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Exhibiting the Archive – National Gallery of Australia Research Library and Archives
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How do we digitise the context, the feel, the intricate somewhat intuitive links that only the human eye and not metadata can detect in an art archive? Art archives are colourful, rich collections holding a vast assortment of documents and items, which themselves hold layers of information and meaning. Digitisation allows for easier dissemination of content but does this distract from the colour, meaning and context of art archives? Today I will be talking about four archive collections, in particular the most recent exhibition of the Mike Parr archive, the process involved to get it to display and how the inclusion of this collection allowed for a more 'real', physical experience.

The Research Library and Archives of the National Gallery of Australia holds a dynamic and ever expanding collection of art archives. Managing this archive collection is fascinating, awe inspiring, very beautiful, yet rather challenging. In the eight years I have been in this role I have seen the uniqueness of archive collections become increasingly significant, driving powerful research and feeding popular imagination. Art archives are gorgeous beasts and I use that word to encompass not only the physical challenges they incur but also the emotional and intellectual; from controversial donor issues to ensuring content is provided within context and in an engaging manner.

Today I am going to discuss four artist archives, including the Inge King archive and the inclusion of select pieces from this in an exhibition; the very intimate Perceval archive and the challenges of capturing archival context digitally; the James Gleeson oral archive, from which an interview has been included in an exhibition at the Canberra Museum and Art Gallery; and the Mike Parr archive. For the last one I will give a detailed description of the process involved with including an entire artist's archive in an exhibition with all the challenges that this brings, from the simple to more complex.

I have titled this talk 'Exhibiting the Archive' as this is where art archives are heading. I have seen an extension of the archive's purpose, a shift from pure research to renewed interest in the unique, to visual repurposing for a broader audience. To including archives as a drawcard for gallery audiences who have become that bit more engaged with the analogue, the non-digital, the previously unknown, the connection with the ordinariness of photographs, letters, diaries and more.

Art archives can offer glimpses into 'the never before known'; the never before known thoughts, feelings, processes and relationships of artists through various documentation including correspondence, diaries, photographs. The flotsam and jetsam of artistic lives, tantalising hints into an artist's mind, their creative drive, their precious life moments, caught, captured and held.

This can be seen in the comprehensive archive collection of the sculptor Inge King. This contains an amazing array of content from hand drawn plans, correspondence, construction photographs (she did her own welding) and lecture notes. Here, in her handwriting, is a note where she has eloquently described sculpture 'as the exploration of form and space', and one of my favourite lines '...it is drawing from a 1000 different angles'. A line that became a particular favourite of the curator. She then continues on to detail her interest in flight, which was a recurring theme in her sculptures. Her archives provided information about her artistic process and when combined with all the other archive information allowed for a deeper understanding and appreciation of her art and art in general. As a celebration of Inge King's 100th birthday in November last year the NGA held an exhibition of some of her works, including this archive material. It allowed a re-contextualisation of her art and engaged people through the tangible presence of photographs, written documents and

other ordinary, everyday life documents. Digitisation for this was undertaken for notifying curators of the archive content and for location purposes, however I will include a few representative items to accompany the finding aid published online and the hand drawn plans will need to be scanned for preservation. It would be ideal to have the archive digitised in its entirety as presently we are scanning on demand which has resulted in an eclectic, fairly random digitised collection, decontextualized and lost in meaning.

These are images of the John Perceval collection, one of the most intimate and personal collections we hold. This collection took over 18 months to clean in quarantine (our preventive conservation maintains an AQIS standard) with each page brushed and vacuumed. The content is raw and emotive, with the artist's distorted mental state documented in random annotations, often with heart wrenching clarity. The rather messy state the collection arrived in reflected Perceval's tortured and highly creative approach, it is a good collection to just get lost in and offers an overwhelming sense of his self, so entwined with his art.

Not long after we had finished cleaning and rehousing the collection we were requested to provide scans of the transparencies and some photographs, some of which can be seen here. These are the types of documents curators love, including photographs where the artist is creating in context. The rather casual photo where his young daughter, Celia, sits in the stroller and John Perceval's wife, Mary Boyd, can be seen demonstrates that painting was once a family affair. We then have his Order of Australia Medal, a solid physical item documenting another point in his artistic career, made all the more important when viewed with the photographs showing him wearing the medal (where he presents as a jocular character) and correspondence to his children where his pride in being awarded the medal is apparent.

I know all this as a result of processing the archive, my own research and through conversations with his daughter Celia, who donated the material on her father's behalf posthumously. However, it is all of these bits and pieces that create the narrative not a digitised image. I don't have the staff or the time to digitise and fully contextualise the digitised material for the whole collection. These images now sit disconnected and divorced from the collection hanging in a folder in the computer under the label 'scanned/digitised'. When time allows I would like to combine these with a finding aid to connect the physical with the digital, to be an engaging experience for users.

