Rapid Capture:  
Documenting, Archiving, and Sharing Contemporary Art in the Digital Age  

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INTRODUCTION  

Contemporary art is one the fastest growing areas of interest in the history of art, mirroring the proliferation of contemporary art around the world. With global biennials, triennials, and exhibitions, occurring at a breakneck pace, libraries are increasingly expected to provide access to contemporary art images, books, and documentation as quickly as this art is being created. From New York City, with its thriving gallery system and major museums, to other established centers for artistic production, including Berlin, Los Angeles, and London, as well as Rio de Janeiro, Istanbul, Helsinki, and other burgeoning hotspots, the contemporary art world is nearly impossible to comprehend, let alone document or curate. And an enormous amount of contemporary art created since the 1960s is not available online. But this challenge has a silver lining. More than ever before, museums, galleries, artists, libraries, visual resource collections, nonprofits, and other organizations have an opportunity to develop new, innovative ways to document, archive, and share contemporary art. Moreover, a networked approach to the globalized art world allows for something more inclusive than rigid canonization and allows for more voices to be heard, especially those who operate outside its mainstream.  

In her talk at the 2012 Art Libraries Society of North America conference in Toronto, Ray Anne Lockhard detailed the difficulties global exhibits like Documenta in Kassel, Germany pose for libraries’ collection development from a resources standpoint. Documenta 13, currently
on view, includes roughly 200 artists participating in projects throughout the city and at outposts in Kabul, Afghanistan, and Alexandria, Egypt. There is no single exhibition catalog for Documenta 13. Rather, there are over one hundred publications that document and complement the exhibition. Not many libraries can afford to purchase 100 publications for a single exhibition or spend the time tracking down difficult-to-locate publications. Temporary and often ephemeral, the works at Documenta and other similar international exhibitions of contemporary art cannot be documented and cataloged quickly enough. Few images of the works on view are available on the Documenta 13 website. But there are tools at our disposal to close the gap between when works are exhibited publicly and when they are made available for users online.

Rapid capture refers to new scanning and photographic technologies that enable libraries, museums, and other institutions to digitize content at previously unimaginable rates. While the technology is undeniably a critical component to fast, successful digitization, this paper is also concerned with the myriad issues that impact an institution’s ability to rapidly capture and make available contemporary art collections. It will begin with an overview of the challenges involved in documenting contemporary art. Despite the abundance of contemporary art, it is hard to find online aggregated collections that have been photographed, cataloged, and legally cleared for wide release. Another way to interpret rapid capture is the urgency to simply document temporary and ephemeral works and exhibitions. If museums take years to document a fraction of their collections, what are our expectations for fully documenting a performance by Los Angeles-based artist Llyn Foulkes at Documenta 13 or the rest of the work at Documenta 13, which is on view for a mere 100 days? Cataloging, a process that is not rapid, plays a key role. In addition to the robust metadata needed to make collections discoverable, social and expert tagging projects hold enormous potential for quickly improving search and connecting users.
Behind the scenes, negotiating and clearing the underlying rights to contemporary works can be a difficult process but is yet another way to rapidly unlock vast amounts of content. Finally, building a sustainable, networked infrastructure to manage and publish digital image collections on the Web is essential for ongoing access and future scholarship. This paper will detail the ways these challenges are being faced by ARTstor, as well as our peers in the museum, gallery, library, and visual resources communities.

**DOCUMENTING CONTEMPORARY ART**

Since being founded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation in 2001 and becoming a live service in 2004, ARTstor has served as an online database of images to meet the teaching and research needs of faculty, scholars, curators, educators, librarians, and students. Today, ARTstor is an independent 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that shares more than 1.4 million images in the arts, architecture, humanities, and sciences with over 1,400 subscribing museums, universities, community colleges, research institutions, primary, and secondary schools. ARTstor works with major museums, artists and their estates, photographers, and galleries to deliver a broad range of contemporary art to the educational community. Our relationships with these institutions as well as our collaborative agreements with domestic and international rights organizations enable much of this content to be shared internationally. As a result, educational users can teach and study with images from MoMA and SFMOMA, the New Museum in New York and its affiliate Rhizome, an organization that exhibits and preserves new media art. Works from private collections such as Fundación Cisneros, galleries like Franklin Furnace, contemporary art centers like the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, and individual artists including Judy Chicago and Elizabeth Peyton have all identified the value of making their works accessible via
ARTstor. But these works are not just dropped in the vast sea of the Web. Rather, they enter an aggregated digital library of curated content. In our work as library and information professionals, we constantly rely on the work of scholars and curators in collection development efforts. Part of ARTstor’s mission to assist in shaping users’ experience of the overwhelming amount of contemporary art in the world, which, in turn, helps facilitate the scholarship of tomorrow.

