Session 5
Managing Moving Image Collections In Art Libraries
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Moderator:
Claire Eike, Director, The John M. Flaxman Library, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.
Recorder: Henrietta Zielinski, Bibliographer, The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.
Sponsors:
Art and Design School Library Division; Visual Resources Division.
Speakers:
Oksana Dykyj, Head, Visual Media Resources, Instructional and Information Technology Services, Concordia University, Montreal
Linda Tadic, Manager of the Digital Library, HBO, New York
David Seubert, Curator, Performing Arts Collections, Department of Special Collections, Davidson Library, University of California, Santa Barbara.
Claire Eike opened with a brief explanation of the purpose and goals of the session. Many art librarians are struggling to maintain valuable film and video art works, along with the necessary playback equipment, in traditional library settings without benefit of developed media management practices or institutional recognition of the significance of these collections. The range of content may include short experimental works, early films, documentaries, newsreels, works by independent and/or amateur filmmakers and video artists, avant-garde animation, student works, local history, bizarre instructional relics, ... a variety that often defies categorization but may also contain scarce and important pieces of our cultural history. Panel members were asked to direct their attention primarily to these more specialized items and collections, rather than works very commonly collected and widely available through commercial distribution. However, Eike also recognized that collections initially viewed as utilitarian and replaceable have a habit of turning, over time, into fragile records of historical significance.

It was noted that film, primarily 16mm, is still significant for a number of ARLIS libraries, especially in art and design schools. Although a substantial number of once-exotic titles are now available in reissue on VHS or DVD, some important works still exist only on film. Regardless of the availability of a given title in other media formats, faculty and scholars in filmmaking, art history, visual studies and related fields may demand access to the original 16mm format for the purpose of aesthetic authenticity. Pragmatists may dismiss film as a dying medium, but it is more highly valued than ever by those who recognize it as the signature of a century.

Video holds its own, equally important, position as a medium of expression for artists and documentarians, and will undoubtedly be considered one of the defining art forms of the new century. For librarians, video presents collection management issues which may be unique to magnetic and digital media, or mirror those associated with film.

The session aimed at addressing some of the management, access and preservation issues associated with film and video collections in libraries, and to help librarians learn how others are handling typical problems. The work of the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) and the Consortium of College and University Media Centers (CCUMC) was introduced. Eike also hoped that a dialogue among ARLIS members would result regarding the extent, condition and future of the moving image collections that we manage.

Oksana Dykyj addressed management of disparate media collections in academic institutions. Media librarians have seen an immense escalation of the use of motion media in academic institutions in the last 40 years, along with the development of cross-pollination in teaching methods and materials, and trans-disciplinary use of media collections in teaching and research. It's clear that library media centers are now receiving requests from departments not traditionally known to be heavy media users. For example, English departments did not use to rely on media but now they do. Not only do some courses compare films to the books on which they are based, many students have apparently stopped relying on Coles Notes and prefer to watch the movie rather than read the book or its Coles Notes summary. The emphasis appears to be on the moving image rather than the written word. This could be defined as an academic embracing of cultural studies and a nod to the media and cinema literacy that is now generally assumed as a skill possessed by students entering college or university. Courses on film, music, popular culture and public history are proliferating in virtually every type of academic department. The study of culture is now as important as the areas that comprise it.
Librarians, on the other hand, may have acquired their media literacy during their undergraduate studies, but have had a tendency until very recently to lack in specific education about motion media in general, and preservation in particular. As a result of the increased need for information, preservation courses are now beginning to appear in Graduate Library School curricula. Some institutions are also broadening their programs to include motion media as particular areas of study. Therefore more recent graduates of library schools are better prepared to face the challenges of motion media preservation and collection management, largely due to a change in the perception of the value of moving images. Moving images are no longer liabilities taking up storage space in their vaults, but assets. Our institutions are responding to changes in teaching and we as librarians are mandated to support the direction that education takes. We should also have a hand in advising our administration about the benefits and risks of preservation technology.

