

Digital Desires: What Are Museums Up To?

by Layna White, Editor of Special Section

Digital Images in Museums

Museums, to greater and lesser extents, have shown increased activity in recent years in getting, inspiring, producing and using digital content – actions motivated in part by interests in using digital content to improve transparency, diversify availability and perspectives and encourage fresh experiences. Articles in this special issue of the *Bulletin* reflect or report on a sliver of digital action in museums. These actions are related to their commonly expressed purposes to collect, preserve, interpret and exhibit objects, the advancing of which can include a host of diverse activities such as research, evaluation, event planning, fundraising, policy-making, recruitment, facility maintenance, marketing and collaboration.

Digital Content

Museums collect and exhibit objects of vastly different types and meanings. Depending on specifics of purpose, scope and support, museums may accession – or, acquire through title transfers from previous owners – works of art, artifacts and natural world specimens, which we will refer to collectively as *accessioned objects*. Within this mix some museums may collect and exhibit digital art, digital design, digital archives or other digital objects, such as digitally mastered video art installations, architectural models and sound recordings. The acquisition, care, interpretation and exhibition of accessioned digital objects is understood to require resources, relationships, priorities and commitments at levels quite different from those habitually assigned by museums to encouraging and dealing with non-accessioned digital content. (Reading Sally Hubbard’s article in this issue may change this view.) *Non-accessioned digital content* is that received or produced during day-to-day museum operations, as it is delivered in emails or on

websites, as still and moving images or as database records, inventories, reports and transaction logs concerning museum collections and activities.

While non-accessioned digital content may be regarded differently from accessioned content, museum strategic plans may nonetheless call out objectives addressing it, such as objectives to share more information about accessioned objects or to implement a new system for managing digital images documenting museum activities. It is understood in museums that getting, inspiring, producing and using digital content should be aligned with the overarching framework of what a museum sets out to do, typically in furtherance of often-cited purposes like collecting, preserving, interpreting and exhibiting objects. Actions around cultivating and handling non-accessioned digital content in a museum setting are likely multi-centered and intradepartmental, pushed forward or held steady by the same set of fundamental influences contemplated by museums when working with accessioned objects – that is, resources, relationships, priorities and commitments – except that the variables (and quite possibly the consequences) are different for non-accessioned digital content.

Internal resources – advocates, expertise, funds, content-related systems and equipment, storage and workspaces, and existing content – may influence the pace, volume, usefulness and responsiveness of a museum’s digital content action. Relationships with digital content producers, owners and users (staff and non-staff) may factor into a museum’s abilities to get, inspire, produce or use content. Good relationships with artists (and other makers) or with museum colleagues might inspire (or impel) a content producer or owner to share materials not otherwise readily available. When ambitions for using digital content are great but resources are limited or relationships nascent so that choices must be made, priorities articulated in strategic plans and/or ideas championed by museum staff will influence digital content action.

Layna White is head of Collections Information and Access at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. She can be reached at lwhite@at-sfmoma.org.

WHITE, continued

Show and Tell and Listen

Exhibitions provide an excellent example of a high-priority museum activity that can set off intense, imperative movements to get, inspire, create and use digital content. Museum exhibitions traditionally comprise public displays (frequently, temporary displays) of objects selected from a museum's permanent collection or objects selected and borrowed temporarily from another museum, gallery, library or private collection – or some combination of accessioned and borrowed objects. These selections and the resulting spatial arrangements of the objects in museum galleries should reveal, especially if expressed in interpretive materials available to visitors, curatorial interests in people(s), cultures, events, ideas and objects.

The intricacies of shepherding exhibitions, large and small, from initial conceptualization through some afterlife may require and yield digital content related to the exhibition's planning, object movement, installation, publicity, merchandise, public viewing and discourse, de-installation,

FIGURE 1. Preparing SFMOMA's galleries in 2007 for Ann Hamilton's installation, *indigo blue*.



