

The Year(s) of the Digital Asset

ARLIS 2008

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[Following is the script and select slides from the May 4, 2008 presentation.]

Getting images together for this presentation reminded me that it isn't easy for staff at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) to get images together. I could easily get my hands on some, but not all images used in the presentation. Having to hunt around for images will decrease over time, because we're building a digital asset library.

Building this library will be a community effort – where the community (at least for now) is SFMOMA staff. SFMOMA curators, conservators, graphic designers, and our imaging team, among many others – will contribute assets to software purchased for the library – a digital asset management system (DAMS) – with the goal of making those assets available to the widest possible number of SFMOMA staff for use in museum activities as varied as collections care, putting images on our website, or using images on street-pole banners to promote an exhibition at SFMOMA.

The scope of our digital asset library today is about non-textual materials. Today, it's primarily about still images and moving images. We've identified three very broad categories of images for the library: images of artworks, contextual images, and images of museum life. Some images may fit into more than one category; it's just a way to make sense of what we have.

Staff will contribute images of artworks in our collection to the DAMS – like the image below of the sculpture, *Fire*, by Teresita Fernández. Staff will also contribute documentation-specific images of artworks to the DAMS: for example, images taken by our registrars documenting how a work is installed.



left image: Teresita Fernández, *Fire*, 2005, silk yarn, steel armature, and epoxy; Collection SFMOMA; © Teresita Fernández
right image: *The Art of Richard Tuttle* exhibition at SFMOMA in 2005

Staff will contribute images of artworks borrowed by SFMOMA for exhibitions: shots of single artworks – like artworks by Richard Tuttle borrowed for *The Art Richard Tuttle* exhibition – or sweeping views of a final installation at SFMOMA (as in the example above).

Staff will contribute images of artists, or images of things or places that provide some context for thinking about, caring for, or presenting our collection, or exhibitions. Contextual imagery includes interviews with artists – captured when an artist is on-site, typically to install his or her work for an exhibition at SFMOMA – interviews conducted by an intra-departmental team of SFMOMA educators, curators, and conservators. (Viewed from a different perspective, the artist interview might be considered primary, with any artwork or exhibition referenced by the artist in the interview providing some context for the interview.)

Beyond images related to artwork, or an exhibition, staff will contribute images of “museum life” to the DAMS. These are images of SFMOMA events or activities – such as images of our annual art auction fundraiser, or families visiting our galleries.

■ Why is this presentation called the “Year(s) of the Digital Asset?” It’s taken time to get the digital library underway – for basic reasons like needing to get funds in place for the software and staffing. It’s taken time for us to understand, promote, and begin to meet needs related to managing and using our growing cache of digital assets. It’s taken time because we’re on the plateau of making the shift from being about producing analog materials – like slides and transparencies – to being nearly 100% digital – in terms of producing the types of assets introduced above (e.g., images of artworks, exhibitions, museum activities).

Implementing a DAMS is one nucleus of current activity that’s taking time. In 2006 we began installing and configuring a DAMS named MediaBin. Leading up to 2006, we looked at a range of vendor-supported systems: from the modestly priced, to the higher-priced. The fundamental advantage of having a DAMS – in this case MediaBin – is that it will provide a common place for staff to put assets, a place to search and browse assets, and a place with easy capabilities for using those assets in various museum activities.

