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To document or not to document, that is the question? Use of the participatory archive model for a residential Artist's Centre

This paper describes an archival approach to document the creativity that takes place at a residential centre for practicing artists. The approach is centered on a participatory archive that is user driven. Moving forward, this project will examine the attitudes of artists to the issues of documentation and archival production in a technological age. The project utilizes an electronic software package whose working title is ArtLog.



Background

The impetus for this research came from a library consultancy carried out in the Tyrone Guthrie Centre in 2005. The brief was to produce an archival strategy that would preserve the history of the Centre. While a remedial strategy could be put in place to record names and dates, the key activity of the Centre is the artistic creativity that takes place there. The objective was to find some way of recording this process.

The Centre is the premier artist's residential facility in Ireland and is located in the north of Ireland. The House accommodates eleven residents and there are five self-catering cottages for artistic couple (both of whom must be practitioners). To be accepted as a resident an artist must have demonstrated some proven success in his/her field.

Facilities include a grand piano, seven studios for visual artists, a performance space, an acoustic recording studio and facilities for processing black and white photography. The ethos of the Centre is focussed on facilitating creative production and housekeeping staff take care of all domestic issues.

Over the years, the majority of residents have been writers, artists or musicians. All come with work projected, initiated or nearing completion. While the number of residents at any one time is small, the cumulative number is quite large. In the 30 years of its existence over six thousand artists have stayed in the Centre.

Archives

Archival studies are firmly rooted in 19th century Positivism which considered it possible to record and document the grand metanarratives such as politics, economics, governance, religion, society itself (Cook, 2000). Traditionally, museums and archives have chosen to preserve objects and texts as having enduring cultural value. Other forms of intangible cultural heritage such as oral traditions, narrative, dance, and folklore did not feature in the collection policies of such organisations (Haskins, 2007). The distinguishing feature of the archive is the fiduciary protection it offers to both the record and the user. The archivist is the voice of authority, controlling both the record and the means of access, and this imparts legitimacy and authenticity - all deemed important for historical research.

This archival model regards the "past" as a distinct space that is used in the "present" for a specific purpose (Roca, 2009). Moreover, the archivist in this context actively shapes social memory by choosing what to remember and what to forget, operating to clearly articulated collection development policies.

The archive then becomes a physical space, where the actual records are stored and described so as to be retrievable and are available to those who are generally well trained in how to use them (Cook, 2000).

Impact of Technology on the Archive

The growth and adoption of new technology has put traditional archival approaches under profound strain. The proliferation of records has rendered the key task of collecting a representative selection of records impossible. Collection policies falter under the onslaught of massive amounts of information coming from a variety of sources whose authenticity and legitimacy are often confused and unclear.

This challenge for archivists was flagged as early as 1992 by Charles Delar at the International Congress on Archives in Montreal:

“We must get our archival heads out of the sands designed for medieval charters and papal decrees. We must realize that clinging to old practices in light of the value of new records is not a noble defense of principle or archival tradition but an act of willful neglect” (Bantin, 1999)

However, it must be said that the response of most archivists to this challenge was merely to develop an online component. The immediate benefit of doing so is to increased access to collections (Hughes, 2004). Other benefits include fast full text searching, hyperlinking to other documents and the correlation of related material all of which greatly facilitates researchers to search, compare, and annotate much faster than ever before (Ketalaar, 2007). Digital records require a “records continuum approach” which means managing the record from its inception. As a result it can be maintained by the home institution for a longer period before the decision is made about its archive potential (Bantin, 1999).

The potential benefits of digitization and the use of new technologies have led some archivists to fundamentally question traditional roles and responsibilities and to suggest a radical reconfiguring of the archive which has been described as “Archives 2.0”, paralleling the development of the web from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0. This development has been heavily influenced by the growth and adoption of new methods of communication on the web.

User as Content Creator

Postmodernism was the pervasive spirit of the 20th century leading to a general critique and abandonment of the certainties of Modernism and has had a profound effect on society. So while Post modernism does not define popular culture it has given us pluralism, globalization and consumerism. Rejecting the grand metanarratives, emphasis is now placed on the personal, situational and temporary. There is a focus on the individual and a new awareness of personal identity. By appropriating images and signifiers to different contexts, the process of applying meaning is deconstructed leading to the ultimate realization there is no meaning except the ones individuals creates for themselves. If there are any “truths” they can only be personal and never collective (Heartney, 2001).