Dykyj urged librarians to think in terms of business models, and specifically of the importance of maintaining our assets. The word asset makes people listen. Simply requesting money to maintain old teaching materials will not put us ahead of those requesting funds for items such as web-course development. While new technology is sexy and exciting, the term "preservation" may represent an image of old dusty and rusty film cans to administrators who ought to know better. They need to know that preservation applies equally to all the new courseware and streaming video projects being developed. Preservation applies to current and future projects as well as to storing film cans. It is after all part of collection management.

A preservation plan should include collection assessment. Academic collections may not appear to include rare films and videos, but we should never be too hasty in weeding. Today's obsolete demonstrations of psychotherapy are tomorrow's materials for history. Many of these films could be considered orphans, that is to say, produced by companies who no longer exist and/or can manage their assets. When reformatting, or transferring to a more suitable preservation medium, always keep the original, particularly if it is unique. Advances in technology may allow you to recover more of the image and sound at a later date. You may have experimental 16mm films purchased from artists in the 1960s in your collections. Please don't assume that the material will be available on DVD when you need to replace the battered film with a new copy. Try to keep up with who the artist's distributor is, and where the negatives are stored or archived. That information may be crucial to you at some point.

The most important thing to do is to establish a preservation program. A program is all encompassing, looking to the future as well as maximizing your value from the past. Even if the entire plan will not be implemented in the foreseeable future, some things could be implemented without any cost to your institutions such as sensitizing people to the great losses of a deteriorating collection. Focus on creating a positive approach to preservation and raising awareness of how preservation contributes to the research of the institution. Show how your collections contribute to enrollment and retention of students in certain departments. Show statistics of how much more you are supporting the teaching of courses and the research done by students and faculty.

The introduction and obsolescence of new moving image formats have resulted in numerous preservation issues in terms of not only material but also equipment. It seems likely that before High Definition Television is able to overcome some of the limitations of video, media librarians will be dealing with maintaining collections and the required yet obsolete playback equipment for a number of formats as not all titles will be available as needed in the latest video permutation.

It, must be mentioned that the use of video in the past twenty years has enormously changed film studies teaching and learning processes. Despite detractors who maintain that the only true way to teach film is by showing film, there are more positive benefits to the use of video than negative repercussions. More material can be covered in class, close analysis can be done more easily, and students can acquire a broader sense of film history. Video has therefore enabled the development of a new film culture, much beyond that of the printing press, allowing close examination of unique texts by the masses over earlier limited access by the elite to film incunabula.

While introducing DVD to the collection mix and attempting to replace some older VHS titles with new DVD versions of films, care should be taken not to discard an old VHS before establishing that it is not a unique version of the work, even if the image and sound quality is inferior to the DVD. For example, the VHS may have been transferred with the original monophonic soundtrack and the newly restored version on DVD may contain a synthetically assembled stereophonic soundtrack to please the ear of contemporary listeners. Unlike other moving image subject areas, cinema collections on video tape are more likely to be replaced by new technology before they wear out. The fact that expected life of videotape is on average 15 years becomes irrelevant in terms of major studio re-releases of many titles that with each new technological permutation are clearer, restored in many instances, and more complete as well as less expensive. The issue then is more of weeding than preservation in many cases, but with experimental, art video and independent works it will continue to be a challenge as artists do not have the luxury of big money behind them.

Dykyj next turned her attention to a quick primer on video formats and their proper storage and handling in both library and archival situations. This technical information will be published elsewhere in a longer paper. Generally, goals for storage within libraries should include ways of providing simple, economical, low-tech environments that are clean, cool, relatively dry and very stable.

