Public Art and the Digital Library – What's in the Collection?

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What I would like to discuss in my paper is what matters to a collection. Not so much from the perspective of content, but from the point of view of ownership. It's an interesting issue in present day hybrid libraries (i.e., libraries which combine analog and digital collections), because they combine institutional prerogatives, time honored service and preservation issues impacted by the application of new technologies, and personal and professional research projects. There is a great difference between libraries, as we have known them in the 20th century, and digital libraries. I am sure this statement comes as no surprise. I would like, nevertheless, to mention some loci of difference and then segue into a specific, art-collection related case.

Twentieth century libraries were characterized by a sense of place, institutional collection development, physical and intellectual access, and teaching of skills-based and intellectual navigation through the physical library and its contents.

The library was very much characterized by the building, its contents, and its communal spaces. Interconnection between libraries (such as interlibrary loan or tiered reference) was engendered by librarians and not necessarily expected by the users. Users did have an expectation that a library constitute a conceptual whole, that there were reasons to its layout and to its contents. Art libraries were a particular subset of libraries, collecting monographs and serials, but also slides, videos, files of specialized ephemera, artifacts, artist books, and archives. It was recognized that the visual aspects of the collection in an art library were as important as the textual. Art libraries often had different access and circulation policies from other libraries, partly for reasons of cost of the collection and for preservation purposes. The scope of the collection and access, in turn, defined the user population. The arrangement of the collection, through whatever means of classification, was geared toward location of known items, although it allowed for a certain amount of serendipity. One had to be fairly familiar with libraries to fully take advantage of the possibilities offered by them because libraries were complex organizations,

which recognized complex behavior from their users. To quote Umberto Eco's wry remarks about these complexities, the functions of a library are those of collecting, hoarding, transcribing, encouraging to read, providing public access to materials, concealing materials, and creating the opportunity for discovery.

Collection development was an organizational endeavor, where the librarian functioned as a representative of the institution to fulfill the perceived needs of its constituencies in making collection development, cataloging, and access decisions. This did not preclude agency on the part of the librarian, but I think that institutional processes were paramount, and so the librarian, too, belonged to the organizational whole.

Since a library without means of intelligent access is not a library but a storage facility, the function of the librarian was paramount in liaison with researchers and in the on-demand, real-time reference. Users of the library fell into certain hierarchical categories. So in the case of a university art library, the primary users would be students and faculty in art-related fields, others in the University, the general art-research community, and members of the community at large (listed in dicreasing hierarchy of importance). Thus, we could make certain assumptions about reference work. We could assume that most research needs fell within certain categories – need for images (not always for art-related purposes), biographical information, art historical questions, provenance and auction questions, verification of details, and location of specific types of resources, such as scholarly journals.

Library instruction pertained very much to the libraries' interest of providing democratic access and extending self-sufficiency to their primary user-base. It was also intertwined with the notion of reference and provision of intelligent access to the contents of the library. As with reference and collection development, instruction was geared toward known constituencies.

Digital library developments are fairly young, of course, but they are taking a different shape. Or, I should say, shapes, in the plural, because the definition of a digital library is complex, and by no means clearly articulated.   Not only that, but digital library efforts are proceeding in very specialized directions, partly because digital libraries are a youthful concept, one that is still adolescent and raging, and partly because there are a variety of issues and constituencies at stake.

Interestingly, the more traditional components of librarianship still apply, but in a changing sense. "Cataloging" has morphed into "harvesting information." Digital libraries, while not bound by buildings, are very much bound by technology. Often, they have the imprimatur of the larger institution to which they belong. Portals in the US, like the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's DSpace are not just efforts to collect electronic resources produced within the institution, but also to create open source platform software designed to manage those resources. In his February 2003 article for the Association of Research Libraries report entitled "Institutional Repositories: Essential Infrastructure for Scholarship in the Digital Age," Clifford A. Lynch discusses institutional repositories in great depth, and identifies particular concerns, such as institutional control over individual contributions and rights, and long-term institutional commitments to operations and standards. The development of standards for describing electronic information, for archiving it, and for harvesting it is a locus of major digital library initiatives; yet standards for articulating ownership of materials are not clearly defined below the institutional level.

