

Filing as Art Form

OR, "I LOVE TO WORK IN MANILA."

I used to assume that my need to organize bits of information neatly in tan folders was more compulsive than creative. This was before I understood conceptual art. Demonstrating my scores of file drawers with their orderly tabs to such an artist one day, I was impressed by his perception of my hobby. "That's no compulsion," he told me. "That's your art form. Filing."

I liked that. It made those cabinets weigh less heavily on my soul. Until then I'd attributed this drive to find every piece of data its proper folder more to toilet training than talent. Today filing has become my most creative means of expression.

Let me explain. There are ways and ways to gather and store information for one's own use. In the simplest approach,

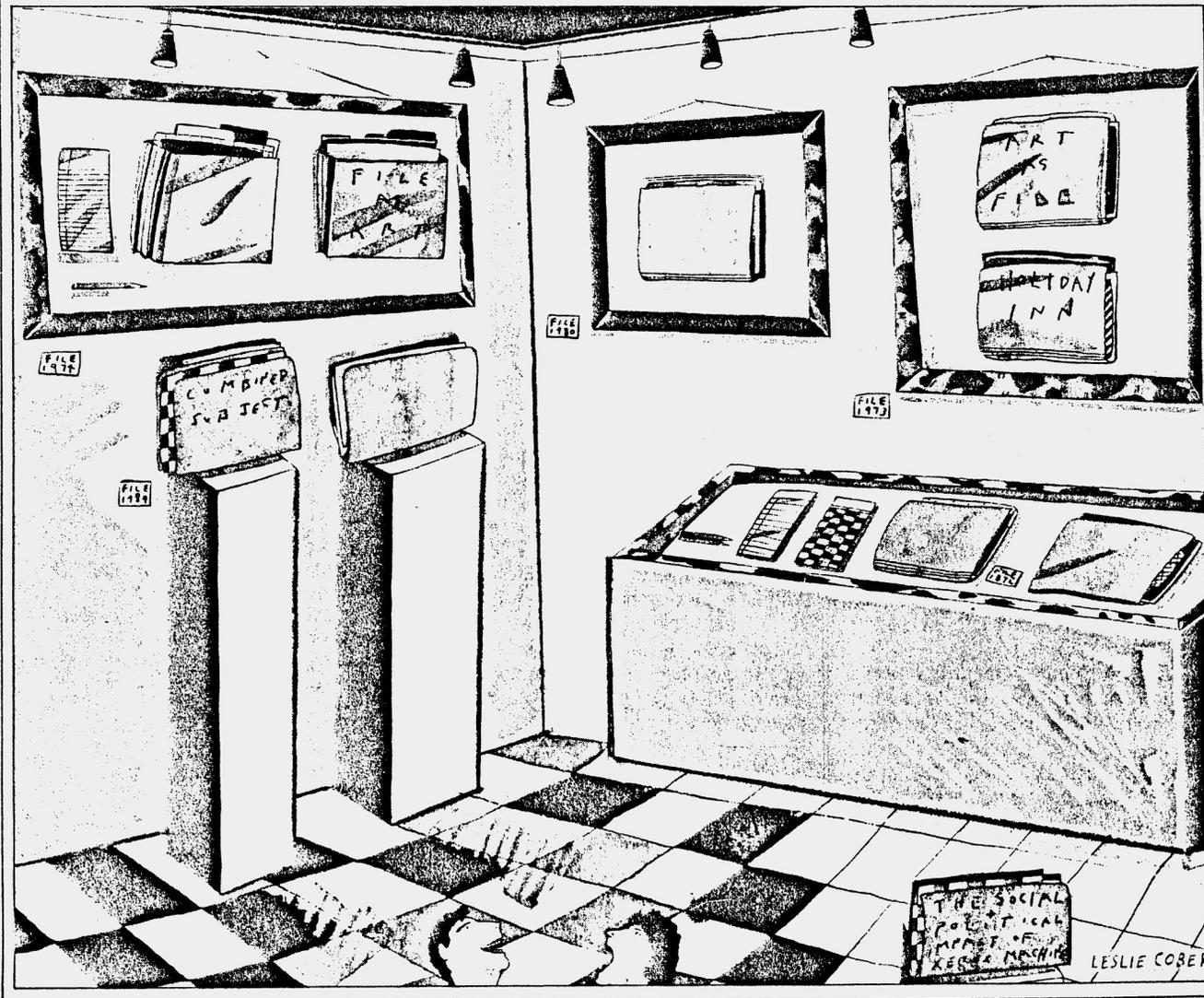
one takes an article on a topic—"Lebanon," say—and files it under "Lebanon." Generally this is a waste of time. One could go to the *Reader's Guide* and look up articles under that heading with less total effort. (Filing is enormously wearing and time-consuming.) With luck, one lives in a city whose newspaper will let you use its morgue and pull clips under such a heading. And at moderate expense some of the new information retrieval systems, in particular the *New York Times* Data Bank, can in minutes produce a comprehensive citation print-out on such a topic with article synopses.

