Contemporary Art Archives Yesterday and Today

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I would like to preface my remarks by explaining that although I come from England, I worked at the Museum of Modern Art in New York for many years; this will explain the preponderance of American examples in what follows, including references to the Archives of American Art, with which I was also associated.

Perhaps we think that we all share an understanding of what we mean by a "contemporary art archive and documentation center". (Even though this may be an oxymoron, since one definition states that an archive can only include "non-current" material.) In case this phrase does not mean the same thing to all of us, I would like to make clear what such archives and centers might be, and how they might differ, for example, from libraries.

Popularly, a library is often thought to be a collection of books, while an archive is often thought to be a collection of manuscripts, but in fact the most generous definition of "library" can cover virtually the same territory as the most generous definition of "archive". For the purposes of this paper I will use the word "library" to designate institutions that collect all those items that are part of the mainstream of commercial publishing and distribution, such as books & exhibition catalogs, newspapers & periodicals, audio tapes & audio disks, slides, films & videos, microforms, CD-Roms, etc. Publications that are generally bibliographically accessible. I will use the word "archive" to refer to institutions that collect not only the manuscripts, correspondence, and documentary records that one would expect, but also those pamphlets, magazines, recordings, "ephemera" and even printed artworks, that barely exist in the commercial or bibliographical worlds.

I will not spend more time on libraries as such, but will focus instead on archives. The contents of archives, as defined above, fall into two groups, the unique and the multiple. "Unique" items might include: manuscripts, correspondence, memoirs, interviews, diaries, notebooks, sketches, scrapbooks, photographs & negatives, diskettes, audio- & video-tapes, films, objects, etc. Whereas "multiple" items might include: pamphlets, booklets, artist books, other printed art forms, small-circulation magazines, manifestos, posters, programs, printed ephemera of all kinds, three-dimensional multiple artworks, etc.

Most familiar contemporary art archives and documentation centers include both types of content, but if we now look at the spectrum of archival institutions it will be seen that some do not. I am excluding museum archives and artists' archives from this discussion since these are archives that virtually make themselves. Although they may be creatively assembled such archives are basically passive accumulations, whereas those that I wish to discuss are more actively shaped.

Broadly speaking there seem to be three main types of contemporary art archives. First are those public national archives that exist to preserve items that document the art of one country or region - these tend to give high priority to manuscripts. Second are those specialized contemporary art archives that exist within other institutions such as libraries and universities. And third are archives created by private individuals that may or may not be publicly accessible.

By way of illustration of these three types I will cite some of the archives that were discussed in the issues of the *AICARC Bulletin* from 1974 to 1982. (This was the period when the Bulletin was edited by Sven Sandström, and gives me a chance to pay him my respects.)

National Art Archives

These are best exemplified by the Archives of American Art in Washington D.C., which operate within the Smithsonian Institution. Also under the umbrella of larger institutions, but less autonomous, are the Tate Gallery Archive in London (which is both the archive of the institution, and the archive of twentieth-century - and earlier - British art), and the Documentation Centers for Modern Swedish Art at the University of Lund and for Contemporary Swiss Art at the Swiss Institute for Art Research in Zurich.

Specialized Archives within Institutions

Examples of these include the archival collections of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, the National Museum of Modern Art in Paris and the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. Not referred

to in the *AICARC Bulletin* are the Archives of Art Criticism here at the University of Rennes, and indeed those collections in the Library of the Museum of Modern Art in New York that might be exemplified by the Political Art Documentation & Distribution (PADD) Archives.

Private Archives
Reference was made in the *AICARC Bulletin* to the then Jean Brown Archive (which was subsequently purchased and integrated into the Getty Center Collections in Santa Monica), to Jean Sellem's Archive of Experimental and Marginal Art in Lund, and to Klaus Groh's collection in Germany. The very important Archiv Sohm was surprisingly not discussed in the *Bulletin* (this archive is now part of the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart).

These categories should help us to see the relations between particular archives more clearly, as well as the differences in their roles.

I would now like to turn to the central question of collecting. As stated already, archives that are basically institutional, such as the Bauhaus Archiv in Berlin, the Venice Biennale Archives and the Documenta Archives in Kassel (all profiled in the *AICARC Bulletin*), do not have a particular problem in this regard because the parameters of their collecting are determined by their parent institution's activities, even though they may still need to think about the boundaries set up by their institution. But all of the other types of archive described above need to be aware of the limits that they set themselves, since these may not all be fully or consciously articulated. There may be significant omissions from their collections.