Dykyj also discussed copyright issues specific to cinema and art video collections. Some titles are only distributed in Europe and not in the U.S. or parts of Canada. Others have been broadcast on television but not released on video. The machinations of non-theatrical distribution and those of home-use-only markets are nothing less than daunting. On the one hand, the extension of copyright and the copyright of (most) European public domain works under the GATT agreement send a clear picture of owner's rights, but on the other hand, academia is clamoring for freedom to
Dealing with cinema collections always involves compromise on a number of levels. For example, it may be impossible to purchase an experimental 16mm film from a distributor representing the filmmaker, because the filmmaker has decided that he or she will not allow any more prints struck of their film. But, perhaps renting an existing print would be a possibility. Developing relationships with distributors is essential. Knowing whom they represent, and what their rights encompass, begins to give some shape to the puzzle. A bit of knowledge goes a long way. Just because a vendor has a web site and is selling titles not available on Amazon.com, does not mean that all the videos are pirated. Some caution needs to be exercised just the same. Vendors are not usually distributors and pirated videotapes are usually very poor quality transfers from battered 16mm dupes, often with parts of the credit information missing. A film like Visconti’s The Leopard is not legally distributed in the United States, yet a pirated tape has been available. Because of these pirated videos, a number of librarians have been placed in situations where they had to argue with faculty about the integrity of their collections and acquisitions policies versus the acquisition of illegal material in the name of freedom of academia. Compromise is possible, for instance, if a PAL videotape of a film is acquired and shown using a multistandard player.

The challenge for librarians with media collections in the next few years will be to maintain existing multi-format collections while planning and delivering anticipated services with a watchful eye to copyright legislation keeping up with digital realities. One way of getting the help that you may need or keeping up to date with developments is to be aware of the work of other professional associations like AMIA and to a lesser extent CCUMC. Dykyj reported briefly about the very recent work of the CCUMC. A task force whose charge is to carry out projects leading to maximum retention and preservation of non-commercial, educational moving image materials was established last Fall. CCUMC will begin an outreach to other media, library and archival organizations in an attempt to plan a mutual storage facility for identified orphan films in the Consortium’s collections. Dykyj closed with a reminder that positive action comes from professional organizations working together so that no one re-invents the wheel.

Linda Tadic further examined the issues of collection management and preservation introduced by Oksana Dykyj, adding specific information regarding collection assessment and intellectual access to motion pictures. Tadic included information about the work of AMIA. She opened by stating that libraries holding films or videos made by artists most likely have valuable and scarce collection items without realizing it. Filmmakers often have money to make only one or two prints of their work. Film distribution cooperatives like Canyon Cinema and Filmmakers Coop, and libraries such as the New York Public Library’s Donnell Media Center, realize that they now hold de facto archives. To a lesser degree, the same may be true of our academic collections. It is important that librarians learn how to care for and preserve these works while still providing access.

Tadic focused her presentation primarily on the medium of film, providing a great deal of depth in the discussion of how to identify and care for the various historic and current film formats. This technical information will be published elsewhere in a longer paper. She also supplied contact information for supplies, services, technical assistance, grant opportunities, and other types of resources.

Film formats included in general academic collections can include regular 8mm, Super-8mm, 9.5mm, 16mm, and 35mm gauges. Acquisitions can include films with magnetic sound stripes; original reversal; magnetic soundtrack (fullcoat); workprint outtakes and trims; and prints with optical tracks. Films can be stored on cores, daylight spools, reels or loosely lying in cans; and stored in metal cans, in plastic and fiber shipping containers, or in originals cardboard boxes. Tadic distributed handouts to help participants identify film gauges and explained how to guess the date of film stock by looking at the print edge codes.

Preservation problems were next on the agenda. Films can be (and frequently are) damaged in use, either by human handling or by mechanical stress. Examples of commonly encountered damage from use include scratching, sprocket and edge damage, and splices. Scratches can be treated by re-printing through a wet gate, or by digitally removing the scratches and re-printing. It is also possible to chemically treat scratches, but some think that the treatment encourages the development of vinegar syndrome by trapping off-gasses. Sprocket and edge damage can be repaired on a sprocket-repair machine. Tape and cement splices are frequently encountered in which old tape has yellowed, leaving a permanent mark on the film. Cement splices may turn brittle and can also stain. Old tape should be removed and the film re-spliced, but cement splices require loss of a frame on either side of the splice. Repairs, of course, should only be carried out by qualified personnel with an understanding of the value of the material being treated.

