

Unwritten Histories & the Digital Divide: On Critics, Archives and Networks

Excerpts from an IM roundtable with Jeanette Ingberman (Exit Art), Richard Rinehart (Berkeley Art Museum / Pacific Film Archive, CIAO, Archiving the Avant-Garde), Beth Rosenberg (Eyebeam Atelier), and Martha Wilson (Franklin Furnace Archives), July 2005. Moderated by Mariam Ghani (media artist/teacher)

Mariam Ghani: To start things off: could each of you maybe speak briefly about how you became involved with or interested in digital archives?

Richard Rinehart: I'm a digital artist (coyoteyip.com) and involved in a multi-organization project to preserve digital/media art (bampfa.berkeley.edu/ciao/avant_garde.html). Also the Director of Digital Media for the UC Berkeley Art Museum.

Martha Wilson: Franklin Furnace is applying to the NEH to provide online access to the first ten years of its glorious history.

Jeanette Ingberman: It's the most practical and democratic.

Beth Rosenberg: Eyebeam is a center for art and technology in New York and we're just beginning to deal with archive issues-- we've done online forums since 1996 as well as R&D projects online like fundrace and reblog.

MG: Jeanette, could you talk a bit more about what you mean by practical and democratic?

J: You have immediate results with the touch of the button and return it to millions of people.

R: Return what to millions, Jeanette?

J: The information you make available on the web.

R: Ah. So, Mariam, what were some of your questions?

MG: Well, having spoken to several of you about digital archive initiatives over the past few years, I thought it would be interesting to bring you together to talk about critical praise and unwritten histories, which is a phrase that comes up a lot in connection with these projects. So to start: Why is the idea of unwritten histories so central to archive digitization projects?

J: Because to archive it in a digital way is a new way to see spoken history.

M: Jeanette coined the phrase, "unwritten history," and Franklin Furnace uses it in relation to our efforts to place our event records online. If institutional archives are made accessible online, many different versions of history can be researched.

MG: So the medium re-writes the history?

R: I'd put the answer to your question in the reverse of the question: digital archives are central to unwritten histories because archives=social memory. If we don't archive it, we forget it.

B: By unwritten histories, I'm thinking particularly of how women artists have been neglected from art history.

J: We are all involved in the unwritten history of American art, and there is a whole new generation out there who is hungry for this information, both about new artists and about the artists we have all been showing for the last 20 years. And digitization has given us a natural path to establishing these histories.

R: And access=research. If it's not archived and made accessible, it's not used for research and teaching and thus it's forgotten and not "discoursed."

J: The major museums, as we know, do not have this information. If we don't get it online, it could be lost and only those histories [that are already written] will remain.

M: Online access will allow scholars to write about the ephemeral practice we are digitizing and that in turn puts us in art history books.

MG: I like Martha's point that the rise of the digital archive, or rather archives, can also create new ways of reading history as histories - multiple intersecting narratives instead of linear progression.

B: Who writes history?

J: I find it very interesting, and I wonder how others experience this, that many young people are coming to us and wanting to know these histories.

M: Today we were trying to figure out what academic departments would be interested in Franklin Furnace's archives and found 10!

B: Of course they are...I'm not surprised. FF has a rich history for students to explore. The question is what kind of information will the students pick to archive?

R: I teach at UC Berkeley, etc. and also find a great eagerness for this stuff, but it's currently so inaccessible; it's hard to teach it.

MG: That brings up another question - should changing the critical or scholarly evaluation of an artist or movement be the goal of archive projects? And is it a possible goal?

B: I think it just adds more to our understanding of the artist and his/her work.

J: The goal is to get the information out there - we can't control what happens to it.

R: Any project that brings a lesser-known artist to light will change their notoriety, and since Academia is all about specialization and finding new material, eventually EVERY artist that is accessible will get attention.

M: We save everything because who knows when the work of Teh-Ching Hsieh will have value to mainstream art history? But I should add that Karen Finley's files get the most traffic.

R: Plus, there's a big difference between promoting general public knowledge and critical/academic attention.

M: Rick, isn't Google changing the game by providing access to everything American, freaking out the English scholarly community?

MG: How do you think access versus critical praise functions in determining future historical validation?

B: This is a question that is so interesting to me because with the influence of blogs and so forth, everybody is a critic.

MG: But can access ever trump market value?

R: To speak to Beth's good point; everyone IS a critic now. Journalism has been changed as a field because of this, but not the slow-moving art world yet. Not really.

J: You know all of us are in this because we chose to work this way and not to

work within the market. We don't ignore it, but it is not how we define ourselves or look for validation.

B: Maybe the point [of online access], as Jeanette said earlier, is to promote more democracy/less criticality.

MG: Going back to your earlier point, Rick, who are the intended users of these archives once they're online?

B: Future PhD projects?

R: Intended users. Not an often-asked question. Usually it's "build it; they will come" or "general access is good." Which I agree with. But a more aggressive strategy is necessary to penetrate the walls of the Academic and the Critical apparatus.

J: We never know who will be interested – that's the beauty of the Internet. Even now we get daily requests for information from such a broad variety of sources.

MG: Right, but if you want to change what is taught in art history classes - or at least what is available to be taught -- don't you need to think about the needs of scholars and learners at the design stage?

M: Mariam, what are some of those needs?

MG: From what is brought to our committee at CAA [Diversity Practices], it seems like there is still a real lack of resources to teach outside the art historical canon -- especially in less well funded or more isolated universities & colleges.

