ART
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CHICAGO

Capturing the Museum Experience: Saving Electronic Media in the Galleries

Summary

Museum institutional archives have long sought to collect and preserve its records. Over the years, the process has been straightforward with the establishment of record retention policies and the capturing of certain types of documents. In addition to governance and finance records among others, museums have actively collected museum collection records, exhibition and installation documents, associated publications, and photographs. Throughout most of the history of museums this changed very little. With the advent of the digital age, these types of materials continued to be collected and preserved albeit in different formats.

Only now the Art Institute of Chicago is beginning to address policies and procedures for capturing this part of its history. Some elements are still analog, such as recordings of audio visitor guides for both the general collection and special exhibitions, as well as recording of lectures, performances, and events. However with the advent of digital media, what needs to be collected also expanded. Some were digital translations of analog examples, such as audio or visual recordings. However, other born digital media are new, such as digital labels (gallery-specific interactives on tablets), and turn-the-page electronic book displays. If the institution does not immediately address saving this born-digital material there is the potential for a considerable loss. Not only will the information contained by these files be lost but the record of what museum visitors saw, heard, and interacted with will disappear.

This proposal will study and develop and implement a plan for preserving born digital documentation of the total art museum experience, including permanent collections, special exhibitions, real and virtual visitor engagement and interaction, lectures, and performances and events. Using established archive policies and digital repository tools for museum records, the project will explore what should be collected and retained for both preservation and future access, and drafting policies and procedures for implementation. As many museums are now addressing these unique media that create the “museum experience” the work on this project and the resulting directives will be applicable to both other museums as well as the greater museum world.

Specific Objectives

1. Identify and inventory born digital "museum experience" assets, including gallery interactives, audio tours, exhibition videos, visitor apps, and other media developed by the museum.

2. Analyze the existing infrastructure of the digital archival repository, in order to modify the environment in preparation of ingestion of electronic media.

3. Develop metadata infrastructure, using recommended standards. Develop step-by-step tutorial for archives staff and interns.

4. Assist in initial transfer of old (inactive) electronic records to the archival repository.

5. Develop workflow protocol for transfer of born digital records from originating department to the digital archival repository and create detailed step-by-step tutorial for participating departments.

6. Develop infrastructure for public and internal access, identifying appropriate levels of access privileges, and authority.

7. Draft a white paper addressing the acquisition and preservation issues (including problems and possible solutions) regarding acquisition and preservation of works identified by the initial survey.

Timeframe & Deliverables

Months 1-2: Survey and Review
- Review over the Art Institute of Chicago's current digital preservation processes and procedures.
- Identify all types of files and media relevant to the museum visitor experience, including gallery interactives, audio tours, exhibition videos, visitor apps, and other media developed by the museum. Meet with media creators to discuss needs and priorities and identify assets with highest importance and greatest risk of loss.
- Analyze the existing infrastructure of the digital archival repository, in order to modify the environment in preparation of ingestion of electronic media.

Months 3-4: Metadata and Ingestion of Inactive Media
- Develop metadata infrastructure. Using standards, the Resident will identify which metadata properly describe and uniquely identify transferred digital resources.
- Assist in initial transfer of old (inactive) electronic records to the archival repository. Test for findability and completeness.

Months 5-8
- Evaluate project progress and adjust priorities for remainder of year.
- With the archivist and pertinent departments, propose and develop workflow protocol for transfer of born digital records from originating department to the digital archival repository. Create detailed step-by-step tutorial for participating departments.
- Work with Digital Experience department for implementation of procedures for live ingest and begin that department's live deposit into institutional archive.

Months 9-12
- Continue to test and monitor ingest of Digital Experience files for appropriateness and accurate metadata. Adjust procedures as needed.
- Develop recommendations for public and internal access, identifying appropriate levels of access privileges, and authority.
- Draft a white paper addressing the acquisition and preservation issues (including problems and possible solutions) regarding acquisition and preservation of works identified by the initial survey. White paper should be drafted for public dissemination along with summarization in Art Documentation. Focus should also address possible goals available for smaller and under-funded museums and cultural heritage organizations.

Context

Over the past four years, the Institutional Archives of the Art Institute of Chicago has transferred select born-digital records from various museum departments and individuals, on a case-by-case basis, and stored these records on a local server. Recently a major effort has been launched to expand the scope of this undertaking by implementing an institution-wide digital preservation system. Start-up funding has been secured to contract with Preservica for the digital infrastructure and initial cloud storage.

The Institutional Archives is in the process of conducting a preliminary survey of the departments of the museum which provide digital content to the museum visitors, both in-person and virtual. This survey has begun to identify the types of electronic records that will need to be addressed, as well as the current storage media (CDs, DVDs, hard drives, local and shared servers …), in preparation for the transfer to a digital archival repository with cloud storage.

Setting up a solid digital preservation program with a long-term focus is in line with the museum's broader digital strategy, which is geared toward an optimal gallery experience for visitors, open access to collections and information, and curatorial and scholarly research. A Digital Asset Management System was developed for the art collections over the past two years which manages information and documentation about individual works of art and exhibitions and provides content for the museum's website and collection catalogue. Other digital projects the Art Institute has initiated include the OSCI project (On-Line Scholarly Catalog Initiative) which continues to add digital-only publications about the collections and specific artists in the museum collection. The Ryerson and Burnham Archives also generates digital finding aids and images of dozens of archival research collections on artists and architects are available through the museum's website, as well as oral histories and the extensive Historic Architecture and Landscape Image Collection (HALIC).

A sizable amount of born-digital material is focused on the visitors museum experience. Such material includes audio tours, digital labels, video presentations, and interactive touchscreens that enhance the gallery experience exponentially. However, the museum object collection DAMS does not ingest content that is not related directly to collection objects, and as a result this media is not being systematically collected, indexed, and preserved, nor is it made available for future use.

The residency would fit in perfectly with the other digital initiatives of the museum community, and would enhance and secure the long-term preservation of the irreplaceable electronic records produced by these ongoing projects.

Required Resources

Mentors: Alvin Dantes, Digital Initiatives and Technologies Librarian; Bart Ryckbosch, Institutional Archivist; Jaime Schumacher, Senior Director - Digital Collections & Scholarship, Founders Memorial Library, Northern Illinois University; Drew VandeCreek, Director of Digital Scholarship and Co-Director Digital Convergence Lab, Northern Illinois University Libraries

Dedicated work space located in library/archives space with computer and necessary software; video conferencing access and telephone.

Established digital repository and necessary training.

Team work spaces.

Required Knowledge & Skills

- Master's degree from an ALA-accredited library school or equivalent accredited degree with formal training in archival theory and practice.
- Awareness of current practices in digital asset management and digital preservation.
- Understanding of metadata related to digital assets, especially Dublin Core.
- Ability to self-start and work both independently and with a group.
- Excellent communication skills.

Preferred Knowledge or Experience

- Experience working in an archives or museum setting.
- Some work with digital asset management systems.
- Experience developing and delivering training.