Motion picture film has been produced since 1895. In proper storage conditions, it can last hundreds of years. However, in normal temperature and humidity environments, film suffers from several kinds of deterioration, depending on the film base. Natural deterioration processes include vinegar syndrome, color fading, ferrotyping, shrinkage, and brittleness.

Vinegar syndrome affects acetate-based films. Moisture in the air interacts with the acetate base, creating acetic acid symptoms. Over time the film will begin to warp and shrink, and the emulsion may pull off its base. The film emits a vinegar odor, hence the name of the “syndrome.” Acetate film originals should not be discarded, even if a film is thought to be extremely warped or deteriorated. Warped or shrunken films can be re-shot on an optical printer. In addition, future advances in film restoration could produce better copies from the original film.
Films affected with vinegar syndrome (VS) should be segregated from "healthy" films since the off-gassing could migrate to the healthy films and accelerate their deterioration. To determine the acidity level of films, use A-D strips available through the Image Permanence Institute or archival supply catalogs. This simple form of testing can be performed in any library. There is some disagreement over whether VS films should be segregated in a separate area with good ventilation so that the gasses dissipate, or whether individual cans should be tightly sealed and placed together in a larger sealed container. However, both arguments agree that the VS films should be stored in a different room than the healthy films, if at all possible.

These comments do not apply to the deterioration of nitrate-based film stock, which is a more complex situation. Because of the safety hazards of nitrate deterioration, there are laws regulating its disposal. Nitrate-based film should never be stored on-site. It is highly flammable, and should only be kept at specially-designed nitrate vaults. There are commercial storage facilities equipped to store nitrate film. Nitrate stock was used only in 35mm film, and was discontinued in 1951.

In general, 16mm film from the 1920s through 1930s will be on diacetate. Deteriorating diacetate stock will smell like mothballs rather than vinegar. From the 1940s to the present, 16mm is on triacetate, with polyester also available since the 1980s. Eight millimeter (8mm) film is on triacetate, with the exception of Fuji Super-8 which is on polyester. Polyester-based film, which will be found in some Super-8 film and more recent 16mm and 35mm prints, is not subject to vinegar syndrome. No natural deterioration process for polyester has yet been identified. Polyester film can be distinguished from acetate film by holding a roll of film up to a light with the film backlit. If the film seems opaque, it is polyester. If translucent, the film is acetate. Also, if you try to tear a piece of polyester, it will not tear; acetate will easily break off.

Another frequently encountered natural deterioration process is color fading. Technicolor and Kodachrome color do not fade as quickly as other Kodak color stocks. Film prints on Eastmancolor from the late 1960s through mid-1970s are notorious for fading quickly to red or magenta. To slow down the color fading process, film should be stored in as cold an environment as possible. Ferrotyping occurs when the silver salts in black and white film ages and becomes shiny. When shrinkage occurs in film, it cannot be passed through a normal printer and will need to be step-printed. AMIA members can borrow a shrinkage gauge through the AMIA office. If film becomes brittle, it cannot be bent or projected. Other common forms of damage include watermarks, mold, and staining from old metal cans. Whenever deterioration is observed or suspected, the material should be transferred to safer stock as soon as possible.

The order of priority for transfers should be: 1) deteriorating film, whether from vinegar syndrome or nitrate deterioration, or film that is warped, shrunk, brittle; 2) moldy film; 3) color-faded film. Ideally, film should be transferred to film, and to the same gauge as the original. However, 8mm and other small gauge formats are frequently "blown-up" to 16mm for convenience. Film will last longer than video formats, so don't transfer to video as a preservation medium. When making preservation masters, generate access copies as well. The originals and the new preservation masters should never be used by researchers. Only access copies should be used by staff and researchers.