When exhibiting art archives the visual display combined with curated descriptions enables contextual information to be conveyed. Including art archives in art gallery exhibitions is a creative and informing approach to not only support works of art but to also support the archive and to promote its resourcefulness.

A hybrid display that combines the instantaneous accessibility of digitised material with the weight of the physical collection drives contextualisation and encourages a dissemination of knowledge in a unique and visually appealing way. This can be seen with the inclusion of a NGA owned work of art by Rosalie Gascoigne being used to represent a very significant archive collection of oral interviews included in the Memory of the World exhibition at the Canberra Museum and Art Gallery.

James Gleeson undertook interviews of artists whose works of art had been acquired by the gallery during its foundation era. This is a unique collection as he was their peer, someone who knew them, often both personally and professionally, and managed to bring a more intimate yet intellectual approach to the interviews resulting in some quite candid responses. The display of the Rosalie Gascoigne interview accompanied by the work of art *Tiepolo's Parrots* allows the digitised audio content to be showcased. It is a form of role reversal where instead of the archive material

supporting the art the art is supporting the archival material, truly demonstrating the significance of such art documentation.

Now for the persistence of the real in regard to the Mike Parr archive, which presents another approach to exhibiting archives, as mentioned previously, and includes digitised material. I will detail the process of this from the acquisition of the archive through to the deinstall and demount of the exhibition, just recently completed.

Mike Parr is a performance artist, a print maker, sculptor, an etcher, a creator of various art forms. The recent retrospective exhibition of Mike Parr at the NGA combined a thorough cross reference to most parts of his artistic career. He is a significant, well established artist recognised both nationally and internationally, with close friend and collaborator Marina Abramovic and other artists of such international calibre.

He is a challenging artist, pushing boundaries, being extreme, exploring pain and endurance. He is an extensive documenter and it can be seen that the documentation of his work, mainly his performances are considered works of art within themselves. It was with this consideration that the curators were determined to acquire his archive, have it processed and to then use it in Mike Parr's retrospective, to show the multi layered process of a well-considered, systematic artist who continually informs himself and his audience. To this end we received 82 plastic tubs of Mike Parr's personal archive just over two years ago.

The acquisition of this involved council, curators, and the artist. Normally archive acquisitions, delivery and subsequent processing are managed by the Chief Librarian (Joye Volker), me and the designated curator; however this was a large archive, already receiving significant attention, already considered a work of art in itself. Therefore we had different groups managing acquisition, delivery, registration and conservation and this was one of the first challenges, one of the most mundane processes; that of labelling, which created a headache that extended on to the exhibition and after.

There were three labels evident on most tubs, circled numbers suggesting order, content description and often reference to the exhibition the material had been generated for. This did not represent the actual contents, at all, as I soon discovered when I began processing. The tubs were numbered by registration staff in no particular order; they just required this for entry into the EMu system so each container (or parent record) had a designator. When talking to Mike Parr about his papers I asked about the content description written on each box. He laughed, 'No it has no meaning, I was just reusing boxes', and he actually stated 'I'm glad you're doing this and not me'.

Now here is where another challenge creeps in; managing an archive collection of a living artist.

I described this collection to item level; I created a mighty tome of a finding aid. This was shared and edited by curators and given to Mike. Although I had done this he knew in minute detail what was in the archive just not what box it was in; you see now the random registration numbering made sense. Several days before the exhibition was to open he wished to include specific items and documents from his archive. He knew they were there somewhere in the 82 tubs, now close to 120 archival boxes. But, his descriptive words did not share meaning with mine.

Labelling this 'a book with the title turn this book over' did not necessarily correspond to his description which was more performance/exhibition based. I do now have a greater understanding of Mike Parr's vocabulary and descriptors, albeit different from anyone else's I know. Some artist's sense of time is also slightly different than that actually documented on their material; my

understanding is they consider the chronology to have begun when the thought of a work of art was first conceived, not necessarily the documented or recorded date.

So over two years we rehoused, organised the digitisation of audio visual content including videos, cassette tapes, film reels, records (LPs), slides and negatives and described the content.

There were tubs full of photographs, sometimes hundreds of images of the same performance and included all the negatives as well; significant to preserve as they themselves were often the only record of a performance.

Liaising with curators and researchers is a large part of what I do and one that I foster. Keeping in close communication drives interest in the archive and allows me a greater understanding of priorities, deadlines and enables better description. In a way archivists become powerful information managers, I became immersed in the Mike Parr world and could inform about the collection to a near granular level.

The curators were constantly using the collection as were researchers, writers and exhibition designers. Discussions were held over what was deemed a work of art and was designated as part of the archive. I persisted with rehousing and describing the archive, following original order and emphasising the importance of maintaining the collection as a whole. The linking within this collection was extensive, with Mike referring back sometimes to work undertaken years before to inform an upcoming project or work of art. The connections were seen across correspondence, notes, exhibition ephemera and administrative papers.

