Documentation of performance art

By Paula Murphy

A report from the Art Libraries Society of North America

The Art Libraries Society of North America held its 20th Annual Conference at the Chicago Hilton and Towers from February 6–13, 1992. There were many interesting programs presented at the conference which ranged from tours of art libraries and galleries and demonstrations of new computer projects in art libraries to more formal presentations on coping with budget cuts and on professional writing and publishing for art libraries and visual resources professionals. Two programs of note were "Space and Time, Parts I and II."

"Space and Time, Part I" was held on the evening of Saturday, February 8 from 8:00 p.m.– 9:30 p.m. at the Randolph Street Gallery in Chicago. The evening began with a panel discussion on the problems of documenting performance art. Rose Parisi from the Illinois Arts Council moderated the panel which included Lou Mallozzi, a faculty member at the Art Institute of Chicago and a performance artist who specializes in sound works; Suzie Silver, a video documenter and artist; and Jeff Abell, a performance artist, educator, and writer. These panelist discussed how difficult it is to document the visual and sound elements of a performance piece using video or film. They said that even the best video documentation does not represent the experience of seeing the performance live, because video cannot capture every element of the performance and that what the performance is trying to communicate can be lost in translation to the video language. They noted that this was the reason some performance artists choose not to be videotaped or filmed. The panel further explored the pros and cons of

using video documentation to represent performance art to grant funding agencies or to galleries that may potentially present the work. It was concluded that presenters or funders of such work must become sensitive to how video changes the actual performance art presentation. They also touched on using video documentation to study one's own performance. The evening concluded with two performance art pieces that we videotaped.

Part II of "Space and Time" was held from 10:00 a.m.–noon on Monday, February 10. The moderator for this session on video documentation and presentation was Hikmet Dogu, reader services librarian at the Thomas J. Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The speakers at this event included Madeleine Nichols, curator of the Dance Collection of the New York Public Library; Suzie Silver; Lou Mallozzi; and Larry Steger the performance artist who had performed at the Randolph Street Gallery the previous Saturday. The discussion began with Silver showing the result of her work at the Saturday evening performances. She noted that the low light in the video redefined how the performance appeared when it was on video. She also noted that the sense of size and depth of space was lost in the video. She showed the difference between her low-cost work and the work of a documenter who had a much larger budget. Madeleine Nichols explained that the video works at Dance Collection were used in conjunction with reviews, costume designs, verbal descriptions, photographs, and other materials and the videotape never represented the only documentation of the performance. She then asked questions of the other panelists including: 1) How do camera work and the natural instincts of the videographer influence the subtle nuances and

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engravings, drawings, blueprints, and architectural models will require diverse treatment and modes of access. Concern was expressed for the disposition of each institution's internal archives, which exist independently of the collections, but which should be included in any moves since archival documentation concerning the institutions of art is increasingly important in tracing the history of art.

Access and services

It was generally agreed that the completed project should result in improved access and services since it will unite several dispersed collections in a single facility that is, in most respects, superior to the current ones. Preservation efforts would certainly be improved. However, issues concerning levels of service and access need to be resolved. The libraries have historically served different clienteles; the new facility will now serve them all, yet must avoid the "encyclopédisme" of being all things to all people. There is special concern on the part of those libraries whose mission has been primarily pedagogical that the association of the arts library with a research institute will restrict the access formerly enjoyed by students.

Automation

Merging the catalogues to provide improved bibliographic access presents a major challenge.

Centuries of independent practices have resulted in neither standardized cataloging nor standardized terminology. The task of "harmonizing" the separate catalogues will be immense, achievable only through a major automation effort that includes retroconversion. Computerization, therefore, is essential and should be at the heart of the project. Government financial support has so far focused on physical facilities, although the Louvre library has just been awarded a large sum to begin automating the catalogue of the Musées Nationaux. But more funding will be needed to consolidate and upgrade all the catalogues that will comprise the new infrastructure. Anticipating future developments, one speaker also envisioned the establishment of a "distance research" service, utilizing imaging technology, fax, scanning, etc. to provide materials to researchers located elsewhere.

Conclusions

The entire project will involve massive financial commitments and considerable upheaval for the institutions involved. That it will proceed is a given and, despite criticisms concerning its inception, the library professionals at this conference seemed committed to a workable solution. Several speakers emphasized that the project does provide a much-needed and long-overdue chance to reevaluate the various libraries' collections, services, and policies. ∎

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expressions of the art work as it is captured in the video presentation? 2) What does the presenter lose in ticket sales if video cameras take up seats that could be sold? 3) What are the things the performer considers important to be presented in each video piece? 4) Is the video being created for study, a grant application, or public relations? and 5) Where should the video document be kept? All of the panelists responded to these questions by expanding on some of the issues that they had addressed in Part I of the program on Saturday night. However, new subjects discussed included issues such as: 1) What kinds of other forms of documentation of a performance such as performer notes or masters of studio recordings and the like are available from the performer to supplement the video document? 2) Does the documenter or the performer or someone else own the copyright on any given work after it is produced? 3) Are libraries presenting performance art videotapes instead of bringing in the actual performer? 4) How can funding for better documentation of performance art be distributed to documenters? and 5) How can library networking help to distribute information about performance art to persons who are interested in it no matter where they are? The session concluded with a question-and-answer period.

These two sessions were interesting because they were connected to one another and gave the participant who had the opportunity to attend them both a good understanding of the issues from the artist, the documenter, and the library point of view. In listening to each of the speakers it became increasingly apparent that libraries can be active participants in preserving and documenting performance art and that the artists and the documenters recognized that libraries could be a much needed impartial widespread distributor of their work. ∎