The result is a self consciousness, a reflexivity that emphasizes the individual’s interpretations and how they arrive at these interpretations.

Technology and in particular the power of the internet to connect people has encouraged the spread of these concepts and has radically changed the way people communicate with each other. Allen suggests that while Postmodernism linked people by designating different cultural phenomena, now a catch all technology links everyone all the time (Allen, 2010).

Global autobiography project of the Internet

The growth of Web 2.0 technologies such as podcasting, blogs, social networking, YouTube all concentrate on the user as content creator (Gordon, 2007). The documentary record is available to all to use and share and history has become a cultural and social process deeply involving the life of the individual. Technology gives rise to a new form of historicity where the past is less past and more integrated in our daily lives (Tredinnick, 2008). For the first time in history, it is normal for people in large parts of the world to be globally connected. This coupled with a growth in leisure time results in a cognitive surplus which people use to combine (Carr, 2010). One consequence of this can be the formation of Communities of Practice (COP), where people combine to use their collective knowledge to find new ways of doing things. The community stays together even as their collective knowledge changes (Shirky, 2010).

New forms of self expression

In the developed world, a marked characteristic of the 21st. century is the emergence of digital creativity and a consumer appetite for digital content. These consumers reflect the shift from consumption of information to personal creation, the customization of data and the co-production of digital content. They can share and disseminate this information over the web by new forms of computer aided communication such as blogs, online diaries, social networking and Twitter.

Blogging as a form of computer mediated communication appeared in the 1990s. Many are centered on a common interest, theme or subject. They tend not to be permanent but spring up to deal with a current interest and cease once that interest has passed. The software is intuitive and user friendly (Clyde, 2004). Many blogs are of the journal type and are inextricably linked to the diary genre.

Diaries are highly personal accounts kept by the individual as a form of personal record keeping and as a tool for self exploration and self knowledge. The keeping of a diary is a deliberate act, the intention is to record although not necessarily for posterity (McNeill, 2003). The diary is a constructed record, a permanent image of the author that the author wishes to leave on the reader though they may not be consciously aware of this (Cox, 2008). Journal keeping is facilitated by the internet with a myriad of free software systems available.

Laura McNeill has described this engagement with online diaries as the “global autobiography project of the internet”, the ever increasing number of “ordinary people” writing about “ordinary lives” on the web. Online diarists are aware of the reader from the beginning and the potential of an online diary to create a virtual community around it similar to a blog (McNeill, 2003).

The diary is an act of communication “the dear diary syndrome” and someone is always being addressed. Moreover, diaries have always been subject to revision, change and editing and this is more easily done using software (Van Dijck, 2004).

Diary keeping can also contribute to a sense of community. Traditionally print diaries have been utilized for this purpose. The diaries of the Maryknoll Sisters are an example of this kind of record keeping both on a personal and institutional level. The Maryknoll Sisters were a religious community who rigorously kept diaries from 1912-1967. The diaries were formally archived as the memory of the community which was monitored by the Mother House as a form of control and reporting. The diaries served to connect the sisters over time and space fostering a sense of a common identity. All the entries are highly contextualized and can be read as self contained units (Yakel, 2004).

Online diaries are proliferating on the web. A simple search on Google for “online diaries” produced 219,000.000 results. The lack of editorial control can result in a reduction of quality but does mean that the act of publishing has become both liberating and democratic. This has given the people “formerly known as the audience” the capacity to document their own lives, creating their own social and historical identity with absolute freedom of expression (Kluth, 2006).

Impact of Social Networking

Social Networking sites have been around since 2000. The market leader is currently Facebook having over 350 million users and 55 million updates per day. Ultimately Facebook is about sociability. A user creates a profile, establishes a list of friends and uses those friends to make more friends. This kind of profile generation is an “explicit act of writing oneself into being in a digital environment (Boyd, 2011) This creation is done in a public sphere because of the way Facebook connects people en masse and yet allows for interaction and informal communication (Papacharissi, 2011).

This democratization of technology is driving the socialization of the web and fundamentally changing the way that people interact with each other (Giles, 2010). This change is most evident in the rise of Twitter which can best be described as a form of micro blogging where users detail their current status in short posts distributed through mobile phone, emails, and the web.