As the exhibition preparation progressed the idea of including an information resource centre bloomed. As a result we were requested to pull any Inhibodress material. Inhibodress was the name given to the artist led cooperative initiated by Mike Parr and Brian Kennedy; it was once an old dress factory. Unfortunately the Inhibodress material was not a discrete series, however having a tightly focussed search request created an efficient workflow. This collection became important in building an understanding of the exhibition space and how it was to be realised. It was during this process that we started to identify items that would be good to scan and have made available online ready for the exhibition. The system used for this was EMu where the gallery harvests digital content for online use. We were constantly ferrying material in and out of the storage facility to scan and digitise and a good amount of physical control was required.

It was fascinating to be a part of the exhibition process and to help inform decisions on the use of space and offering my own understanding of the collection. As mentioned before, I got fully involved in Mike Parr's world, enjoying the dialogue he kept between his international contemporaries, the joys and sorrows of his own private life documented in correspondence. This also literally reflected his creative processes at that point in time; no grammar, no full stops, no capital letters just a constant stream of words, yet deliberately chosen for an overall effect. I would scan images and letters, liaise with curators and research some obscure reference I had dug up and then would find linking exhibitions, creative thoughts, people and places.

Part of our process included sourcing out the digitisation of audio cassettes; VHS, BETA, any AV that included documentation of the artist in some form; this was an expensive process. When considering he is a performance artist, parallels can be drawn between these AV items being works of art, his research, work towards a final moment, from his preparation of an accumulation of months, including often medical, physical and mental preparation not unlike the production of a painting. This documentation was/is of utmost importance and value to the artist and he wanted it included in the exhibition as did the curator.

It was interesting to have the digitised AV material returned. Considering one of his major performance pieces involved breathing in and out over and over; the cassette tape recording of this was interesting particularly when the labelling was obscure. Airy, non-verbal yet distinctly human sounds; some notes from the digitising company were good to read in this regard. This does demonstrate the benefits of researching your subject, communicating with professionals and following original order, even when the content doesn't make sense.

There was a range of archival housing products used, great amounts of polypropylene binders for all the negatives, transparencies and photographs, all placed in order which was time consuming and one that I thank the casual staff for.

Unlike other archival processing I have undertaken this reminded me a bit more of university and producing a thesis. Instead of university lecturers and supervisors I had curators breathing down my neck. When was the finding aid going to be available? Was it nearly ready? The collection was being processed at our offsite facility and considering a curator's schedule, constantly popping out to see what new and exciting things had been discovered in the archive was just not feasible. We did have many meetings offsite consulting the archive however these turned into massive sessions as the curators got more and more excited which fed my now obsessive need to tell them what I had found, I had a fully engaged audience. Instead of constant trips to visit the collection the finding aid allowed for the curators to have the intimacy with the archive that they desired. I was constantly sending the most recent iteration; it is a mighty tome, that isn't finished yet.

By July of this year I was about three quarters of the way through describing the content and the exhibition was opening in August. This presented some more challenges including time restraints, exhibition deadlines and managing expectations. It just didn't all get described by opening but that was ok. Mike told me there was the same amount of archival material being donated again, another 82 plastic tubs.

Processing archives can have no definite end date and allowances must be made to cater for this. Exhibition preparation does have an end date and there are no allowances made. Those boxes and the digitised collection had to be down in the gallery on a certain date at a certain time. It was then all about how the collection looked on display. This was another challenge, when the curator saw the boxes and decided to curate them so they would look a certain way, our wonderful order was now in question. The box labels now served as a visual feature not just as a mundane numbering system for storage and description. We had to undertake some last minute mad labelling so the boxes looked good for display and there was a crazy reprint and subsequent binding of the finding aid after realising the old one had the incorrect branding. The

This is it, the entry to the Mike Parr exhibition *Foreign looking* including a visual of the rather industrial looking exhibition space for the information centre. There were two walls lined with his diaries. These were dense, highly informative documents where he has given minute detail to his processes including visual aids; some of which can be seen fully realised as works of art later on in the exhibition.

The grand reveal of the information centre shows a resource sharing area (available on the table) which included books, ephemera and the iPads, creating both a tactile and digital engagement. Over 1000 documents from the archive had been scanned and placed online for digital interaction and were accessible through these iPads. The material that was digitised had been chosen based on visual merit, relation to artistic process and type, correspondence and 'mail art' which was a

popular art form in the 60s and 70s, offering communication of ideas and thoughts via small art pieces, that were paper based and suitable for mailing. An analogue version of Instagram.