No, the most creative purpose for a personal filing system is to collect for retrieval not just information of personal interest but a) information not readily available elsewhere, and b) information

recategorized.

To take the last first: an artful filing system is one that not only assembles information bits but also stitches them together in new patterns. To do this, one seldom files an article under its obvious heading. Rather one looks within the body of articles for items that, filed properly, will relate to other items, building toward a new whole. For example, I have several articles about Lebanon filed under "Holiday Inn." This is because for years I've been fascinated by the evolving impact Holiday Inns have had on society, both physical and spiritual. Among hundreds of data bits in this file are examples of the Holiday Inn used as a metaphor for sterility, including an excerpt from Gail Sheehy's *Passages* in which

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a woman's demeanor is called "impersonal as a Holiday Inn," and a note jotted from the televised version of Bruce Jay Friedman's play "Steambath," in which a character says of death: "I thought it meant having to spend every day for the rest of your life in a Holiday Inn."

This file includes a long list of political events set in the Holiday Inn, including the fact that this was where Arthur Bremer first stalked George Wallace in Milwaukee. It goes on to note that in her book *C'nelia*, Wallace's wife says their first coupling after his accident took place in a room of the Holiday Inn.

A new run of items focuses on crimes committed in the Inn—most recently in Wichita where a sniper held forth from its 26th-floor balcony, and on Long Island where a kidnapped 7-year-old boy was held for ransom in the Westbury Holiday Inn.

In time I hope all these folders will mature into an article on the social impact of Holiday Inns. My point will be that as the Inn has grown so ubiquitous, its attempt at Disneyland-like architectural sanitation has failed because the world keeps contaminating its corridors. Although the Inn for some time has assured us "the best surprise is no surprise," waking up to gunfire outside one's room would, to say the least, be surprising. This is why the Beirut Holiday Inn gone up in smoke so fixated American eyes. This wasn't just the burning of a building, it was the destruction of a dream. If the Holiday Inn wasn't a Demilitarized Zone, what was? So for my purposes, clips about that aspect of Lebanon's civil war have been filed under "Holiday Inn."

Any number of articles I've already written were born in such a folder. One in particular stands out in my mind—on the social and political impact of Xerox machines. ("America's Favorite Form of Re-Production," *New Times*, Jan. 9 1976.) A major point made here was that without photocopying machines causing his White House to leak like a Corps of Engineers dam, then burying him under tons of impeachment testimony, Richard Nixon might be President today. This story began with a series of items emerging from the Watergate revelations that were filed not under that heading nor under "Nixon," but under "Xerox." (There is also a Holiday Inn/Watergate subcategory about that motel as a setting for cover-up transactions.)