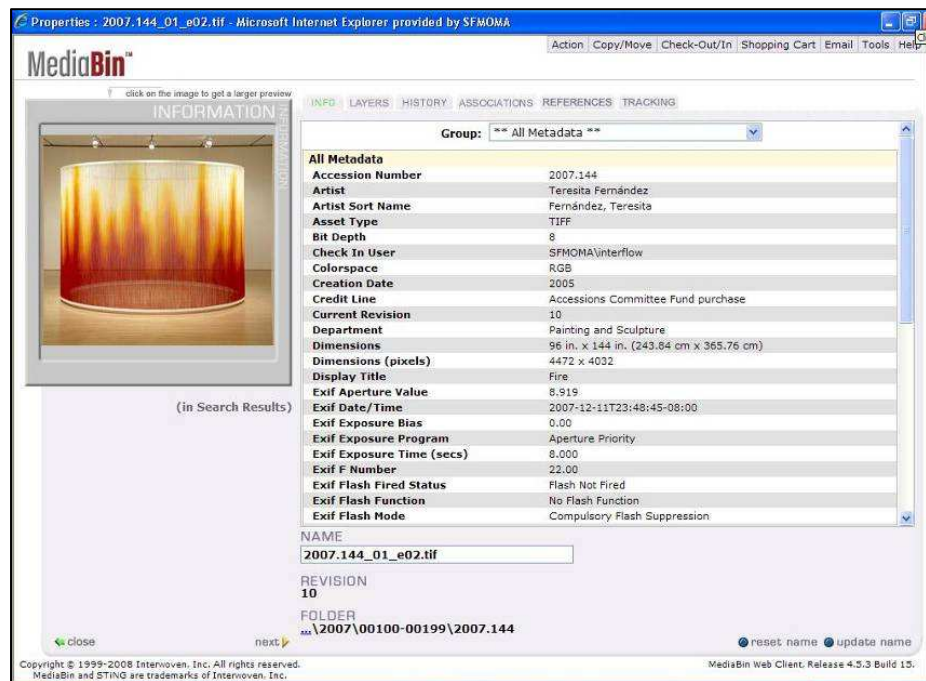


image: screenshot of an image of *Fire* contributed to the DAMS

Building-out content in the DAMS (e.g., by adding images and data) will be a community effort at SFMOMA, but someone needs to keep the momentum going, someone needs to manage the software and provide user support. Getting the software configured has been a collaboration between Collections Information and Access (CIA) and our Information Systems and Services department (ISS). ISS keeps the technical environment for the DAMS accessible and in good working order: for example, ISS oversees servers, network storage, and maintenance schedules for applications and operating and database systems. CIA – specifically, our visual resources team – is responsible for the day-to-day management of the skin, muscle, and bones of the DAMS (that is, what users see and experience). [Note: CIA's four areas of responsibilities are 1) to advance our collections management system (CMS), which houses significant descriptive and administrative data about artworks in the collection, as well as exhibitions; 2) to manage and produce images; 3) to manage intellectual property concerns (i.e., questions regarding copyright, rights to publicity and privacy); and 4) to foster access to information about artworks in our collection.]

CIA is the only department at SFMOMA, right now, using the DAMS. We're the only department putting assets into, and getting them out of the DAMS. This will change, this month [May 2008], when we start rolling out the system to other departments in waves. Making CIA (a department of 8 people) an initial nucleus of activity is part of our strategy to prototype the DAMS and to roll-out it out to staff in phases, coupled with a targeted approach to actually getting assets and data into the software.

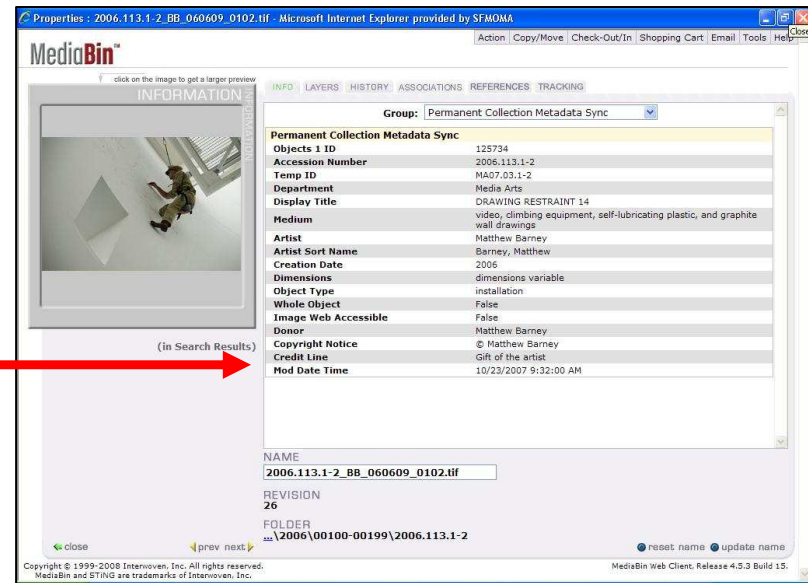
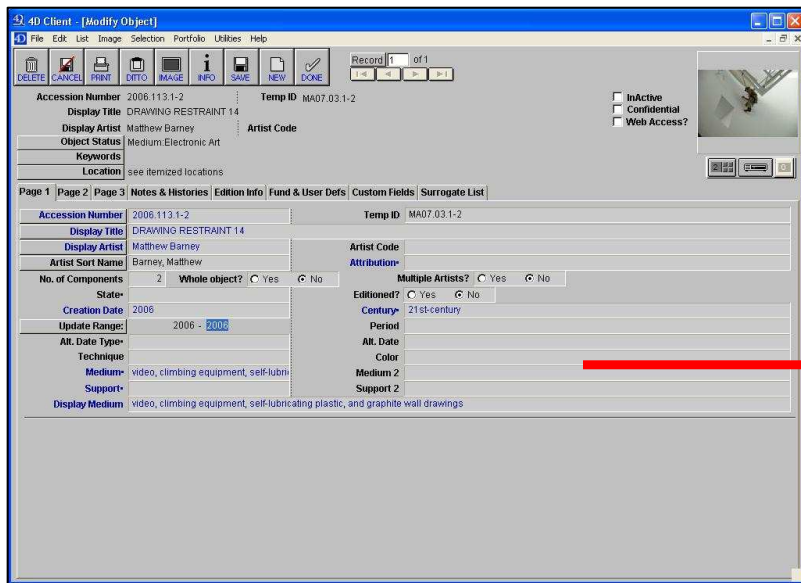
■ We first targeted images perceived to be amongst the hottest, most routinely demanded images at SFMOMA for research, collections and exhibitions management, interpretation, and publication. These were primarily images of artworks in our collection. We've added about 40,000 images related to the collection to the DAMS thus far, and that's just the initial push. On the immediate horizon for addition into the DAMS are:

- documentation-specific images (such as installation shots produced by registrars, conservators, and exhibitions staff);
- artist interviews;
- images of artworks borrowed for exhibitions.

