Recovering the Documents of 20th-Century Latin American/Latino Art
Background

Helvetia Martell, Museum of Fine Arts Houston

In 2001 the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, established the Department of Latin American Art, prompted by the interest of American scholars in the field, as well as the commitment of the museum in producing programs and exhibitions that represent and tend to the needs and interest of the fastest growing ethnic group in the United States: the Latin American immigrants and the US Latino populations.

Factors that led to the creation of the International Center for the Arts of the Americas (ICAA) within the Latin American Art Department include: the scarcity of museum collections that represent the richness of the art of these peoples, the lack of a framework that can lead to the understanding and the history of their artistic manifestations, the dearth of trained professionals who can interpret their artistic traditions and expressions, and the absence of textual materials that can serve as research sources for establishing museum programs and collections and for supporting programs of study at the college level.

The ICAA’s mission is “… to build a first rate collection of Latin American/Latino art and organize exhibitions in this area, undertake original research and educate various audiences, and serve as a gateway for Latin American artists into the United States and Latino artists into Latin America.”

In June 2004, ICAA opened the exhibition “Inverted Utopias,” an award-winning endeavor that drew international interest to this art. This exhibition produced a 586-page catalog that included 92 documents translated into English that were written by Latin American artists and critics and had been practically unknown to English-speaking audiences.

To address the need for this type of primary source textual material that would help scholars and art students conducting research in this field in both in the United States and Latin America, as well as to provide a framework for research for museum and library based programs and exhibitions on Latin American art, Mari Carmen Ramirez, the Wortham curator of Latin American Art at the MFAH and director of ICAA, conceived and developed the “Documents of 20th-century Latin American
“Latino Art Project,” which was launched at the project conference in October 2004. At this conference, specialists in Latin American and Latino art from different countries of the Americas met in Houston to exchange ideas regarding themes, peoples, logistics, resources, etc., for the development of the project.

This project is a ten-year initiative that aims to increase the scholarly depth of knowledge in the fields of Latin American/Latino Art of the 20th century by recovering, cataloging, translating, and publishing in electronic and print formats primary source material in the fields of Latin American and U.S. Latino art history and criticism of the 20th century.

In order to achieve its goals the project has set up nine research centers in eight countries in the Americas that will operate under the project’s partner institutions. The research centers will accommodate research teams composed of specialists in the subject that will be responsible for: selecting and locating the documents in libraries, museums, archives and private collections; scanning the documents; cataloging them; and inputing the cataloging data into the customized database application.

With support from the MFAH, the partner institutions will hire the researchers and will manage all the operations at the centers.

The partner institutions are:
1. Fundación Espigas, Buenos Aires, Argentina
2. Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil
3. Seminario de Investigación de Historia del Arte, Universidad de Playa Ancha, Valparaíso, Chile
4. Biblioteca Luis Arango, Bogotá, Colombia
5. CURARE , Mexico City, Mexico
6. Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru
7. Institute for Latino Studies at Notre Dame University, Indiana, U.S.A.
8. UCLA Chicano Studies Research Center, California, U.S.A.
9. Fundación Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, Venezuela

To facilitate the work and to maintain consistency in the operations, ICAA provided each research center with identical technical equipment (computers, scanners, printers, etc.), access to the web-based software
application, guidance regarding technical specifications for the production of the images, information regarding cataloging standards to follow, and intensive on-site training.

For imaging, the researchers are using an HP portable scanner (HP Scanjet 4670), two Dell laptops (Dell Latitude D600) and a Cannon digital camera (Rebel EOS 300D). Portability of the equipment is important since some of the documents to be scanned have restrictions regarding circulation and access. The images to be produced are of archival quality and should follow these specifications.