Exhibiting the archive in this information centre dovetails nicely with the theme of this conference 'Persistence of the Real'. Gallery visitors were encouraged to engage with books, periodicals, artist books, ephemera and archives which were combined effectively with a curated, digitised collection of archival material. The inclusion of this digitised material highlighted and increased the continuing appeal of the real. This approach allowed for an appreciation for the serendipity of encounter provided by the real object in contrast to the digitally specific.

After moving through the exhibition spaces several times I realised Mike Parr's works of art were more intimate, more close, more tortured than anything offered in the archive. His archive presented an organised man whose art was his business. Compared to his art the archive was the cold reality, the non-ethereal, documenting and recording. In direct contrast to the John Perceval archive and in some ways similar to the Inge King archive, who presented as a practical, factual documenter.

The exhibition showed his sculpture, performance work, etchings and word art. All informed by his documentation, the archive.

I first starting writing this talk sitting opposite a wall of type 1 archive boxes with a couple of clam shell type 6 boxes. I proudly look at the sign stating that this space is a resource information centre displaying archives. As part of the exhibition programme I attended the information centre in my capacity as the archivist. When I am in there I engage with researchers, the general public (often baffled but rather interested by Mike Parr), curators, other archivists and the artist himself who, at opening, sat there quietly taking it all in, this very personal, rather raw take on his artistic life.

This display of archives did not offer the physical contents to visitors, they got to experience the presence of them, another side to the production of works of art. A sample of the archive content was given digitally (on iPads) which encouraged serendipitous encounters. In regards to contextualising, this was achieved with the actual works of art on display, particularly as this was a retrospective exhibition. As with the Rosalie Gascoigne interview the works of art offer meaning to the archive and vice versa, the physical presence of the archives gives weight to the artistic process; both these collections feed one another. It would be too simplistic to state that exhibiting the archive is an important thing to do as how this is approached and realised is different for each exhibiting experience.

So what have I learned in regards to exhibiting art archives and their digitised counterparts? Well the basics, but they are good to reiterate. Be in control, be there for delivery, it doesn't matter how much liaising with curators, registration or donors is required make sure you have a system to physically receive that allows others do what they need to do. Never go by someone else's listing until you have checked the incoming collection yourself. Document the process from the beginning, photographs of the original tubs were invaluable later on.

Collaborate with living artists as much as possible, but know when not to. As an archivist we do know how to describe, trust in your professionalism but allow wiggle room and diplomacy; it is their archive after all. Time restraints, you never have enough time; at the end of the day the well-oiled exhibition machine stops for nothing, it does happen and if it isn't all described or perfect, that is ok, more will probably come in the future anyway. 'Pending additions' or 'in process' are completely acceptable phrases.

As an archivist fully immerse yourself, communicate with artist, family, curators, go look at their work. Encourage preservation of documents now when they can curate their own archive, try to avoid copious reams of printed out emails, ensure you have the space and capability to archive their digital files as these become more common to receive when archives are acquired. Keep a running itinerary of digitised material that is then recorded in the finding aid. Still create a finding aid; it links the physical and the digital. Be selective, what remains will be studied, researched and used for exhibition and digitised for an online audience. All of this had to all be reflected in a new donor agreement form without being too complicated and immense.

This was a new and exciting experience, being part of producing material for an exhibiting space purposely built for the archives as part of Mike Parr's retrospective, highlighting that these archives form an important part of his work. It has produced a positive and well realised precedent for similar future endeavours.

The more I manage art archives and digitise them I can see that these collections will become, perhaps not integral to an exhibition, but rather important. Understanding an archive's overall content, John Perceval's intimate, sensitive collection, Inge King's practical yet revealing collection and the artist interviews undertaken by a peer in a professional setting can inform how they can be included in an exhibition. They are already used for research, using them to demonstrate an artist's creative process, influences and inspirations adds another layer of visual interest and understanding. It allows for real unique archival material to be put in context with the art in informs and digital versions can be used to support them but not define them as the examples I have given today demonstrate.

I am excited about all the possibilities exhibiting and digitising artist archives can produce. The next one we are working on is rather amazing and covers several generations. This archive collection does hold real, physical objects directly related to the artist as seen here with a gardening scythe used by Arthur Streeton in his *Olinda Garden, Longacres* and correspondence in his handwriting, written in the last months of his life. The curatorial staff are already excited about the exhibiting potential of this archive, I am already wondering how this will look on display.

The case studies discussed in this talk suggest to me that art archives are like works of art when it comes to digital management and exhibiting. I have discovered, just like works of art that the digitisation of art archives and the real item can allow for material to be reinterpreted, reimagined and rediscovered. This means allowing the digitisation and dissemination of art archives to be flexible, adaptable, aware of provenance with material always returned to the correct folder, box and sequence in the collection so it is all in order for the next use, awaiting more reimagining.

Thank you for listening