Archives 2.0

These changes in communication models have brought about a paradigm shift in archival studies. An observer and a critic of the archival process has defined the change in emphasis as reflecting what is changing in society generally.

“Process rather than product, becoming rather than being, dynamic rather than static, context rather than text, reflecting time and place rather than universal absolutes...these have become the modern watchwords for analyzing and understanding science, society, organizational and business activity among others. They should likewise become the watchword for archives in the new century and thus the foundation for a new concept paradigm for the profession”(Cook, 2000).

Archives 1.0 is concerned with documentary trace evidence of past/historical transactions. Archive 2.0 sees beyond the record and looks at the context of its creation and concentrates on appraisal. This approach is predicated on the basis that no record is free of bias, that all records are the results of constructed actions and that a multiplicity of voices will exist behind each one. This has given rise to much professional discourse about the nature of the archive and its processes and procedures.

Flinn suggests that the debate is polarized into two points of view: the first favours the traditional authoritative voice of the archivist and the second which sees the archivist as collaborator and co-producer with the user. This can be described as the tension between the single voice and the many:

“As a number of writers have pointed out, what is at stake with Archive 2.0 and History 2.0 is not just the potential of new collaborative technologies but a cultural shift which embraces democratization, a de-centring of authority and perspective, a refiguring of authority and perspective, a refiguring of thinking and practice and a thorough ongoing participatory ethos (Flinn, 2010).

Value is established by the construction of a social theory based on the contextual narrativity around the creation rather than subjective content of the record. (Cook, 2001, Huvila, 2008). The debate in the profession was stimulated by the publication of Derrida’s “Archive Fever” in 1996 which took a postmodernist view of the archive and discussed its role and significance in modern society. This determined the archive as a source of power, a shaper of language and the means of critiquing society in innovative ways. For Derrida the audience had a large role in ascribing meaning and providing context. It is context that gives the archive credibility (Cook, 2001).

Archive 2.0 is less of a physical space and more of a performance platform inviting participation from users. The archivist, if present at all, is a mediator who is conscious of the need to be inclusive rather than exclusive. Users establish common ground not so much in their shared personal memories but in the shared processes of creating and including them in the archive. However the public can be fickle and may lack the required commitment to the archive (Labrador and Chilton, 2009). For Flinn, a truly democratized and participatory archive will have an established community around it and will recognize that all who come into contact with the archive can and do affect understanding and knowledge of the archive. Huvila has summarized this approach as decentralised curation, radical user orientation and contextualization.

The archive develops through continuous use and by adopting an iterative approach builds on feedback received. The rise in the number of community archives reflects the growing interest in personal identity and sense of place. Moreover, working together to create the archive can enhance community spirit. In 2007 there were approximately 3000 community archives in the United Kingdom (Flinn, 2007).

Tyrone Guthrie Centre Archive

The Centre facilitates a small number of creative people engaged in a creative process to produce artworks in an environment dedicated to their creativity. The challenge is to establish an archive that would document this creativity and organise the information so it is capable of retrieval.

Given the changes in communication patterns, the rise of social computing, the global autobiography project of the web and the fact that anyone born after 1980 cannot envisage a world without the internet, it was reasonable to make the archive electronic. While being aware that participatory archives are more successful if user driven, there was a perceived need for a physical model that could act as a demonstrator. Therefore it was decided to begin with a smaller project, utilizing an action research approach where a basic functionality is established and development is based on feedback from the users. Two approaches were then considered, one being the Facebook approach and the second, the online diary.

Social networking being user centric, collaborative and open is a useful model for participatory archives. Facebook is a model that could be used for an archive for artists as it incorporates the communion and community aspects that would be needed to build both the archive and a community around the archive. Artists would share their collective knowledge and even though the knowledge would change the community would stay in place. The decision was taken to proceed incrementally. Putting the archive online and making it public was felt to be too dramatic a step and might inhibit participation. Moreover there was sensitivity to the issues around privacy and intrusion into the work space. However, a feature that can be adopted from Facebook is the generation of profiles. A profile could be generated for each resident who would be able to update this as in Facebook. Over time, this would create a database of living Irish artists working in a variety of media. The decision was also taken that initially the archive would be stand alone but would be built with a view to going online at a later stage.