Not surprisingly, users regularly request that more contemporary art be included in the ARTstor Digital Library, making it a continual priority for collection development. While images of contemporary art abound on the open Web, the scarcity of high quality images with reliable metadata remains a problem. Many museums now collect contemporary art but they rarely own a large number of works by a single artist; there are many more paintings by Paul Cezanne and Jackson Pollock in the MoMA than there are installations by Sarah Sze or Kai Althoff. What is available on museum websites is one or a small selection of works by a single artist. The Getty’s Online Scholarly Catalogue Initiative (OSCI) is addressing this issue in part by supporting museum’s efforts to publish dynamic collection catalogues online. For example, SFMOMA is currently working on a comprehensive online catalogue for their significant Robert Rauschenberg holdings, which will dramatically improve both the quantity and quality of online holdings for this influential contemporary artist.2

Commercial galleries, the primary venue for active contemporary artists, comprise a world far removed from the educational community. Contemporary art is primarily sold in galleries and at art fairs like the Armory Show in New York or Art Basel in Switzerland, and the majority of these works end up in private collections. Major galleries’ websites include images of works by the artists on their roster, but searching out artists and their gallery can be difficult
for those not familiar with the art world. The case is more complicated for smaller galleries or alternative spaces, where professional documentation is less likely to occur. Moreover, many contemporary artists do not maintain their own websites. Without a direct line to the educational community, it can be difficult to access authorized, high quality images by working artists. This situation is radically different from that of deceased artists with established estates like Josef and Anni Albers, whose work is in dozens of museum collections. The Albers Foundation has thousands of images with reliable metadata that they share with ARTstor, but this situation is exceedingly rare with contemporary artists.

One particular challenge arises with performances and durational works. Unlike painting, sculpture, and photography, there is no clear method for documenting these works. If a performance only occurs once or a handful of times, what is the best method of documenting it through still images and accompanying metadata? Should there be many photographs of one performance or several performances? And what about the materials used in the performance: costume, props, set design, etc.? Capturing a work’s full range of movement, emotions, and materiality through still photography presents considerable challenges.³

Franklin Furnace is one alternative exhibition space in New York City that has successfully exhibited and documented performance and ephemeral works that had been neglected by the commercial gallery system (e.g. performance, artists’ books). Since being founded in 1976 by the artist Martha Wilson, Franklin Furnace has been “on a mission to make the world safe for avant-garde art.”⁴ Franklin Furnace has presented works by Joan Jonas, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Shirin Neshat. After successfully presenting avant-garde art for over twenty years, the gallery closed its physical space in 1997 to become a nonprofit arts organization that funds artistic projects and art education initiatives. By taking art to users in the
classroom and online, Franklin Furnace identified a strategy for quickly reaching a much broader audience. They also began the long-term process of digitizing their extensive collection of visual materials documenting their history as an exhibition space (slides, photographs, press releases, postcards, etc.). Upon digitizing and cataloging images from their first decade (1976-1985), Franklin Furnace contributed several thousand images and data records to ARTstor for educational use. And we are currently working with them to share over 6,000 additional images dating from 1986-1995. This collaboration ensures a significant portion of Franklin Furnace’s important history, and that of New York’s alternative gallery scene, will be available for teaching and research.

For example, photographs of Joan Jonas’s 1978 performance “Juniper Tree” are included in the Franklin Furnace collection along with photographs documenting the construction of the performance’s set. Other works include postcards and press releases advertising performances. Additionally, the gallery exhibited political works by international artists. The 1982 Russian Samizdat Art exhibition presented decades of artists’ books, poetry, prints, and other works rarely seen beyond small, underground artists groups in the Soviet Union.