In terms of content, digital libraries have been developing in extremely piece-meal manner. Partly, it is because there is much more information to filter and manage. Not only do we think about transporting traditional print media into electronic, but we are hard at work to transport ephemeral and gray materials into the electronic medium, and we are dealing with bodies of information that are born digital. These days it is often the ephemeral, gray, and born digital "stuff" that affects primary research.

What constitutes access to digital libraries is somewhat murky, as well. As a profession, librarianship has not yet defined its role in the networked information environment. More

specifically, we have not quite defined our role in knowledge management or content management, areas which are highly technical and specialized. About a year and a half ago, the Association of Research Libraries, which is an umbrella organization for large research and academic libraries in the US, appointed a Task Force on Collections and Access Issues. The Task Force came up with a series of recommendations, conceptually covering all areas of librarianship – access, development of standards, and collection building. One of the recommendations was for academic libraries to "promote weaving the library into the Web (rather than the Web into the library)."

I'd like to use this idea as an anchor for launching into the second part of my paper, because what interests me is the role of collection development librarians in the experiment of digital libraries. What particularly is of interest is the potential for a librarian to assume the role of researcher-collector working under the auspices of a much larger institution.   I would like to approach this issue with an example, very modest, and very personal. It is not a huge institutional effort, but is akin to a research effort that an individual may undertake. It typifies on a small-scale unresolved issues in the management of digital resources.

The example I will use is a web site on Public Art in Los Angeles. To my knowledge, there are no similar efforts conducted anywhere to the magnitude evident in this web site. I started collecting information on public art in Los Angeles, and digitizing it in very simple textual and jpeg formats for the Web in April 1996. At that time, being a very naïve resident of Los Angeles, I expected to be done with this project in a couple of years. I am still at it, and there is no end in sight. I will now hazard a guess that it may turn into a life-long project.

The genesis of this project was partly personal interest, but also involved a decision to make available to the public, using a newly recognized distributed network (the Web, which was fairly new to the lay public in 1996) information about a topic that was difficult to research otherwise. There were bits and pieces of information available in libraries, but most of it resided in organizations that sponsored public art works, bur which were not obligated to provide information to the public at large – in other words, they were not libraries. I was a resident of Los Angeles for almost 20 years at that point, but because Los Angeles is a car-bound city, and I was a full member of that culture, I frankly did not notice much public art. At that time no one else on the University campus showed much interest in such a collection effort, not even the department of Public Art within the School of Fine Arts, and the Internet was a novelty for many academics who weren't terribly sure what to do about it. Also, the idea of making ephemeral information publicly available was of little interest to anyone but a librarian.

Armed with a camera, a fairly flexible time at work particularly in the summer when most of the school is not in session, and good intentions, I started roaming the downtown (or central) area of the city, photographing. The downtown of Los Angeles is very large, it is a city in itself, and I quickly discovered that I was wrong in my assumption about the dearth of public art. I also contacted certain agencies which oversaw public art commissions, and met some people who have done research on particular pieces. Everyone was happy to contribute mountains of information that they had. As I realized that there was much more than I ever thought, I took a 6 months sabbatical, another very lucky privilege we have at our institution. During the sabbatical, my project really took off, and it is still flying. To pay homage to my university, which allowed me to do this, I included information on public art on campus. This sub-project was rather interesting, because in a city which was never terribly good at preserving its past, the University is an example of an institution which didn't collect too many records about its own history. For anyone interested in the history of the University, there is an amazing amount of reliance on people who have been around for a long time, and on "old wives' tales". I am now considered to be somewhat of an authority on the University's artistic patrimony, and students, University public relations personnel, and other librarians frequently turn to me with strange questions like: How many fountains are there at the University? Or, what happened to the proposed monument to a famous Mexican-American California farm labor organizer, which was supposedly approved by the University 5

years ago? The entire Public Art web site is freely accessible, and I get all kinds of reference queries. I get questions from artists looking to participate in public art commissions, people doing research on a painting they found in their attic, students doing research on public art policy, or on a specific piece, organizations looking to link to my site while I link to theirs (which I don't do), publishers looking to reproduce a work from the site. I also get off the wall queries such as ones from people looking to rent an apartment in Los Angeles, or people wanting me to sell ready-made research papers for a fee. The reference needs are wide, and only a small portion of inquiries I get comes from the University constituency.