FIGURE 2. Ann Hamilton's *indigo blue* exhibited at SFMOMA in 2007. The installation comprises approximately 18,000 pieces of used, blue, cotton work clothes, each folded and piled on a steel and wood platform, and a participant – or attendant – seated at a wood table, positioned in front of the platform. The participant uses saliva and Pink Pearl erasers to erase lines of text from the book, *International Law Situations*, published by the Naval War College. The mound of clothing suggests the anonymity of workers and overlooked histories; the erasing of text in this manner suggests using the body to write a different history. Image © Ann Hamilton



touring, object dispersal and an inter- and afterlife involving evaluations, memories and documentations of experiences, responses and events. For example, museums may seek and produce digital images of objects for use in conjunction with exhibitions, ranging from shots of individual objects considered to be publication-ready, to detailed images of objects before, during and after any conservation treatment undertaken prior to an exhibition. Exhibition-related images may also include those of artists and museum staff installing objects in galleries (Figure 1) as well as sweeping, documentary views of the final layout of the exhibition (Figure 2). Museum staff work toward and generally anticipate that exhibitions will generate

WHITE, continued

FIGURE 3. SFMOMA prepares different types of interpretive materials for exhibitions. For instance, the museum's Interactive Educational Technologies team produced a multimedia feature examining Ann Hamilton's *indigo blue*.



interest and discourse amongst on-site visitors (for example, during docent tours), through reviews by journalists published in newspapers and magazines or communicated by word of mouth in classrooms, social gatherings, blogs and other venues.

Dealing with non-accessioned digital content in museums means taking a stance on and exercising policies (or, more generally, exercising beliefs) related to access – policies likely influenced by relationships with, for example, object makers, object owners and museum audiences. Museums are, by and large, experienced with exercising policies or beliefs about accessing and sharing digital content related to accessioned objects and/or to exhibitions.

Exhibitions require and yield digital content of primary interest to staff – such as research notes and pictures, correspondence, contracts and licenses, shipping and insurance records, working checklists, museum membership data. They also require and yield digital content intended from the get-go by museums to be disseminated outwardly – such as brief texts, short films, audio guides, podcasts, recorded interviews and lectures, web pages (Figure 3), still and moving images of objects in the exhibition and possibly images of museum visitors viewing and experiencing the exhibition. Museum interests in using digital content to improve transparency, diversify availability and encourage fresh experiences through exhibitions and other activities will likely bump into concerns for privacy and perhaps publicity rights, as well as copyrights. These concerns influence and are influenced by trust, respect, relationships and the overarching framework of what a museum sets out to do, and does.

It is no surprise that museums don't have a lock on all the digital content created about exhibitions. Pictures are taken, contextualized and shared by visitors. Ideas are exchanged in listservs, course management systems and blogs operated outside museums. The Brooklyn Museum, Walker Art Center, Powerhouse Museum and Tate are among many museums seeking to increase and diversify multi-way dialogues with and between visitors by actively soliciting – through announcements and other means of promotion – digital content produced by museum visitors about or in response to exhibitions or about visitor experiences and interests in general, whether those visitors are onsite or online. (The annual conferences of Museums and the Web, Museum Computer Network and American Association of Museums are three places to hear about and discuss what museums are up to in this area.) Many museums are looking to familiar and popular modes of producing and sharing digital content to connect what happens inside a museum more directly to contemporary life, such as inviting visitors to use cell phones or digital cameras to capture still or moving images of things or events experienced in museum galleries, then to tag or describe those images during or after a museum visit.

At the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), we're looking forward to experiencing and reflecting on visitor (and staff) responses to the upcoming exhibition, *The Art of Participation: 1950 to Now*, organized by SFMOMA media arts curator Rudolf Frieling and opening in the fall of 2008.

The exhibition is about art that incorporates public participation as an action in the art-making process (such as in works of art by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Lygia Clark, Ant Farm, John Cage and Lynn Hershman Leeson). The premise of the exhibition (participation), situated with SFMOMA's commitment to engaging in new ways with audiences, is inspiring intradepartmental collaborative teams to heighten resources and actions around transparency, inclusion and open exchanges.

As museum exhibitions are organized, opened, experienced and taken down, museum staffs are minding, to varying degrees, concomitant, upcoming and past exhibitions. Making commitments to cultivating and handling non-accessioned digital content involves thinking about what gets described and saved. What digital content gets (or should get) described and saved by museums in the course and aftermath of making an exhibition? Activities surrounding the exhibition of accessioned objects such as research, interviews with makers, conservation and new photography of objects provide incentives and opportunities for museums to review, discuss and, when warranted, amend and/or expand object records with new or variant information. But does the digital content contributed by museum visitors via something a museum operates – such as its email and website – get folded into or become part of the museum's documentation of an exhibition, or does the content contributed by visitors directly to museums get treated completely separately? Why or why not? What should be described or explained and saved in order to present any digital content in an intended or new context?