The second model to be considered was the online diary. The diary genre has a long history and can be a means of documenting one's life and personal development. However, it is not for everybody. The creation of art is a very personal activity, different for each person and some artists are more articulate about the process than others. The "global autobiography project of the internet" has demonstrated the rise of the consumer as content creator who are very accustomed to revealing themselves on the web or at the very least a version of themselves. Diaries have always been regarded as intensely private documents which are read in the hope of gaining insight into the mind of the author generally after their death (McNeill, 2003). Therefore the diary genre would seem more appropriate for the Centre.

In ArtLog, artists will create their own content, writing/blogging about the process of producing art. The difference between the diary at the Centre and a blog would be that the Centre's diary would be permanent with an infrastructure for storage and retrieval. This is a genre that could very well go online as in the case of the Pepys diary which has been turned into a blog. An argument against the online diary is that authors will be self consciously aware of the audience. However, the identity that an artist presents to the world is revealing in as much as it is constructed, a statement that they wish to leave as a permanent record. Moreover, artists will be conscious of addressing their peers. Persuading artists to blog about their work in real time would be a means of creating records in an area that is not documented i.e. the process that is involved in art production.

Some artists are interviewed about their work after they produce it and such interviews tend to be formulaic and provide little insight into the way the work was produced (Burton and Pasquariello, 2005).

Moreover the further one is removed in time from an event, the more one relies on memory (frequently faulty) or speculation, all of which can be misleading. If an artist is in the habit of blogging it is possible that they will be more honest about their approach as the creative process will be in flux with no guaranteed outcomes.

Artists will be familiar with the concept of blogging as many use blogs to publicize their work. By way of illustration, a Google search using the terms “artist’s blogs” brought back 271,000,000 results. The success of online archives like National Life Stories, Moving Here, Experiencing War, Storycorps indicate a great appetite among “ordinary people” to record their own stories. History has become more localized, focusing on the individual with an emphasis on the narratives. The narrative record is what is important to people. Through their stories they reveal how they interact with society, culture and history and how they interpret and rationalize that interaction. Collecting the stories preserves the social and cultural memory.

An artist’s online diary would help to document the personal stories, providing context that would assist in establishing provenance, interpretation and ultimately understanding both of the artist and the work. Postmodernism asserts the author is dead but in this author’s opinion there is an inevitable link between creator and product that cannot be denied. At the very least, re-establishing that link will enrich the documentary record, by adding a contextual layer around the construction of the work, which is produced in real time.

A feature of blogs is that they break down the barriers between authors, readers and text. The author is aware of the reader from the beginning, the reader can influence the author by commenting on what has been written and as a result, the text can become a collaborative product by both. It would be interesting to see how this would work with a diary attached to the Centre where the artist would be a “prosumer” as in the creator and the consumer of the content.

Residents have commented on the pleasure they find in the companionship of other artists and how such collaboration can enhance their creativity. A diary might reflect this, the comments capturing some of the collaborations. The diary could help to create a sense of community, the storytelling activity promoting a community of practice where people share their collective knowledge and this in turn would help reduce the isolation of the individual artist.

However, a diary/blog is text based which may not suit visual artists so the archive needs to be able to ingest material in non-text formats such as audio files and images. An information retrieval infrastructure would also be incorporated ensuring the long term preservation of the information and ease of retrieval. As a model the online diary/blog would establish the basic functionality quickly and easily, would be familiar to most users and would introduce the concept of an archive to the Centre. The familiarity of the format would also promote acceptance among artists and encourage participation. The challenge for ArtLog is to query the possibility for online diary/blog to provide the nucleus of an archive and indeed, what archival approach would be the most appropriate?

Archival Approach

The first decision arrived at was not to have a selection policy. Is there a need for a selection policy when it is apparent that the archivist cannot be totally neutral and that the mere act of selecting is also an act of exclusion? In any event, the use of technology makes it easier to be inclusive rather than exclusive, to collect rather than select. Also, what is the benefit in establishing limits on what can be collected when collecting everything increases the possibility of creating some highly valuable records? This would be particularly true in relation to the Tyrone Guthrie Centre. Many of the artists are young so who can say what their future successes or failures will be? An artist producing mediocre work may be more articulate about the process than an artist producing high quality work. Moreover, with digital data the possibility exists to discern patterns that would be impossible in the analogue world.

“You may not have thought of your digital file as part of a personal archive or as of having long term historical interest yet what seems ordinary and mundane to you may well interest future researchers. In an archival repository your archive will reveal a personal perspective on your life, work and environment for posterity: it will combine with the mementos of your contemporaries, forbears and successors to provide personal and historical insights into past times.”