Capturing temporary exhibitions – regardless of the venue – is critical for documenting contemporary art. These images enable educational users to examine curatorial practice, trace an object’s or an artist’s history, and track a gallery’s exhibition history. Moreover, the proliferation of site specific and ephemeral works, documenting an exhibition may be the only visual record available. The Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum, the New Museum, the Dallas Museum of Art, and the Larry Qualls Archive of contemporary art exhibitions are a handful of the collections that contribute installation images to ARTstor. The Guggenheim’s exhibition images, which are currently in production at ARTstor and will be available this fall, will include
images from recent exhibitions such as the recent Maurizio Cattelan and Cai Guo Chiang retrospectives. Historic exhibition installation photographs from MoMA’s Museum Archives features over 16,000 images, such as the landmark exhibit “Information” of 1970, curated by Kynaston McShine. “Information” was an early attempt to survey conceptual art and featured work by artists such as Joseph Kosuth and Hans Haacke, and it is just one example of the many exhibits in this collection that document the ways MoMA has shaped artistic taste, engaged political issues, and challenged prevailing notions of what can be called art.

**DESCRIBING CONTEMPORARY ART**

Without robust descriptive metadata the collections mentioned above are difficult to discover. Museums, galleries, and artist’s studios and estates are trusted authorities on the work they own, but sometimes they only provide basic, tombstone metadata. Cataloging art collections is time consuming and, as a result, data records for a performance may not include the names of all the performers, only the primary artist. In order to make collections easier to discover we need tools to rapidly describe and enhance metadata records. MoMA’s exhibition archive is undoubtedly an incredible resource, but the data records do not include the names of the works depicted. The name and date for the exhibition is included but only a very knowledgeable user would be able to identify all the works in a single image. If an institution does not have the resources to this extent, one solution is to leverage the knowledge of the public or outside experts to enhance data records.

Social Tagging is one means to this end and has been successfully deployed for many collections. Briefly, social tagging allows users to assign keywords to digital collections with natural language instead of subject headings and other controlled vocabularies. Of course,
controlled vocabularies remain essential for cataloging but social tags add a layer of common
terminology to facilitate discovery. Flickr Commons is a great example, with substantial
collections from the Library of Congress, New York Public Library, National Library of New
Zealand, U.S. National Archives, and many others. These projects not only make large
collections available quickly, but they can also quickly improve metadata. The steve.museum
project has pointed out that social tagging provides a model that positions tagging between users
and collections, as opposed to the museum model, where tagging is between the museum
professional and the collection. ARTstor works with the data from our contributors, so we work
within this model as well. Of course, this is a necessary dynamic for reliable metadata, but
increasingly institutions also seek descriptive tags and annotations from their users as well.

ARTstor is working on an expert tagging tool that will leverage users’ deep subject
knowledge. Expert Tagging is intended to give users an opportunity to add commentary for the
broader scholarly community; these could include tags, notes, bibliographic citations, and
annotations. This community-driven solution has the capacity to provide a combination of
natural language tagging and controlled vocabularies to improve search of ARTstor content.

The Larry Qualls Archive is a massive collection of photographs of contemporary art
exhibitions taken over the course of several decades that could benefit from expert tagging. The
physical archive resides at Yale University’s Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library,
which has been digitized and contributed to ARTstor. Qualls continues to photograph exhibitions
digitally each year, contributing thousands of images to ARTstor. His collection serves two
critical functions. One, it documents the exhibition histories of galleries and museums in New
York. Whitney Biennials, retrospectives, exhibitions at Gagosian, Mary Boone Gallery, Matthew
Marks, Marian Goodman, and other blue chip and lesser known galleries in New York are
included. There is no other way to view an aggregated online collection of images of contemporary art in New York over such a long period of time. Two, since Qualls is voracious in photographing as many galleries as possible, he has created a near encyclopedic record, full of unknown and famous artists alike. Needless to say, such a wealth of images can spark scholarship on previously unexamined artists. Since contemporary art, and especially the gallery system, is part of an international market, these objects do not stay put. Expert tagging can help trace object locations, link to exhibition reviews, auction information, and provide context for an object’s or an artist’s exhibition history.