Dealing with digital content in museums involves making and remaking interpretations of suitability of that content. It is useful to know, for instance, where the content came from and if the content in hand is what its producer or contributor purports it to be. It is useful to understand if a particular digital image, description or commentary about an event or object is suitable or desirable for a particular purpose. Which image or set of images, or descriptions and commentary, might best or, rather, suitably represent an event or object on a museum's website or in a multimedia educational presentation delivered onsite? Museums recognize that no single representation of an accessioned object or representation of a

temporary grouping of objects in an exhibition – whether represented through digital images, descriptions, commentary or some combination thereof – is absolute or frozen through all time, people and circumstances (some or all of which is true about analog representations).

Museums – like other organizations, as well as individuals – do not all seek, inspire, produce or use digital content at the same levels and in the same manner. Resources, relationships, priorities and commitments, as well as audience needs and expectations, are variable, and the digital content sought or produced by museums and their audiences is heterogeneous and unsettled. Museums are at different stages of dealing with existing content and planning for future action. Like many other producers, owners and users of digital content, museums have a relatively brief history understanding the trappings of building and caring for large collections of heterogeneous digital content or temporary groupings of content, some of which may be built very purposely – for example, to fill lacunae in digital content collections – and others of which may compound organically in less filtered and less structured fits and starts.

Acting on digital desires in museums draws on the inspirations, contributions, know-how and responsibilities of different staff. Those participating in and advancing this action will have or will need a good understanding of what it is any given museum is attempting to do, and what that museum needs in order to make progress along those paths given, again, a museum's resources, relationships, priorities and commitments. For example, a museum might set its sights on being more transparent, sharing more and different digital content and encouraging different experiences. It then might need to plan for growth or shifts in production and use and for reducing barriers to access while seeking to understand what, how and when different audiences want different content delivered.

Contributed Articles

Two articles in this issue of the *Bulletin* offer specific views into current digital action. Shyam Oberoi provides an information insider's view into the process of implementing a museum-wide digital asset management system (DAMS) at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met). Shyam laces three

WHITE, continued

key observations about implementing something new in museums throughout his article.

Firstly, museums face challenges when moving data from system to system. Like many museums, the Met's collections-related staff (such as curatorial staff) use a collections management system as one tool to add, refine, store and access information related to objects in the permanent collection. Like many large and medium-sized museums, the Met has different systems and staffing in place for producing, tracking and delivering images related to those objects. Shyam details efforts to bring together data related to objects and images in the new DAMS.

Secondly, Shyam alludes to the impact of implementing a DAMS on addressing or redressing beliefs about access to object information and images. Shyam observes that, in the past, expressing and controlling information about museum objects was a fairly exclusive activity, as was, to some extent, producing and delivering images of those objects. Bringing together core information about museum objects and associated images in a DAMS has made discussions about access to information and images at the Met more prominent.

Lastly, Shyam notes that leveraging and respecting local understandings of needs, processes and systems is invaluable when implementing a digital asset management system. While outsourcing had an initial role in implementing the Met's new system, the best outcomes derived from – and would have stalled without – the direct, hands-on work of museum staff ultimately responsible for developing, running and supporting the new system.

In her article *Securing Digital Content*, Sally Hubbard writes of unfolding

awareness, strategies and actions surrounding digital content curation at the Getty Research Institute and the J. Paul Getty Trust as a whole. While not, strictly speaking, a museum in name, the Research Institute demonstrates museum-like interests and behaviors. Sally's article points out meaningful signposts in a macro- and microcosmic, synergistic, forward-thinking approach to digital content stewardship. The signposts – tangible and intangible – include advocacy around awareness and committing to managing digital content responsibly, as well as the role of cross-program collaboration and the fundamental need for policies, standards and tools.

A digital asset management system is one of the tools currently at hand, and here too, we get an insider's view into the process of implementing something new into the streams of existing practices and systems. Sally's article underscores the understanding that implementing a DAMS today may comprise one part of an institution's comprehensive digital content strategy, but a DAMS alone is not likely the whole of it. Her article points to several known signposts that lie ahead, including several new ambitious initiatives at the Getty, each of which suggests action in areas of content production, care and use. The realities and issues described in the article provide a sense of a living, evolving system or, in Sally's words, a work in progress, where the system/work is a compound of management systems like a DAMS, cohesiveness derived from working cross-programmatically to discover current and future practices and procedures and policies that step through points of content creation to expected and trusted access in years ahead.

Getting from here to there is a digital desire shared by many museum professionals. ■