Limiting the initial roll-out of the DAMS to a small, contained user group (in this case, one department) has given us time and space to begin to think-through various issues. For example, as managers of the DAMS, we want to lessen confusion over images found in the DAMS – as when, for example, we have multiple images – with differences in colors – for an artwork available in the DAMS. Which image is more appropriate, more trusted, for use in a membership mailing, or a presentation made at ARLIS, or College Art Association, or to a board of trustees? How is a staff member to know which image is more appropriate, more trusted, if they are not very familiar with the artwork? Should each image be retained, and made widely available in the DAMS? My feeling, now, is to be conservative about retaining images, at least images related to the collection. However, wanting to retain images will bump up against wanting to lessen confusion over what is found in the DAMS. Beyond weeding images from the DAMS, we're talking through the merits – and the operability of identifying, via metadata – the preferred image or preferred images for a particular artwork,

perhaps for a particular purpose (such as a publication). But, what are the criteria for identifying preferred images, for a particular purpose? Is it about faithful color? Is it about the artist's or curator's preference?

Limiting the roll-out of the DAMS has given us time and space to experience new workflows around managing images: such as workflows around contributing images to a common place (the DAMS) rather than tucking images away on local or departmental network drives. The success of our DAMS will largely depend on the contributions of museum staff – to build-out the DAMS with content; therefore, we want to keep procedures as simple as possible for getting images and data into the DAMS. We've worked with two consultants to automate some actions around getting data into the DAMS, and we know there may be more calls for automation as more staff get their hands on the DAMS. For example, we've worked with consultants to rig a routine whereby selected data about artworks in our collection stored in our CMS – such as artist name, object title, medium, date, and copyright notice – is brought automatically into the DAMS. We're not hand-entering those data in the DAMS. It's magic, and it took working with consultants through some kinks and bugs to make it happen.



left image: screenshot of an object record for Matthew Barney's *DRAWING RESTRAINT 14* in the CMS
 right image: screenshot of an image for *DRAWING RESTRAINT 14* in the DAMS

We'll need to take a different approach for contextual images (like our artist interviews) and so-called museum life images (such as images of our annual art auction fundraiser), because these types of assets do not have a connection to the CMS. We do not, for example, catalogue events like the art auction in the CMS; therefore, there will be no magic importing of existing data from the CMS to the DAMS for contextual or museum life images. We'll get data for those types of images into the DAMS the old-fashioned way: by adding descriptive and administrative metadata into the DAMS at the point of contribution – at least a minimal-level, by answering questions such as, what is it a picture of? Where was the picture taken?

We're taking a community-based approach to building-out the DAMS with content for practical, and perhaps obvious reasons. We don't have enough staff to centralize all image production, all image contribution, and all image description activities, and it may not make sense to attempt complete centralization. Conservators, for instance, take their own before, during, after treatment pictures of artworks. Curators and registrars take pictures while on research or courier trips, or when installing traveling exhibitions at borrowing institutions. Who better than image producers to describe their images, at least at a minimal level? I would like to hear from you – if your institution encourages faculty, students, or patrons, for example, to contribute images to a central place. If so, do faculty, students, or patrons contribute data with their images?

■ Our phased approach has given us time and space to begin to understand the level of support needed for the system – especially if we are to rely on a community-based approach to building-out content. It's taken longer for us to find out how much support will be needed for the DAMS because we are roughly six months behind schedule. Some of the delay is due to our dependency on consultants for programming expertise, and the unfortunate experience of having our first consulting group not deliver the results we expected. (We've since changed consultants.) Getting the magic to happen between the DAMS and the CMS was clearly something that fell outside an out-of-the-box DAMS that serves a broad clientele, not just museums. In our experience, it's also been about pressing the vendor on things we assume any other client would have pointed out: such as the product's limited functionality for controlled vocabulary – a limitation which may be problematic when increasing numbers of staff contribute images of artworks to the DAMS.

How much will we – as managers of the DAMS – need to track or apply maintenance to staff-contributed content? CIA will attempt to mind contributed content as a whole – for instance, we're especially interested in improving the findability of images in the system – but, we cannot and do not want to look at everything that's going into the DAMS. A similar approach, or actuality, exists with our CMS. Staff in different departments contribute data about artworks to the CMS, and CIA minds the big picture by keeping the system sound, moving it forward, beefing up certain aspects of records for artworks, and providing user support.

We didn't become 100% digital – as producers of digital content – overnight, and we're not likely to implement something as new as a DAMS within a year, and that's not unexpected, given the grey areas, like navigating shifts in mindsets and workflows. The past year has largely been about handling still images related to artworks. The rest of this year, and into next (and so on) will be about

getting images of exhibitions, museum life, more contextual images, more images of artworks, and moving images, including our artist interviews, into the DAMS.

I'd like to end by showing a clip from an interview with the artist Katharina Sieverding, captured earlier this year at SFMOMA during the installation of her work *Transformer*. I hope the clip gives you an idea of how this type of asset can provide some context for thinking about, caring for, and presenting our collection.

Thank you.