For publication

Advancing Art Libraries and Curated Web Archives: A Literature Review

October 4, 2018

Internet Archive

New York Art Resources Consortium

Persistent URL: https://archive.org/details/AALCWALiteratureReview

LITERATURE REVIEW

Stewards of the art historical record in the United States appreciate the values of curating and preserving born-digital, web-published resources. Their recent research and case studies describe opportunities for leadership and advancement in web archiving more generally if they can formally collaborate in collection development, resource sharing, preservation, and provisioning front-end access to their stakeholder communities.

Among the earliest and most comprehensive of these studies, Slania (2013) summarizes the technical and resource challenges experienced by web archivists as they manifest to art librarians and archivists. Slania highlights the subsequent opportunities for stewards of visual culture to lead improvements to the archivability and description of highly interactive or creatively designed web materials, and in the case of the National Museum of Women in the Arts to enrich a scholarly record with both traditionally under-represented artists and media formats in the process. Slania concludes that the overarching opportunity and challenge to make web archiving viable within the arts community is to make curation collaborative and access interoperable among institutions willing to contribute their specialist collecting visions and resources to the effort.

Deutch & McKay (2016) detail one effort to realize this at the scale of four participating institutions and the Artist Files Special Interest Group (SIG) of the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA). The Artist Files SIG piloted a partnership with Archive-It to share technical tools and resources among regionally disperse institutions with mandates to collect and preserve the ephemera of artists' gallery shows and promotions that were once accessioned strictly in print forms, and which have since moved significantly to the ephemeral web homes of galleries themselves. Deutch and McKay document technical improvements in the collection and preservation of their acquisitions made just in the course of their 2013-2015 pilot project. They conclude that collaboration was technically easy and viable to develop into existing workflows, but that participating institutions must think critically about their respective roles in devising collaborative collection development strategies that divide the labor and responsibility.

Kempe (2013) frames the intentions of the New York Art Resources Consortium (NYARC) to engage web archiving as a response to Cuno's (2012) plea to the art historical community to emulate the advancements of its peers in the digital humanities by working more collaboratively on products and platforms that could enhance access to the art historical record both openly and sustainably. Otherwise, Kempe warns (2014) of a looming "digital black hole" in the future art historical record, accelerated specifically by stewarding institutions' lack of funding and staffing commitments and questions about copyright implications that obstruct collecting born-digital resources from the web. NYARC, a partnership among art research libraries at the Brooklyn Museum, Frick Collection, and Museum of Modern Art in New York, used a two-year Mellon Foundation-funded project to explore the viability and document the implementation of a web archiving program that could serve the collecting and institutional archiving interests of three complementary organizations. Duncan & Blumenthal (2016) summarize how that program

operated at the time that it transitioned from a grant-funded, exploratory project to a permanent aspect of the Consortium's operation, with special note paid to the collaborative processes engaged among the three partners and external entities at each stage from collection development through access and long-term preservation.

Both Connor (2015) and Puccio (2017) meanwhile present value stories for archiving web resources with no inherent owner or maintainer, such as a publishing house or institutional archive. Connor describes the independent net art organization Rhizome's project to archive the influential art criticism and web gallery blog *VVORK*, which included restoring third party-hosted video to the site that would otherwise be lost to scholarship. Puccio presents a practical, permanent application of ideas raised by Deutch & McKay, in which the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute Library uses web archiving to collect and preserve websites, blogs, social media, and other web-based ephemera made temporarily accessible online to inform the Venice Biennale, a subject of rich collecting in print and other media at the Clark. These studies complement a growing body of literature written by new web archivists about how to implement a web archiving program in a library or archives environment, be it a standalone (Cobourn, 2017) or consortial (Hight, Todd-Diaz, Schulte, & Church, 2017) effort.

Yet in spite of opportunities and a growing knowledge base, few art and museum libraries are currently engaged in web archiving. In its regular survey of web archiving initiatives in the United States, the National Digital Stewardship Alliance (NDSA) consistently finds that the sector they call "museum libraries" specifically constitutes a small sliver of the community, dormant of growth: 3% of their respondents in 2011, 1% in 2013, and 2% in 2016 (Bailey, Grotke, McCain, Moffatt, & Taylor, 2017). That small representation in the NDSA's sample set makes it difficult to draw conclusions specific to the art librarian's perspective. Truman's (2016) web archiving environmental scan for Harvard University Library, however, includes a higher quotient of art and museum library voices--4 out of 23 collectors interviewed, or 17%--and may provide more direct insight. Ultimately, Truman's conclusions largely echo Slania's from 2013, including the first and foremost observation that stewards desire more communication and collaboration towards smart expenditure of resources and minimum of effort duplication. The study concludes that web archiving services lower the technical barriers to entry significantly, but that strategic collection development and resource allocation decisions still seize progress.

Active efforts to mitigate this problem include the Internet Archive's Canadian consortial partnership programs (Bailey, 2017) and IMLS-funded Community Webs project (Bailey, 2018), and the IMLS-funded Cobweb collaboration among partners at the California Digital Library, UCLA, and Harvard University (Stine, 2018). The Internet Archive's Archive-It partners in Canada gain access to the web archiving service by way of large scale and discounted software licensing agreements among existing consortia, such as the Council of Prairie and Pacific Libraries (COPPUL) and Ontario Council of University Libraries (OCUL), extending the opportunity to more research libraries than have the individual resources. The Community Webs project enhances this model by recruiting a cohort of new web archivists from within another traditionally under-represented sector--public libraries--who communicate and strategize collaboratively by way of their custom training and ongoing educational modules, in-person meetings, and outreach to their local stakeholders at home. A collaboration among comparatively mature web archiving

programs, Cobweb works towards a common infrastructure that stewards across institutions and geography may use in order to make exactly those kinds of collection development decisions that concern art librarians, based upon subject strengths, available resources, and alignment with documentation strategy.

A meeting in person to discuss and demonstrate these models and others can benefit art and museum libraries as they work together to determine their own next steps as a community. In the meantime, the threat of opening gaps in the digital art historical record persists. As documented by Klein et al. (2014), "reference rot"--the phenomenon of cited web resources in academic literature breaking or significantly changing their contents--poses a growing risk to myriad disciplines. Recognizing the threat has already led to the development of collaborative workflows, technology resources, and professional networks in disciplines such as law (Zittrain, Albert, & Lessig, 2014). A similarly concerted effort among art and museum libraries could likewise enable future scholarship and scholarly services that may otherwise be at risk to disappear from possibility before their time.

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