**Archival Images * **

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF DOCUMENT</th>
<th>Handwritten Text</th>
<th>Printed Text</th>
<th>Text with Black &amp; White Illustrations</th>
<th>Text with Color photos or Illustrations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>600 ppi</td>
<td>400 ppi</td>
<td>400 ppi</td>
<td>400 ppi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bit</td>
<td>1 bit</td>
<td>1 bit</td>
<td>8 bit</td>
<td>24 bit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>File format</td>
<td>tiff</td>
<td>tiff</td>
<td>tiff</td>
<td>tiff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compression</td>
<td>Uncompressed or G4</td>
<td>Uncompressed or G4</td>
<td>Uncompressed or LZW</td>
<td>Uncompressed or LZW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Color mode</td>
<td>bitonal</td>
<td>bitonal</td>
<td>grayscale</td>
<td>(S)RGB</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Complies with or exceeds recommendations put forth by the Research Libraries Group, Cultural Materials Initiative in *Recommendations for Digitizing for RLG Cultural Materials*, 25 Jan 2002

Complies with or exceeds recommendations put forth by National Archives and records Administration per “Guidelines for Image Capture” by Stephen Chapman (Preservation Librarian for Digital Initiatives/Harvard University Library Preservation Center).

**Reference Copy * **

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TYPE OF DOCUMENT</th>
<th>Black and white textual documents</th>
<th>Black and white illustrated text, slides and photographs</th>
<th>Color illustrated text, slides and photographs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Resolution</td>
<td>300 dpi</td>
<td>300 dpi</td>
<td>300 dpi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bit</td>
<td>1 bit</td>
<td>8 bit</td>
<td>24 bit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>File format</td>
<td>jpg</td>
<td>jpg</td>
<td>jpg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compression</td>
<td>medium</td>
<td>medium</td>
<td>medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Color mode</td>
<td>bitonal</td>
<td>grayscale</td>
<td>(S)RGB</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The project administration in Houston is responsible for enhancing the images scanned by the research teams; converting the images to a lower resolution format for web publishing, linking the images with the corresponding database record, and publishing the images along with the corresponding catalog record on the project’s web site.

Determining cataloging issues has been one of the most difficult endeavors of this project for me. The researchers who will do the cataloging are outstanding scholars in the field. They are very familiar with the topics, people, history, genres, institutions, and movements that are of interest to the project, but they are not librarians. Although some of them may be familiar with controlled vocabularies, cross referencing, library catalogs and finding aids; and even ISBD, not all have the knowledge and expertise of using the AACR2 code, assigning subject headings and descriptors, using and constructing thesauri, and working with authority control issues. Thus, given all these conditions, this is how I designed the cataloging operations:

Descriptive Cataloguing

Regarding descriptive cataloguing, my choice was to use the format for bibliographic citations according to the *Chicago Manual of Style* for recording titles, publishers, place of publication, dates, etc., when dealing with published materials; and using *AACR2* for other data not covered in CMS such as physical description. I created a manual combining the two styles and then translated it to Spanish.

For archival and manuscript materials we will try to adhere as much as possible to: *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts (APPM)*.

Authority Control

The main source for name authority that we will be using is ULAN. We procured a license of this database and the data has been incorporated into
our software to interact with the system. Of course, we don’t expect to find in ULAN all the names that we will be working with, so we will also be using Library of Congress Authority File, catalogs of the national libraries in the countries, as well as national archives, museum and national bibliographies. When the names are not in any of these sources, we will be establishing the authorized form according to ACCR2.

Subject Cataloging

When I came to the project, I was asked if I can come up with a list of subject headings to index the documents and have it finished in three months. After explaining what a subject headings list is, the existing standards regarding its construction, and the resources and time needed to accomplish such an endeavor, I was left with the task to find a suitable subject heading list or a thesaurus to use for this project.

Subject cataloging is another one of those difficult issues that arise when dealing with Spanish materials and audiences. In spite of Spanish being the third or fourth most spoken language in the world (352 million people speak it as their native language and it is spoken in twenty-four countries including the USA), still there is not a subject heading list or a thesaurus that can be used to cover all the possible topics in all the possible countries. Basically each country has its own list of subject headings, or each library has its own thesaurus, that respond to its own culture, institutions, administration, history, and social, economic and political situation.