It may be useful to draw attention to two possible approaches to collecting that could polarize this discussion. In building the kind of archive already referred to, which includes rare published materials as well as unique items, the extremes of collecting seem to me to be either curatorial or sociological. In the case of "curatorial" collecting, decisions are made in relation to the importance of participants in a particular subject area, whereas "sociological" collecting seems to me to be more concerned to document an area that seems significant without making judgments as to the present or future significance of specific items or individuals. Of course the lines drawn around subjects, in the latter case, need to be precise, since sociological collecting can yield large catches.

In practice, both methods need to be employed, since the sociological collectors would be foolish to ignore documents pertaining to well known people who have incontrovertibly affected an area, while the curatorial collectors will surely need to document some of the foothills around their perceived mountains. But the particular advantage of bearing in mind the sociological approach is that one may then examine all the forces operating in an area whether they appear at first to be equally important or not. In this way collections of material documenting the activities of minorities and immigrant artists or groups, for example, can be considered in relation to the whole artistic ecology often dominated by establishment entities.

In attempting to cover a particular subject area it is necessary to be watchful for the fate of the records of relevant small art organizations that happen to fizzle out or become defunct. When such events occur almost the last thing on the minds of those who have to wind up the affairs of an organization is the significance of piles of old correspondence, memos and reports, or even publications.

The materials likely to be found in the three main kinds of archives were listed earlier. However, before moving on from forms of presentation, it may be worth highlighting some of the problems that have arisen more recently with the increase in the use of (relatively) new technologies for communication. The idea that manuscripts are the principal content of archives is under especial pressure now, at least in developed countries, because holographic and autographic documents and even typewritten documents are being supplanted by word-processed, faxed, and electronic documents.

Although the concept of the paperless office has been shown to be presently utopian, and while fax machines and computers contribute to the generation of even more paper files than earlier processes, these devices do cause a number of problems for archivists. In spite of this tidal wave of paper, the originals of taxes may be only electronic, and fax output may be on extremely impermanent paper; "originals" of world-processed documents may also only exist electronically; e-mail may never be put on paper; telephone calls are rarely archived; and drafts of electronically-generated documents are usually wiped out with each new version. The materials with which archivists now have to deal are rapidly changing, both in format and in their nature.

It is obvious that computer diskettes must be preserved, just as audio and video-cassettes are preserved. But for all such formats - unlike paper records and even photographic records such as microfiche - an even bigger problem now looms: how do we access these formats when the machines which they were created on - or for - become defunct? Do archives now have to collect old office machinery - and their supplies and spare parts? And, as well as old computers, will we not need to save old software too?

This problem becomes especially acute with the growth in time-based visual arts which will not be adequately documented by text or still images. But even the solution of copying original video and film to superior media is questionable because this takes us one more remove from the original format. In addition there is no guarantee that videos made as recently as two decades ago can still be viewed, even on appropriate equipment!

Microforms were one of the preoccupations of the *AICARC Bulletin* twenty-odd years ago. I believe that we are now witnessing the death of microforms - in slow motion. But surely no one will regret the passing of those two emphatically transitional mediums, microfilm and microfiche, as digitization takes command?

Yet another concern back then was the classification and cataloging of documents. Recent electronic advances are making the retrieval of information much simpler. Instead of being confined to a single, or limited number of points of access in the old card catalog, for example, it is already possible to use free-text searching of cataloging records - and of documents themselves when their texts have been stored electronically. While the description of documents could therefore be regarded almost as a clerical activity, subject analysis still requires a knowledge of contemporary art and critical appraisal of documents. But earlier preoccupation with universal classification schemes has receded, because of the greater relevance of the thesaurus in the electronic environment. Since research into this area is well-developed in the world of libraries, we need not linger here now.

What might concern us more is the lack of guides to the location and accessibility of archives of contemporary art. The AICA publication *Documentation of Modern Art: a Handlist of Resources* was published back in 1975, over twenty years ago. Maybe we can now take a leaf out of the art librarians' book, by working towards a new list of resources comparable to their *IFLA Directory of Art Libraries*, which is available periodically in hard copy, but regularly updated on the internet. (http://aaln.org/ifla-idal/index.html)

When we consider the actual collections of the various types of archives, it is evident that mostly because of the unique documents that they contain, though also because of the rarity of some multiple documents, each archive is much more of a unique entity than the general run of libraries. However, the contents of archives lend themselves much more easily to facsimile reproduction than do the contents of libraries, both because of the brevity of many documents, and because of generally less-complicated problems of copyright. The microfilming program of the Archives of American Art (both for preservation and for access) illustrates this point. Now, with the development of more sophisticated and less expensive scanners, surely digital facsimiles will become more and more common? (Though a new problem that might arise in this regard is the ease of falsification of documents, since present crude attempts to do this manually might be supplanted by more sophisticated digital manipulation of images).

