



37th Annual Conference
Indianapolis, Indiana, April 16-21, 2009

Session/Meeting Name: Where Libraries and Archives Converge
Date, Time: April 20, 2009, 10:15-11:45am

Moderators: Jon Evans
Recorder: Elizabeth Ehrnst

Introductory Remarks

Good morning and welcome to our session entitled *Where Libraries and Archives Converge: Artist Files*. I'm Jon Evans, Reference Librarian at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Before I get any further, I want to be sure to acknowledge our generous sponsor for this session, Mr. Richard Minsky, who is a bookmaker and someone that I suspect many of you know. In speaking with Richard yesterday, he mentioned that he made this sponsorship as a tribute to Judith Hoffberg. So, on that note, I hope we can properly honor her here today. I also want to acknowledge Francine Snyder, Beth Hylan, and Greta Earnest, all of whom worked to put together the proposal for this session. And thank you to Elizabeth Ehrnst for serving as our recorder.

This morning we have five speakers who will provide a sense of history about artist files, as well as address some of the creative ways in which the challenges and opportunities inherent in providing better access to artist files have been undertaken. Before we move onto these more specific topics, I would like to step back and provide some context and a bit of provocation.

If one listened closely during the plenary session the other day, there was plenty that relates to our topic of discussion this morning, specifically artist files. James Neal strongly encouraged us to "remain committed to special collections." Carol Terry promoted the idea of the digitization of our unique collections. While Jane Carlin noted that our special collections are "more important than ever."

One might reasonably ask the question: how are artist files related to special collections? It's no secret that for most institutions – not all mind you – but for most, artist files are the poor step-child to the elegant exhibition catalogue, the magisterial monograph, and of course the rarified rare book. How then is a lowly artist file to compete, I ask you? Note: when we use the term artist files here, we're encompassing the world of ephemera, which is just but one subset of artist files. However, it happens to be the one with the most substantial body of literature.

So, if one were to look at the scholarship of Maurice Rickards, who in his lifetime pioneered the scholarship of ephemera, you would read an impassioned plea that states, "This everyday material has much more than passing vitality. Above and beyond its immediate purpose, it expresses a fragment of social history, a reflection of the spirit of its time." And Michael Twyman, the director for the Centre for Ephemera Studies concurs that these kinds of materials "can bring the past to life more vividly and often with greater particularity than many other forms of documentation." A third scholar, Katherine Ott, opined that they're "the raw, unedited history – the purest kind."

So, I would ask, are they not special enough, not unique enough, not relevant enough, or important enough to our collective artistic heritage to warrant the distinction of special collections material? While we would acknowledge that a significant amount of our artist files collections are indeed not all that unique, closer inspection reveals objects of real significance to art historical scholarship: unique artworks, editioned objects, correspondence, bills of sale, artist statements, mail art, signed objet, etc. – each of which tells an important slice of an often overlooked history.

So, if you stay with me on this train of thought (or even suspend belief for a moment for those of you not yet convinced), you might ask, “Why should we as art librarians invest money, time and resources into cataloging or even digitizing artist files on an item level basis?”

But before you entertain this question, I want to see a show of hands – “How many of you anticipate cutting your collection development budget in the coming year?” And, “How many of you have artist files in your collections?” So, given that you now likely have a sudden glut – or even a backlog – of “newly discovered” special collections material in your collections ... remember we’re still in suspended belief land for some of you... wouldn’t this be an opportune moment to re-evaluate the significance of our artist files collections in relation to our missions to provide access to our collections – especially those that present a distinctive and unique perspective on the art and artists in our collections? In fact, I quote Michael Twyman again who writes about the critical need for this material “to be catalogued and studied with something of the rigour applied to other kinds of documents, such as books, music, maps, prints, and archival material.”

Concerning solely this issue of digitization of artist files, we might wonder, “Why not just allow patrons to come to us to view these materials in situ?” Are we worried that by providing external access we’ll ultimately lose control of our collections and leave little incentive for scholars and general patrons to come to us? I would argue that by putting them out there, we’ll generate more general interest in the collections as a whole. Equally significantly, we’ll find that our unique materials in artist files – even if we present a digital surrogate – will continue to hold their value or scholarly significant – because the objects’ intrinsic physical properties provides lots of rich information. This includes the weight of the paper, printing technique, relative usage or wear, marginalia, binding subtleties, etc. – all of which tells us something about the short-term or long-term intentions of its creator, as well as the objects’ life after inception.

Another topic of concern deals directly with artists who create art that is intentionally ephemeral, which I think is salient to our discussions this morning. In reading the fascinating exhibition catalogue, entitled *Extra Art: A survey of Artists’ Ephemera, 1960-1999* (published in 2001 by California College of the Arts), essayist Ralph Rugoff comments that “a democratic impulse underlies a great deal of artists’ ephemera work. This impulse is perhaps most conspicuously evident in the desire of artists to reach a larger public than that constituted by gallery visitors.” I find this a most interesting observation as I think this has a direct correlation to art librarianship in which we’re trying to promote a more democratic environment for the consumption of art information. And at the same time, it’s a troubling issue. Are we serving this democratic impulse? If so, how well are we as art librarians doing that? I’ll just let you ponder that.

One of our fellow ARLIS members recently pointed us via our listserv to a blog that addressed the topic of Twittephemerality, - yes Twittephemerality. In his posting, the author was lamenting the fact that he was no longer able to find a series of tweets on Twitter. These tweets apparently dealt with content from an ALA Midwinter meeting from just 3 months ago that he could no longer locate after extensively searching the Twitter Archives and other archiving sources. He ultimately stated, “You’ll have to decide what

level of ephemerality you're comfortable with for that conversation." I really like that word ephemerality. I think this is analogous to problems that we encounter with our artist files materials and speaks volumes about the challenges that we still face in this realm. What level of ephemerality are we comfortable with? Are we willing to subject these materials to ignominy?

In his plenary session commentary the other day, Ken Soehner suggested that we need to establish a new paradigm within museum libraries and at the same time enlighten our patrons as to the function of libraries. Perhaps doing something unexpected and challenging like promoting these smaller, but no less critical primary resources would be a good way to promote art libraries and fulfill our objectives as stewards of our collections. In closing, some have suggested that in a landscape in which the printed word is digitized and seemingly more ubiquitous, the value of libraries will diminish. That said, those collections that manage to highlight and feature their distinctive character, (those unique cultural materials like artist files) will not only survive, but thrive in an environment where the unique and the original is a valuable commodity.