This is where filing becomes art. No information source I know of could provide you with data so shaped. You must do this yourself. And such a process is best executed with the tools of cabinets

and folders. A good scissors also helps. I like a hefty pair with eight-inch blades that extract articles neatly and quickly, like a scythe mowing wheat. Buying folders by the hundred at a discount stationer's or wholesaler is economical, and encourages their liberal use. A combination of fifth-cut and third-cut folders makes for easy visibility within cabinets. Marking occasional tabs in different colors makes them stand out and strengthens the claim of filing to be art. Folders can be used at least twice, simply by turning them inside-out.

Filing cabinets are expensive and getting more so. My best buys have been beat-up old wooden ones that collect dust in second-hand stores but need just a coat of paint, and perhaps a handle or two. Single metal transfer files are also not bad, especially if you're thinking about moving. Which is an important consideration before putting even a single item into its proper folder. Such folders quickly grow heavy, heavy, heavy. A single filled file drawer weighs upward of 50 pounds. For this reason, I've tried to establish a principle of never opening a folder without throwing something away. Often I stick to this principle.

But compensating for physical weight are the virtues of filing in realms beyond the aesthetic. A primary virtue of files is as external memory: a blowing of one's mental nose. Once properly stored in cabinets, all information bits and pieces are free to leave your head. A proper retrieval system doesn't weigh down the spirit so much as lighten it because you have confidence that data on a given topic are available as needed. Until then they can be blissfully forgotten. This has proven so true with my own system that I often won't read in advance clippings to be filed since this would only add to my mental clutter. Once I'm ready to delve into a topic, pulling its file and reading it straight through is far more instructive than consuming the items piecemeal over time. And opening a fresh folder fat with clippings on a new topic is the only grown-up thrill I know comparable to opening gifts as a kid at Christmas.

A major filing problem is retrieval: how to recall where you've filed an item once you want to get at it. The larger your system grows, the more serious this problem becomes. There is nothing more frustrating than hours spent pawing through folders for an item you "know" is there—somewhere. I've yet to find the perfect means of retrieval, but do have some leads. For one thing, there is no substitute for a profligate use of folders. Ideally a file folder should include no more than ten items. Any file

thicker than this should be broken down into subtopics. This has two virtues; it prevents one from having to paw through inches of material looking for a single item (possibly a small clip hiding in the middle of a larger one) and makes it necessary to review constantly and reacquaint one's self with one's folders. For this reason I also make a point of doing all my own filing once the "file pile" gets too high—usually once a month. In the process I'm reminded of what's tucked away where, and I see which headings seem to be attracting the most items.

Another retrieval technique I've found helpful is labeling folders with whatever heading first comes to mind, even if this isn't exactly accurate. My reasoning is that what first pops into my head as a folder topic is probably what will also occur to me first when searching for an item filed in that folder. This can lead to eccentric labeling. One old favorite is a folder on the public expression of feeling by politicians which is headed "Muskie/Feelings" because I got interested in this subject when Muskie "cried" in New Hampshire's snow. (A later clip says he actually didn't, but by now, revising that heading would throw the system entirely out of whack.)

A final caution about filing: This hobby is quite time-consuming. The simple act of examining, marking, clipping and putting items in folders takes many hours per week. Filing also can be addictive. Like smoking, it's far easier to start than stop. And the most frustrating part of filing is knowing in advance that you will never use at least 90% of what you file. The only problem is that you don't know which 90%. To get 10, you must collect 100. The occasional item I discard saying, "Oh, I'll never need that one," is invariably the one I later must spend hours looking for in the library. (Was it in *Time*? *Newsweek*? *The New Republic*? *The National Enquirer*?)

But filing also can be fun. I get high on putting things in their proper folders. Finding a good item, about the Holiday Inn say, can make me positively ecstatic. And at some level I'm convinced that once every bit of information has been placed in its proper file, I'll finally understand. ■

Our Ralph Keyes file tells us that he is the author of Chancing It: Why We Take Risks, The Height of Your Life and Is There Life After High School? His articles have appeared in Reader's Digest, Newsweek, Harper's, GQ, Esquire and other publications. "Filing as Art Form" originally appeared in The Antioch Review.