(Paradigm Project, 2007)

The above extract is taken from the Paradigm Project Workbook on Digital Private Papers and illustrates the point that it is virtually impossible to predict what records will be valuable in the future given the power of technology to cross search and hyperlink databases. Allowing all residents of the Centre access to the archive will create a data pool that will be of interest to those engaging in cultural and social research. If this data can be continually collected, the value of the archive will increase exponentially over a period of time.

The paradigm shift that has taken place in archival studies means archiving is seen as the consciously constructed and actively mediated archivalisation of social memory. The records are now of and for the people and the value of the archive lies in the sense of locality, identity and history it gives the user. The challenge in the Centre will be to create an archival sensitivity among artists and those who run the Centre, so that they become aware of the need for self reflection and documentation. To do this requires that the archive is physically present so artists can start to engage with the concepts of record keeping and personal archiving.

If records are being preserved for the future, it is important that the future can be assured that those records are genuine so that the fiduciary protection offered in more traditional archives is provided. It will therefore be necessary to authenticate the artists who contribute to the archive. Access to the archive for contributors will be password protected, the access key being given to the artist on registration. As a result provenance will be established in this direct, validated link between the record and the creator. Given that the records of the archive will be primary ones created by the artists themselves, intervention in the Archive will be kept to the minimum and instead efforts will be concentrated on preservation and accessibility. It would be important that artists are free to input whatever they like without fear of censorship.

Archives 2.0 favours the “record continuum approach”. The records are managed by the home institution and are appraised for archival value at a later stage. Using this approach means the records can be managed by the Centre with a view to formulating an exit strategy to a national archive at a later stage.

Participative Community Archives are always experimental and user participation is never guaranteed. Building a participative archive in the Tyrone Guthrie Centre is an excursion into the unknown with more questions being raised at the outset than answers provided. However, the process of building the archive should answer questions such as - how aware are artists of their process, can they articulate it, are they prepared to share their thinking and experience, will they participate and what factors will influence or hinder such participation?

ArtLog System

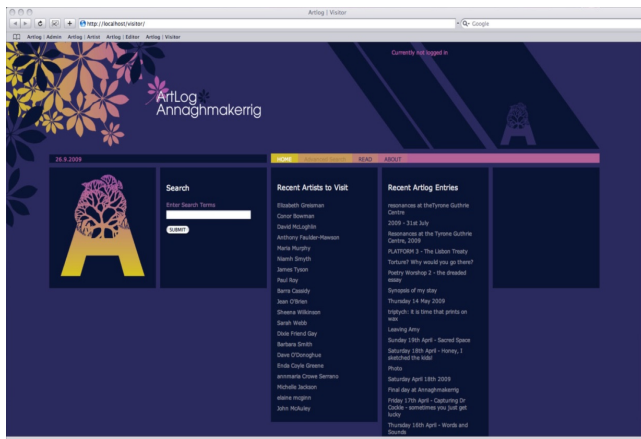


Fig 1 Visitors screen

The Visitors Screen allows residents and visitors to the Centre to read previous entries but an artist must login in before they can input information. The screens are attractive and the colours have been kept consistent throughout the various parts of the system.

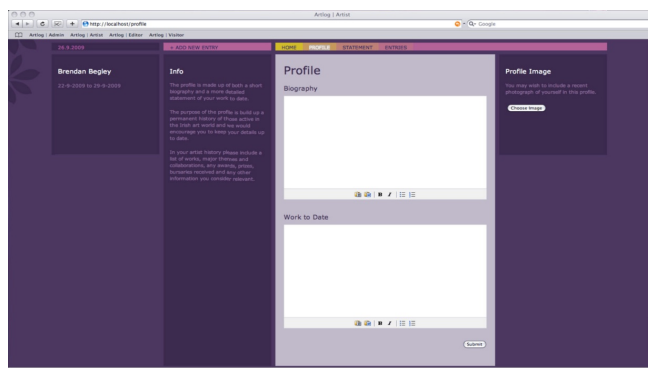


Fig. 2 Profile Screen

This is a blog-like screen that allows the artist to input their biographical details and work to date.

