Art Libraries Society of North America, 33rd Annual Conference
Hilton Americas, Houston, Texas, April 1-6, 2005

Artists' Files Working Group Meeting
Monday April 4, 2005, 4:00 – 5:20 PM

Recorder: Jon Evans, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

A meeting of all individuals interested in the issue of providing better access to artists' files was invited to attend a meeting during the 2005 ARLIS conference in Houston.

The meeting began shortly after 4:00 PM. Each of the twenty-five attendees introduced themselves and addressed the holdings of artists' files within their collections, as well as issues or concerns related to this material. It was noted that a particularly diverse group of interests was expressed, ranging from institutions with limited or no electronic access to files (LACMA, Chrysler Museum of Art), those pursuing independent databases (National Museum of Women in the Arts, Smithsonian), those who have already added files to their local catalogs and larger bibliographic utilities (MoMA, The Frick, and in the near future The Metropolitan Museum of Art), those who wish to undertake digitization projects (MoMA, Indianapolis Museum of Art). Further, there were individuals who were more interested in the potential for an increase in name authority records (UCAI).

The size of holdings varied as well with some institutions having as many as 78,000 files (Chrysler Museum of Art), while others just now determining that they have a small collection and trying to determine some best practices for housing their collections (LACMA).

Further, the scope of collections equally varied, often as a result of the mission or focus of the larger institution. For example, Sharon Wasserman, National Museum of Women in the Arts, indicated that their files are, not surprisingly, devoted to women artists. Lea Whittington, Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, noted that they have extensive files devoted to filmmakers and actors, whereas, Alba Fernandez-Keys, Indianapolis Museum of Art, stated that their collection is strong on Indiana artists.

Ultimately though, one common factor that united attendees was a desire to provide broader access to these rich collections that are heavily used and treasured, but only at a local level.

Amy Lucker, Harvard University, eloquently emphasized the richness that these files contain and expressed the value of connecting our users with the lesser known or under-documented artists represented in these files.

Jon Evans, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, provided a bit of history and background for the group, noting that this particular group has been active since 2003. However, progress has been slow due to the inappropriateness of e-mail as a mechanism to launch such a complex venture. This meeting was organized in an effort to rectify this. He stated that this was not the first time that the issue of providing better access to artists' files had been addressed by ARLIS/NA. In fact, it was focus of the spring 1995 issue of *Art Documentation*. The lead article by Paula Baxter, New York Public Library, was entitled "North American Vertical File Database:

Dream or Possibility" and posed the questions: "Is ARLIS/NA ready to take on such a project? Is the society's role really just to rally, provoke, and educate professionals, or should action be a determined part of the whole society?" Evans noted that Goal II of the present draft of the ARLIS/NA Strategic Plan for 2006-9 proposes the following: "To foster the creation and dissemination of information, resources and standards in the field of arts information and arts librarianship." Therefore, this endeavor to increase awareness of and access to these files seemed to fit squarely within the goals of the society.

Evans prefaced the next phase of the discussion by stating that the objectives of the working group as they had previously been determined were to seek out ways to balance the broadest possible degree of access to these files with the least amount of burden for already over-stressed cataloging departments. Further, he noted that this group was not anxious to create a new wheel to solve the issue of limited access to files, but rather to pursue ways to provide better access with a limited amount of institutional effort, such as encouraging the adding of records to the major bibliographic utilities or even producing a rather low-tech Web directory of collections with files.

He asked those involved with cataloging, in particular, to indicate why their institutions did not add their records to larger bibliographic utilities, such as the *RLG Union Catalog* or OCLC's *WorldCat*. Lucker stated that in her experience it was not so much due to a lack of desire, but rather an issue of staffing shortages in cataloging departments and as a result remained a low priority for many institutions. Many attendees agreed with this assessment. She promoted the notion of creating a directory, given this limitation. Evans said that even with staff limits there must be a rationale as to why this is not occurring. He polled the group to find that more than half of the attendees said that they had minimal level records for artists' files in their OPACs. However, only two institutions are presently known to add records to RLG or OCLC - MoMA and The Frick (though The Met is planning to do so in the near future). Given the fact that the records in many cases are currently available in OPACs, but not in the larger utilities, and that staff time for migration would be limited, there must be another reason for the lack of records.

Greta Earnest, Fashion Institute of Technology, pointed out that many smaller libraries that do not have much experience batch loading records from their OPAC to RLIN and might not know how to undertake this process. Others confirmed that this likely is a stumbling block for some. Evans asked Gunter Weibel, RLG, whether he could gather the necessary documentation to make this process easier for contributors. Discussion ensued about who could actually contribute to the RLG Union Catalog and at what cost. Weibel stated that he believed there was no longer a fee for adding minimal level records. He agreed to confirm pricing and offered to provide the necessary documentation for batch loading. Further, he proposed that a best practices website be created for artists' files that could become part of the ARLIS/NA Website (AWS). This was enthusiastically received by the group. Milan Hughston, Museum of Modern Art, stated that as part of a best practices site, we should consult and link to Daniel Starr's paper given at IFLA several years ago, which was devoted to cataloging artists' files. It was generally agreed that since MoMA was one of the few institutions to have their records already in the RLG Union Catalog that perhaps these minimal records could be used as a model for others.

Earnest agreed to review the necessary fields for inclusion in a directory record. Sally McKay, Getty Research Institute, suggested that we survey the kinds of records

created for the recently completed: *L.A as a Subject Database* (*http://www.usc.edu/isd/archives/arc/lasubject/*). Weibel also suggested that perhaps these directory statements could be submitted to the RLG's *Cultural Resources* database, as another way to provide access.

Some questioned whether there would be support for adding a project of this nature to the AWS. Evans replied that at this year's Leadership Breakfast, Jack Robertson, Publication Committee Chair, had asked for content that would add value to website. It seemed that this would make for an ideal addition to the site.

Whittington inquired about the range of files to be included in such a directory or utility. Specifically, she wondered whether files related to film would fall under this umbrella. Consensus supported an elastic and broad interpretation.

The issue of digitization was raised to which Evans responded that at present this would not be an issue addressed by this working group, as this posed a myriad of issues and problems that could easily consume the efforts to simply provide better access to files.

Linda Seckelson, Metropolitan Museum of Art, suggested that a statement of purpose be written, outlining the goals and objectives of this group. She agreed to draft such a document.

Hughston suggested that the group consider putting forth a proposal devoted to the issue of artists' files for the 2006 Banff conference. Seckelson, Hughston, and Evans agreed to do so.

The issue of promotion was also addressed. It was noted that several other institutions not represented at the meeting have significant collections of artists' files, including The New York Public Library, The Amon Carter Museum, St. Louis Public Library, and Los Angeles Public Library to name just a few. It was agreed that a message would be sent out to ARLIS-L asking for statements about institutional holdings of artist's files that would then be input into the directory. Further, it was agreed that enlisting ARLIS/NA regional representatives and chapters was a good approach to exposing the broadest range of collections.

Ultimately, it was agreed upon to produce a double-pronged approach: encourage the future addition and migration of minimal level artists' file records to bibliographic utilities, while simultaneously creating a Web-based directory of institutions and their holdings that would ideally be mounted on the AWS.

The meeting adjourned at 5:20 PM.