For example, the Qualls Archive data record in the Digital Library for *Unpainted Sculpture* (1997) by Charles Ray correctly states that it was exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1998. But it is unclear if it is part of the Whitney’s permanent collection or if it was part of a temporary exhibition. And if so, was it a solo or a group show? Maybe it was exhibited in a Biennial. In fact, the sculpture was part of a travelling mid-career retrospective for Charles Ray and it is owned by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. The catalog entry on the Walker’s excellent website includes curatorial commentary and videos about the work. By annotating the existing record with links to the Walker’s videos, a citation to the exhibition catalogue, or information about *Unpainted Sculpture*’s provenance, the ARTstor record can be quickly transformed to include contextual information, multimedia content, and a citation for further reading. Of course, not all records in ARTstor need this level of supplemental information, but this record, which is representative of the Qualls Archive, would benefit from these enhancements. Similarly, expert tagging could dramatically improve data records for MoMA’s exhibition installation photographs. The possibility of searching for works by the artist Mike Kelley in ARTstor and retrieving images from museums’ permanent collections, New
York gallery exhibitions via the Qualls Archive, as well as exhibitions at MoMA and the Guggenheim, along with accompanying expert commentary, would be a boon for educational users. Tagging projects can quickly address the cataloging limitations of over-worked institutions and empower users to actively participate in the research community.

**SHARING CONTEMPORARY ART**

High quality images of contemporary art remain difficult to access on the open Web for the reasons detailed above, but none is more important than copyright. Although museums own and display contemporary works of art, most often they do not own the underlying rights to the works. Typically, copyright is held by the individual artist or their estate. Securing permissions to share contemporary works is complicated and involves working with multiple parties: artists, artists’ estates, rights agencies, museums, galleries, etc. And depending on the type of use, it can be expensive; the fees to display contemporary works on the Web can preclude institutions from including images on their websites as well as scholars publishing on contemporary art. However, for educational and scholarly users in the United States, the Fair Use doctrine offers one possible solution. Fair Use allows for certain uses of copyrighted materials in the United States without obtaining permission from the copyright owner. Educational and nonprofit uses of copyrighted materials are uses that often fall within the doctrine, particularly where they involve uses at the core of freedoms of speech.

Within the U.S., ARTstor shares many images of contemporary art with educational users via the Digital Library pursuant of fair use. Our terms of use restrict use of these images for only teaching, research and study, and not for publication. The Visual Resources Association and Association of Research Libraries recently published statements on the Fair Use doctrine and
their perspective on the application of the doctrine to different educational and scholarly uses of copyright materials, including images. However, fair use does not exist outside the United States and the question of when U.S. law and fair use should apply when images are being distributed globally is often murky. Indeed, it is because of these jurisdictional limits on fair use that ARTstor has not distributed some images of contemporary art for which we have relied on fair use outside of the U.S.

Regardless of the application of fair use, however, from ARTstor’s perspective, ARTstor has found significant value in working with the U.S. based artists rights organizations, the Artists Rights Society and the Visual Artists and Galleries Association, and many of their sister societies in other countries, including Bildkunst of Germany, Beeldrecht of the Netherlands, BONO of Norway, BUS of Sweden, Copydan of Denmark, DACS of the United Kingdom, Prolitteris of Switzerland, SIAE of Italy, VEGAP of Spain, and SABAM of Belgium. Recently, ARTstor began collaborating with additional rights societies in Austria (VBK), Australia (VISCOPY), Canada (SODRAC), Finland (KUVASTO), Brazil (AUTVIS), and Mexico (SOMAAP). Collectively these artists’ rights associations represent over 40,000 modern and contemporary artists and estates, including: Andy Warhol, Man Ray, Sol Lewitt, Josef and Anni Albers, Bruce Nauman, Marina Abramovic, Joseph Beuys, Louise Nevelson, Jose Clemente Orozco, Niki de Saint Phalle, Yves Klein, Hans Haacke, Richard Hamilton, Robert Rauschenberg, Eija-Liisa Ahtila, and many others. This means that we are able to display images of these artists’ works globally.