The decision was taken not to pre-format the fields so as to leave the artist totally free to decide what to input. By creating a separate screen for the Profiles it was possible to make completion of the Profiles a condition of residency. During their stay the artist can amend their Profile but once they leave the Profile is date stamped and locked. On subsequent visits the Profile is presented for updating but will, in effect, be a new Profile. This should make it possible to compare and contrast profiles of the same artist at different stages and possibly track their development.

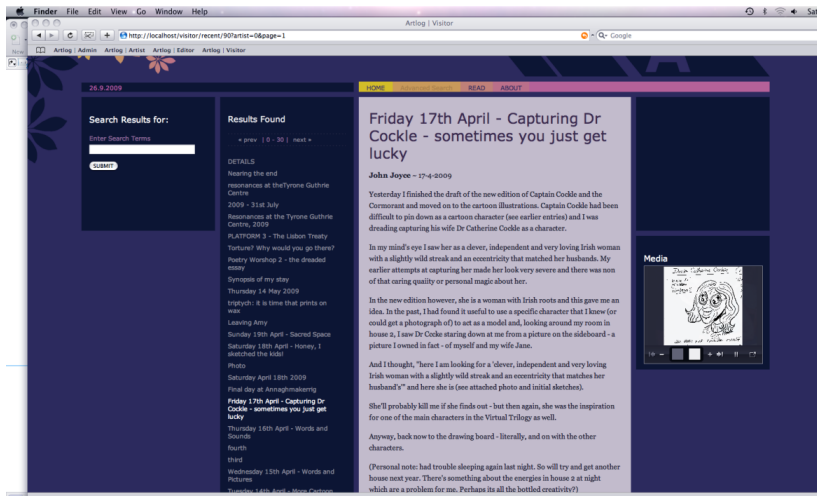


Fig.3 Entries

Entries are concentrated not on the artist but on the work they are producing. This is because the majority of artists are resident for a short time (average two weeks) and come with a specific project in mind and a strategy to achieve it. The artist reflects on the work in hand while doing it and in this way creates both a context and a narrative around it. They are free to make as many or as few entries as they wish. The Entries are bookended by an Entry and Exit statement. In the Entry statement the artist talks about the work in hand and what they hope to achieve during their stay. The Exit statement describes how their visit went, what was achieved with the work and what comes next.

As with a blog, there is a facility for others to comment on the Entries. The entries are open to the residents of the Centre but if an artist chooses, they can delay making their entries visible for up to six months.

There is a comprehensive Editor module which allows the Entries to be abstracted and key words to be applied. This is to facilitate retrieval by researchers. While this level of cataloguing is labour extensive it does contribute to precise retrieval. The system uses the Mets metadata schema and an Application Profile has been designed in order to promote consistency and enhance retrieval.

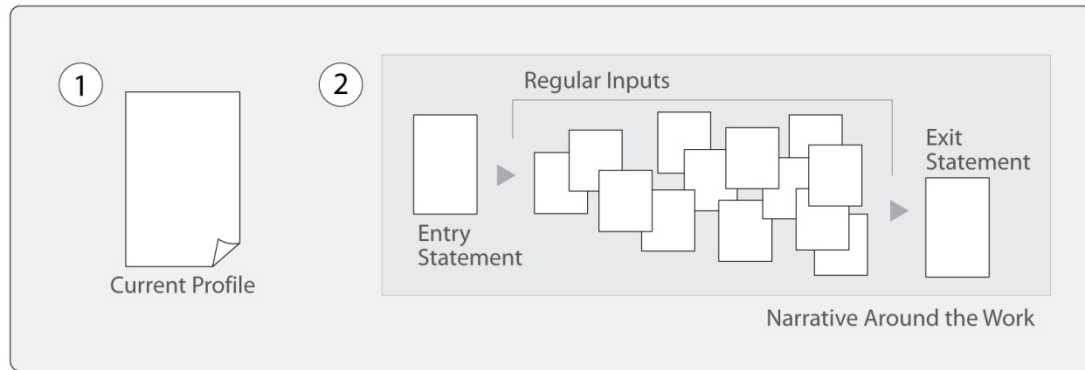


Fig. 4 Basic structure

The system went live in July, 2008 and feedback to date has been positive. Operationally some changes have had to be made. The system requires that the administrator sets up the artist in advance of their visit so that when they come they have immediate access. However, staff shortages have militated against this happening and frequently an artist finds they are unable to logon to the system which results in frustration and negativity. The system is on a standalone PC in the Library which requires the artist to leave their place of work and go to the library to make their entries. While physically this is not a particularly long walk, psychologically it is enormous. It had been envisaged that there would be an input device in each room but this is not feasible in the current economic climate. Again the system being stand alone does not assist the design team as they must travel from some considerable distance to deal with support issues. A development that might help to resolve these operational difficulties is that the Centre now has a broadband connection to the Internet.