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Film's natural deterioration processes cannot be stopped, but they can be slowed significantly by following good collection management practices and providing proper storage. Tadic outlined optimum storage conditions for macro (vault) and micro (can) environments, and detailed basic conservation principles.

Next on the agenda was a discussion of the assessment or appraisal of collections as an imperative management tool. If you collect films or videos made by artists, you may find yourself dealing with outtakes, versions, workprints, negatives, and any number of physical formats, accompanied by boxes of ephemeral stuff related to the making of a motion picture. A selection policy must consider your institution’s overall mission as well as storage constraints, access issues, and preservation costs. Do you take everything, or set limits? If you accept a filmmaker’s entire output, they will want access to their own negatives and prints later. Rights must be clearly delineated. Libraries can be taken advantage of when filmmakers want free storage. A precise legal donation or deposit agreement is necessary. If archival copies are to be made the agreement should specify who will pay. Some of this information should also be noted in the cataloging record. Motion picture cataloging practices and standards have been addressed by a number of agencies, which information Tadic provided in handouts and orally.

After reviewing further sources of information including audiovisual preservation organizations, preservation funding sources, and archival training programs in the U.S. and abroad, Tadic closed with an invitation to attend the next AMIA annual conference which will be held in November, 2001, in Portland Oregon. The conference will include sessions on smaller gauge films, such as those typically held in library collections.

David Seubert examined the response to film and video, along with other audiovisual formats, in the context of a non-circulating academic library Special Collections department. The Performing Arts Collections in the Donald C. Davidson Library of the University of California, Santa
Barbara, includes recordings, manuscripts, photographs, and artwork that documents and supports research on local, national, and international performing arts. While not a true film or video archive, the repository is responsible for diverse media holdings, playback facilities, and for preservation copying of audio, video, and film. The Special Collections department has listening and viewing facilities as well as a state of the art laboratory for playback and preservation copying. A full time archivist oversees management of the collections.

In his responsibility for the Performing Arts Collections, Seubert has had to face all of the questions of access, preservation and storage raised by the previous speakers: how to provide access to material when we no longer have working playback equipment; how to apply cataloging standards and develop procedural systems; how to create a curatorial reference model? In this case study, the broad information provided by Dykyj and Tadic was applied to a specific set of problems.

Solutions to the challenges Seubert faced began with the assessment, standardization and intellectual consolidation of the collections. Each collection item had to be identified, inventoried, and assigned a unique number. Individual audiovisual formats then were separated for storage. Copies were separated from masters, and the need for further preservation copying was evaluated. Films were tested for acidity, with appropriate steps taken if vinegar syndrome was found. It was determined that originals and preservation masters would be stored off site, with access copies retained in Special Collections for active use.

Data sheets were developed to track the details of each motion picture along with the history of its preservation copying. An example of the data template, which provides important pre-cataloging data as well, was distributed. Examples of cataloging records from MELVYL were shared and the integration of online cataloging into management databases was discussed. In a step-by-step fashion, Seubert guided the audience through the decision-making processes he employed and the information resources he drew from in developing the moving image collections in his charge. He presented his guidelines for assessing the materials in those collections, noting that the uniqueness of film is harder to determine than that of video. In either case, the appraisal of motion picture collections can be difficult and time-consuming.

There was also discussion of the recording and playback equipment and the supplies needed for a preservation laboratory. The brands, models, and vendors used at the Performing Arts Collection, along with costs, were outlined. Seubert also shared his thoughts on the systemization of the laboratory workflow, and some factors to consider when deciding whether to out-source work or perform it in-house. He concluded his talk by pointing out that the greatest obstacle faced in the preservation process is time.

There followed a question-and-answer session with the audience.