In some cases we have been able to collaborate with rights holders, either through ARS, VAGA or independently, to obtain higher quality images with better data. For example, in working with the Roy Lichtenstein estate, we were able to obtain digital images of works never
before published. And in working with the Rothko estate, we were able to obtain high quality images and better data than we would have obtained elsewhere. Similarly, by working with Elizabeth Peyton’s gallery, Gavin Brown’s enterprise, we have included 173 works by Elizabeth Peyton in the Digital Library. This is likely the largest aggregated selection of works one can find online or in person for this major contemporary artist. Similarly, feminist art icon Judy Chicago contributed 350 images of her works, taken by her husband, the photographer Donald Woodman. Our collaboration with Chicago and Woodman began when Woodman contacted ARTstor after learning his photographs of Chicago’s work were included in the Digital Library without his knowledge. In a situation that could have resulted in an artist demanding their content be removed, both Chicago and Woodman identified the value of increased access to Chicago’s work for the educational community and are now strong ARTstor supporters. As a result, they contributed more works than previously available and have expressed interest in contributing more.

These collaborations between ARTstor and individual artists exemplify how the needs of the educational community differ from those of the commercial market. It may take years for an artist to create and share digital images that meet their standards but a painting can sell at auction in an instant. All of ARTstor’s agreements with contributors are non-exclusive, so Judy Chicago and Elizabeth Peyton, the New Museum and SFMOMA, can engage in whatever commercial pursuits they desire. Scholarship relies on the exchange of ideas and information, not money. For scholarship to advance, the educational community needs ongoing access to content that is simultaneously exhibited, bought, and sold in the commercial market. Where the market thrives on a level of volatility, educational users rely on stability. However, educational and commercial interests can be pursued simultaneously and can even be complementary. We believe that
through our work with contributors and their representatives that increased access to collections within an educational context is beneficial to the commercial market. In short, increased exposure within the educational community can raise an artist’s profile on the commercial market.

THE FUTURE OF RAPID CAPTURE

Looking forward, ARTstor’s goal is to not only share more contemporary art collections but to ingest and launch them with increasing speed. Users will continue to expect more collections but also more contemporary, up-to-date content. Our capacity to effectively deliver this content to users is closely tied to the community’s ability to capture and document the art world: galleries, museums, art fairs, private collections, and the like. We must collaborate to aggregate these collections into trusted, non-commercial networks that meet the needs of educational users while respecting artists’ concerns. To this end, ARTstor is currently developing Shared Shelf, a digital image management system. As a cloud-based solution, Shared Shelf allows institutions to manage and share collections across departments on their own campus, with other institutions, or on the open Web, without maintaining local technical infrastructure. The cataloging interface for Shared Shelf facilitates the creation of shared name records and includes a vocabulary warehouse with Getty authorities. For cataloging contemporary artists, shared name records will serve as a much needed resource. The Getty’s Union List of Artist Names (ULAN) is an invaluable resource that already contains a wealth of contemporary artist names, but there are fewer less well known and international contemporary artists. A key component to building an inclusive, robust network of contemporary art online is the inclusion of
established and unknown artists. After all, some under-represented artists of today will undoubtedly be rediscovered and celebrated in the future.

The contemporary art world will continue to expand into new regions of the globe, encompassing new media and creating new audiences. A thoughtful combination of the issues detailed above, from thoroughly documenting and describing contemporary art collections, to collaborating with rights holders while advocating for the rights of educational users, and utilizing new tools that enable institutions to share collections quickly in multiple online venues is essential. Moreover, it is what our users deserve. It is our responsibility, as a community, to anticipate their needs and develop the collections and tools to encourage scholarship by students, professors, curators, and librarians that is as fascinating and innovative as the art that surrounds us.

3 Carrie Lambert, “Moving Still: Mediating Yvonne Rainer’s “Trio A,”” October, Vol. 89, (Summer, 1999), pp. 87-112. Lambert argues that photographs of Rainer’s “Trio A” capture the most dynamic and elegant moments of a dance that is primarily concerned with natural, mundane movement.
4 See the Franklin Furnace website for additional information: www.franklinfurnace.org.