There have been a few attempts in creating a general list of subject headings in Spanish that could be used by all countries, but their coverage is very limited and the treatment of the subjects is too general. There also have been a few attempts to produce bilingual lists using LCSH as the starting point, but they are still very far from being satisfactory. My experience using one of those lists used in US, mainly by public libraries to add subject headings in Spanish, is that the list presents structural problems: many times the choice of terms is questionable, the geographical treatment is limited, and cross references are inadequate.

In the process of trying to find a solution, I learned that the Art & Architecture Thesaurus has been translated to Spanish by the Centro de Documentación de Bienes Patrimoniales - Dirección de Bibliotecas, Archivos y Museos (Center for the Documentation of the Cultural Heritage -
Directorate of Libraries, Archives and Museums) with the support of the Getty. I accessed the thesaurus web site http://www.aatespanol.cl/HTML/home.htm, evaluated it having in mind the possibility of using it for the project, and contacted Lina Nagel, who is in charge of the translation project at the centro. Lina told me that although the thesaurus was a work in progress, it was already at a stage where it could be used. We became the first institution aside from the centro to use the Tesauro de Arte y Arquitectura. Lina and I have already talked about how the ICAA Documents Project could help the centro updating and further developing the thesaurus.

Besides being a good well thought-out tool, another benefit of using this thesaurus is that the original English equivalent was kept as well as the original control number; thus when assigning a term in Spanish, the English equivalent will also be part of the record, allowing for searches using the English term.

Since the software that we are using allows us to add descriptors that are not in the thesaurus without changing the original tool, we are considering the possibility of adding LCSH, so that users that are familiar with this tool can also search the documents using the terminology the LCSH terminology.

Although the researchers will be trained in the use of the thesaurus and they will be assigning the descriptors to the documents, I will be reviewing all the records to check for choice of terms, references, etc. Also I will be the one adding LCSH to these documents.

The documents recovered through this undertaking are going to be accessible in two ways: in electronic form and in print format. The web site will include an archive of all the records processed for the project. It will allow for complex searches, image display, and cross references handling. It will have a trilingual interface: English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Did I say Portuguese? I forgot to mention earlier that we are dealing with Brazil, thus with Portuguese, which adds another dimension to the challenges faced by this project. We are talking about a huge country with a very diverse population and geography, not to mention the richness of the artistic production that in itself needs a separate project. Luckily, we are going to work with a Brazilian librarian to help charting and developing the project in this country.
The print format will be a series of some ten volumes that will include a selection of relevant documents, and that will be translated to English. The documents will be selected according to their importance in representing the topics for scholars and art students to use them as core corpus of research material on the subject.

There is a Spanish proverb that literally translated says: “Why discover the Mediterranean Sea? which in English translates to: Why reinvent the wheel? And those were my words after been told that a company was working in creating a database and an interface applications for the project.

Since I am familiar with some database applications, MARC21, and other library and indexing software that could have been used for this project, my question was of course: Why reinvent the wheel? One of the reasons for developing a customized application was that since the researches in Latin America were going to do the data entry, procuring licenses for accessing the software over the Internet to be used in so many different locations presented a problem. Also, the customized software includes polyglot interface (English, Spanish, and Portuguese), which the ready-made software does not have.

My recommendations to other institutions and librarians that are thinking in getting involved in similar projects are:

1. Things take a lot more time than initially planned, especially when one is dealing with foreign countries.

2. There are huge differences in the ways business is conducted in Latin American countries compared to how things are in the US. Being aware of these differences can help ease the operations

3. Follow standards as much as possible and don’t try to rediscover the Mediterranean Sea if you can avoid it. Customized software is a labor-intensive task for all parties involved as well as extremely expensive.

4. Accuracy, attention to detail, and well structured and intensive training are critical issues when dealing with operations like these; an error in a file name may result in a lost image that may never
be recovered, especially if the original document is no longer available.

I am aware of the huge undertaking that this project represent to a “solo” librarian, and sometimes is kind of “scary,” but since I have the support of the ICAA director, the rest of the ICAA team, the administration of the museum, and the researchers in Latin America and the US who are conducting the operations, I am convinced that we can cross the borders and capture the essence of these documents, so that users here and there can have access to the richness of this art.