A solution that integrates an online application process and ArtLog is currently being tested. On applying to the Centre artists would fill out their profile and make an entry statement. Once their application is accepted, an online account is created and the profile and entry statement are downloaded to ArtLog. This means that artists will come into contact with the system at a very early stage. Moreover, there are no access problems for the artist when they arrive at the Centre as they use the account they created. This also means that via a wireless connection artists could access ArtLog from their rooms and over the web. However, it remains to be seen if this approach is viable.

To date, the reaction of residents has been positive. Participation apart from completing the Profile is voluntary. There has been little or no hostility to the project. This is possibly because residents regard the Centre as their special place and are well disposed to activities there. All of the artists who have used the system have found it to be intuitive and simple to use. The major difficulties have arisen around registration and passwords. Some simple things were overlooked in the design such as a spellchecker and a facility to cut and paste. This is required particularly for the Profiles as artists wish to copy and paste from CVs and Resumes. However, these are minor deficiencies that can be remedied in future iterations.

Content

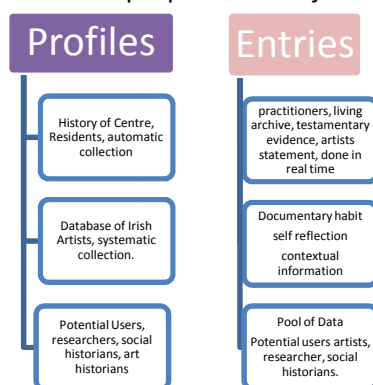
An archive that requires original material to flow inwards rather than outwards can have difficulty attracting content. Research in this area has been concentrated on Academic Repositories where despite the personal benefits accruing to the depositors, content is still difficult to attract. The same would seem to apply to ArtLog. Artists appear enthusiastic about the project but this does not translate into active participation.

Actively contributing to an archive requires the depositing of content to become an integral part of the individual's work flow. However, this will involve changes in patterns of behaviour and work practices.

200 former residents were surveyed during the summer of 2009. There were 67 responses (31%) and of these 87% were artists who had been practising for over 6 years. 65% of respondents indicated they were interested in creating a permanent record of how their work is produced and 87% felt reflecting on their practice made them grow as an artist. However, only 55% found it easy to talk about their work while 20% could not. 49.1% of respondents agreed that providing evidence of their artistic process would help others to understand their work, 36% thought it might and only 12.7% said it would not. 45% always used a computer, 43.6% sometimes while 10.9% never did. While those that used computers organised their material into folders and dated them, 61.5% only backed up when they thought of it.

Conclusion

While the take up of ArtLog has been relatively low (approximately thirty artists) the quality of the entries has been high. Already, some unique moments in the creation of a work have been recorded for posterity. As with any archive, the project requires an onsite advocate, a person permanently in the Centre who could inform residents about the project. This will be the single most influential factor in attracting content but will require additional funding. Experience to date has demonstrated that artists require to be informed about the purpose and objectives of the project before they will participate.



Collecting this kind of data has potential benefits as indicated in the diagram above and the stories of artists have to be equally as important as the stories of scientists, immigrants and "ordinary people". It must also be remembered that the majority of artists labour all their lives perfecting their "art" without any critical acclaim and disappear without trace into the mists of history. ArtLog will be a way for them to preserve the "feeling" of what it is like to produce a work of art and that personal story will add to the other voices that make up the history of our cultural heritage.

The very presence of the project in the Centre has stimulated discussion among the residents about process, context, documentation and preservation. It is logical to assume that artists are as ready as everybody else in the world to tell their stories. However, it may be that they are not. Perhaps artists do not want to communicate how their work happens? Perhaps artists require validation before they are prepared to speak about process?

It is hard to reconcile the ease with which artists are interviewed about their work after they have produced it with the apparent reluctance to articulate the process while experiencing it. Or, is it just a question of finding the appropriate mechanism? It is to be hoped that as this project develops answers will be provided to these questions.

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