What I have discovered in the process of my research and documentation, as well as through providing research assistance, is that the issue of what constitutes public art is rather complicated. It's not just the permanent sculptures and murals, but redesigned sidewalks, bicycle racks, video-screens, communal gardens, fences, bus shelters, performance art, children's playground objects, and other types of "artistic" activities vetted by public arts commissions and boards. Many works, at least in Los Angeles, are temporary. Many are in places which are not easily accessible by cars, or in neighborhoods which are not considered to be terribly safe by many Angelenos. In fact, public art commissions are tools of ideology and urban redevelopment. The web site does not cover public performances, but it does attempt to capture some information about the static works, including those which are temporary. The web site provides some sort of a central record about the works, even if that record does not capture all of the pertinent information. There are now several thousand images and several hundred textual files.

So, who owns this collection? I am the keeper of the physical information, the photographs, slides, the negatives, the brochures, emails, announcements, publicity, etc. The collection is available to the public through the Web site only. There is no access to the physical collection otherwise, and probably 75% of it is on the Web.   I make the decisions to grant reproduction of my photographs. I've had contact with artists who work with public art, and so far, they are very happy to have information about their work displayed and disseminated to the public. They want that public recognition, but they also want the attribution that the work is theirs.

Who owns the web site? It is on a University-owned server, which provides me with free space courtesy of the library system. This means that the institution has control over where the digital copy resides. Since the library system was reorganized several times in the last seven years, so were its servers. The web site was moved without my knowledge during the reorganizations, and I had to request permission to access the files on the server several times. Except for me, no one knows what the site encompasses, nor can anyone provide reference assistance – this is too specialized a subject area. As there has been an increase in the use of the Internet for information and research, and as the University itself has embarked on many endeavors to study and teach the region's urban history and development, there is more of a consciousness of the value of web sites such as this one and of similar repositories of regional information. A portal is being developed at the University, to manage and mine its digital collections. The institution went from allowing free reign to individual efforts such as my own, to viewing many of them as possibly its own. This is not a minor point, as Clifford Lynch explains in his article. Most faculty are very careful about what they consider their intellectual property, but it is different for librarians. Professionally and ethically we view what we do in terms of service for the larger institution. But it seems to me that with the increase of digital library efforts we will see a variety of intellectual property issues cropping up, affecting not just libraries but individual researchers. It is one thing to digitally develop materials which were always held by the institution, it is another thing to mine materials collected and researched by an individual who is intellectually vested in the subject. There are also long term implications. What if I leave the University? I can leave what is currently in the web site on the University server, but it will not grow, nor will anyone else assume the responsibility for it. I can make a copy of what's there, and put it on a server elsewhere, but doesn't the University, which granted me a sabbatical and initial privileges for this project have a stake in this small but widely used digital project?

A recent report of OCLC (Online Computer Library Center, with membership serving over 43,000 libraries), entitled "Preserve Digital Materials: Roles, Scenarios, and Economic Decision-Making," draws a complicated, economically based picture of incentives for digital preservation. These incentives must be sufficient to induce interested parties to secure the long-term viability and to implement technologies aimed at ensuring the longevity of digital materials. According to this report, the key economic decision-makers in the digital preservation process are (not surprisingly) the Rights Holder, the Archive, and the Beneficiary. The report lays out five organizational models and analyzes the nature of incentives for preservation illustrated by each model; it also develops the concept of the aftermarket, which provides goods and services that enhance the value and longevity of a good. The report provides a useful intellectual framework for anyone working on producing digital resources, and it has certainly made me pause and consider my role in the scenarios.

I hope this paper will leave you with some thoughts on the changing relationship between raw research materials and digital library collections, and some knowledge of the kinds of issues to anticipate in your institutions. I have also tried to obliquely posit that the nature of librarianship is changing not only because of technology or because knowledge management has become a much broader concern, but also because our own role in collecting, researching, and preserving is changing, too.

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