), 181-215.

Wolfgang Ernst, ‘Media Archaeology: Method and Machine versus History and Narrative of Media,’ in Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, eds, *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications* (Berkeley: University of California UP, 2011), pp. 239-55.

Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2013).

Otto Fenichel, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of the Neurosis* (New York: Norton, 1945).

Scott Herring, *The Hoarders: Material Deviance in Modern American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

Erkki Huhtamo, *Illusions in Motion: Media Archaeology of the Moving Panorama and Related Spectacles* (Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 2012).

Ernest Jones, ‘Anal-erotic character traits’ in *Papers on Psycho-Analysis* (London: Baillière, Tindall and Cox, 1950).

Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Dennis Porter (London: Routledge, 1992).

Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre VI, Le désir et son interprétation 1958-1959*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Paris: Éditions de La Martinière, 2013).

Marc Levinson, *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

Patrick Mauriès, *Cabinets of Curiosities* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002).

Linda Matthews, ‘Diary’, *London Review of Books*, October 22, 2015, 38-9.

William Meyers, ‘The Nanny’s Secret’, *The Wall Street Journal*, January 3, 2012.

Jill Nicholls, dir. *Vivian Maier: Who Took Nanny’s Pictures?* (BBC, 2013).

Jussi Parikka, ‘Introduction: Archival Media Theory’ in Wolfgang Ernst, *Digital Memory and the Archive* (Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 2013), pp. 1-23.

Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2015).

Susan M. Pearce, *On Collecting: An investigation into collecting in the European tradition* (London: Routledge, 1995)

Claire Preston, ‘In the Wilderness of Forms: Ideas and Things in Thomas Browne’s Cabinets of Curiosity’, in Neil Rhodes and Jonathan Sawday, eds, *The Renaissance Computer: Knowledge Technology in the First Age of Print* (New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 167-80.

Barbara Stafford, *Good Looking* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).

Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984).

Siegfried Zielinski, *Deep Time of Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*, trans. Gloria Custance (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).

1. ‘Artifacts of Media Archaeology: Inside Professor Erkki Huhtamo's Office’ [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See for example, *Curiosity: Art and the Pleasures of Knowing*, Turner Contemporary, Margate, 2013, and *Magnificent Obsessions: The Artist as Collector*, Barbican Art Gallery, 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Kevin Coffee, p. 99, for a critique of the ‘contrived narrative’ of Maier’s life put about by the marketers of her prints. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Bannos is interviewed in Nicholls, *Vivian Maier: Who Took Nanny’s Pictures?* [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Kevin Coffee adds that the twin-lens format of the Rollei ‘imposes the tripartite discipline of square frame, fixed focal length, and parallax effect on the viewing screen, all of which she mastered.’ Coffee, p. 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. This is reported in *Vivian Maier: Who Took Nanny’s Pictures?* [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. For a comparison between search engine protocols and the methods of Renaissance antiquarianism, see Preston, p. 170. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. See also Edgerton, 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For a discussion of this phenomenon see Buse, pp. 214-21. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)