These considerations of technological advance lead us on to other aspects of accessibility. Researchers except to be able to access the contents of national and other archives, subject only to such reasonable legal restrictions imposed on manuscript collections by, for example, donors and executors. (Access to private archives, however, may be another matter.) Where technology - especially technologies of facsimile reproduction - might make a substantial difference to access is in the case of fragile originals. If these can be photographed and/or scanned into a computer they may only rarely need to be handled again.

While conservation and preservation problems are simply obstacles to be overcome, public access is an issue that is more a matter of policy, though one which has again also been transformed by technological advances. Digitization and the desire to make information accessible has lead to many documents of public interest being made freely available on the internet. While it may not serve any useful purpose to put digitized images from contemporary art archives on the internet, except as

samples of what else might be available from an institution, it could be very useful to copy much-used material onto CD-Roms. In this way both preservation and access could be improved.

The Archives of American Art had quite innovative ideas about public access to its collections from its inception, for it was decided to establish several geographically-dispersed centers where the contents of the Archives could be consulted. This outreach was made possible at that time through the use of microfilm to duplicate material. Thus regional centers were initially set up in Detroit, Washington DC, New York, Boston and San Francisco. Access was extended beyond these centers by the loan of microfilm copies to libraries around the world. (In recent years, however, the high costs involved in microfilming have meant that the ideal of filming every unique document has had to be abandoned.)

This example of wide geographic access still seems salutary in an age when electronic communication is burgeoning. If an institution is not over-protective of the materials it has amassed, and places emphasis on their use and exploitation, digitization and the internet will serve their purposes well. Though it must be noted that for the immediate future developing countries may have to rely on printed and photographic documents disproportionately.

This brings me to perhaps the most pressing problem in both the developing and developed countries. If an archival collection becomes available for acquisition, or a rescue mission becomes necessary to save an artist's papers or the records of a defunct organization, can an existing archive afford the labor to collect and transport these records? Is there then space to store or house them? Are there staff members to process and make them available? Are there resources to conserve them or to duplicate them? All these questions come down to financial considerations - even where there is no price to be paid for acquiring the collection. The situation regarding the preservation of rare and unique documents can surely only get worse as available collections proliferate, and economic resources decline.

When I left New York two summers ago, two important archival collections were about to become available for purchase: the late Charlotte Moorman's New York Avant-Garde Festival papers, and the Peter Moore collection of photographs of happenings, demonstrations, performance, dance, etc. Since then, following his suicide, Ray Johnson's important archive will also become available. These three collections could provide researchers with incredibly important resources with which to assess contemporary art activity in New York, and elsewhere, over several decades. To my knowledge they still have no institutional homes. Where will they end up? What institutions can afford to purchase them, house them, organize them, preserve them, and make them accessible? (All of the collections have international ramifications; should the documents therefore stay in the USA, or could they equally well be housed in Europe or elsewhere, especially given the possibility of duplicating the records and making them available on other continents?)

I refer to these three high-profile collections just as convenient examples. There are many collections that could be sought out for preservation in every city and country. Where will the resources come from to provide this documentary memory of the recent past for the future? Is there the will to preserve and make accessible these vital particles of the history of contemporary art?

It seems to me that private individuals have repeatedly led the way in the establishment of important archives of contemporary art. In this context I would therefore like to pay tribute to individuals such as Hanns Sohm, Jean Brown, Gil & Lila Silverman, Ruth & Marvin Sackner and Guy Schraenen among others, who have created archival collections on contemporary art. They have very often taken initiatives before public bodies were even aware that certain art forms had become established. Furthermore the perspicacity of such people in tracking the activities of certain artists and groups of artists as they happen has sometimes provided us with the only photographic or documentary records that exist of certain events. Indeed, it would not be too fanciful to suggest that such individuals have written histories of contemporary art solely by means of their archival activity. What they have not collected and recorded may no longer exist. Barbara Moore, the widow of Peter Moore, said half-jokingly (I hope I do not misquote her) that if Peter had not photographed an event it had not happened. There is a double-edged truth to that remark.

Finally I wish to say that it would be valuable - even if also a product of self-interest - for critics to express their support for the maintenance and expansion of existing archives of contemporary art, and for the establishment of new archives whether small or large. (The existence of many small well-defined archives may well be more effective in preserving material and in ensuring a proper diversity of content in the long run, than a few large encyclopedic archives). Through their day-to-day work

and their research they can also help existing contemporary art archives to identify lacunae in their collecting. Lastly, critics are, of course, extremely well-placed to raise the alarm in the press when the records of an individual, or an institution, or a specific tendency, are vulnerable and might be abandoned or lost. Critics are essential to the progress of archives of contemporary art.