R: I agree with Mariam. Everyone asks our Berkeley profs why they don't teach media or digital art and they say it's because classrooms are not equipped to even show them (and this is Berkeley, relatively tech-rich); but the other reason is, of course, access. There's still too little access to information about lesser-known histories.

B: Even the School of Visual Arts has no online repository for slides...and requesting multi-media is difficult!

R: I think what helps the effort to reach multiple audiences is to place our digital archive content in multiple venues, so that it's not just accessible on our own websites but also through copies deposited in all the major scholarly/university library resources, as well as general public resources, which are online. Design is taken care of by the different venues; our expertise is in the content under the design.

M: Today I met with the Director of Collection Development at ArtStor who said they are continually being asked to provide contemporary content.

MG: Exactly. Many people in academia are unaware of the resources that are in your archives and archives like yours.

J: Could it also be generational? Because this information is available.

R: Jeanette, I don't think the information is available yet. Not in the places scholars look. We can't expect them to go hunting on all of our various websites; we need to consolidate content.

J: But I feel it is also up to us to help promote each other and what we do. And build bridges to the large museums and universities that need our content.

R: Jeanette, I totally agree. It's only together that we can make a difference (does that sound like a lame political soundbite or what?) but we need to be more

strategic than just good-mouthing each other, or providing links to each others' websites. We need to be systematic and structured about it.

MG: Maybe someone can speak here about the Art Spaces Archive Project (www.asap.org)? David [Platzker, the project director] couldn't be here because he's offline this week...

M: Regarding ASAP, this is an effort to locate living and defunct art spaces, and establish a centralized Location Database to facilitate scholarly access. The goals of ASAP would be to get the art spaces to value their archives and also inject the events produced into the art historical narrative.

B: Ultimately, though, don't you think the book is not dead? Online is great, but universities and books go hand in hand.

R: "Books and universities" do go together, but universities are not avoiding digital resources, it's just that they don't subscribe to a lot of little organizational websites. They like big masses of content from all over the place in one accessible spot online.

MG: Much as I try to steer CAA committee members toward digital resources, they keep wanting books.

R: That's because books count for tenure; digital does not.

B: Maybe we're not doing such a good job making this information available in book format as well?

M: It is so expensive to produce books and the information becomes outmoded immediately!

R: Books are a dead end for us. Terribly expensive, limited distribution, and younger students do not consult them.

B: Eyebeam just started a small technology bookshop where we're just carrying titles directly related to technology...I'm amazed how thirsty the public is. Yes, it's very expensive to produce books, but why does it have to be?

R: Good point; books might be good for the general public if not for academia...

M: Sunny Yoon, Librarian, says even librarians consult Google.

J: In an ironic turn - we used to be asked for and give out more info with slide requests.

MG: Rick mentioned to me that he's teaching a class on new media and social memory next spring, and I thought that would be an interesting idea to raise in the context of the archive. To what extent do you feel that the archives of art spaces, or the new "archives" being generated by new media networks, are keepers of particular memories of the broader society and culture beyond the art world?

R: Well, what are archives (and libraries and museums) if not mechanisms for collective memory?

J: In the Bard graduate program on curatorial studies, there's a course on important exhibitions since WWII at Bard and when I asked what shows they teach from the alternative spaces - well they don't. I was appalled.

MG: Haven't alternative spaces often been havens for art that reflects and intervenes in contemporary culture and society? So are their archives particularly important as keepers of this memory? And how does this relate to the status of

their histories as written or unwritten?

B: I am very impressed with the recent book on the history of Artists Space -- not to stick to the topic of books!

J: I think that the book is still very important, and I hope that it will be possible for all the spaces to be able to publish something like the history of Artists Space. I think in a way (without sounding corny) we are the conscience of a lot of people and of the period in which we exist. Our programs reflect the important issues of our time.

M: Alternative spaces occupy a very unpopular social position. But the material we have presented has value now in Europe and will have value here in 100 years.

MG: That's interesting, Martha - would you say that there are different factors that determine the critical or historical value of work in Europe as opposed to here?

M: I just meant that the American avant-garde is valued more by institutions in Vienna and UK than by institutions here.

R: I didn't know that, Martha.

MG: Why do you think that is?

B: Because in Europe, art is supported by the government!

R: So does that mean they don't need or have alternate spaces? Or do they have more of them?

M: There are certainly alternative spaces like Artpool in Budapest, Zone in Milan, and De Appel in Amsterdam.

R: Are alternate spaces a byproduct of capitalism then? As in - we need them. Or, another question might be, "What do alternate art spaces remember (on behalf of us all)?"

B: Gosh, I think alternative spaces are so important. I think about how important the Difference show at the New Museum was in the 1980s -- that show really preceded so much thinking related to psychoanalysis and art.

R: The New Museum is an alternate art space?

B: According to the ASAP site, which I looked at today -- it's on there! I was a bit surprised myself... But, then we get the question of how do we define this or that?

R: Well, even museums (like mine) have interesting, unknown stuff in the basement waiting to be revealed....

MG: Isn't it possible to begin as an alternative space and metamorphose into an institution?

R: Seriously, we're all doing the same thing; museums, alternate spaces... museums just move more slowly and take less risks.

J: We all have a part of that history. That's why it is so important that our archives talk to each other and are accessible together, which is something that Martha and Rick have been working on for a while. This big "digital archive project" is a big opportunity to have impact and importance, which is why I hope we can work it out so that they can connect technically.

MG: Interoperability and accessibility.

R: Exactly.

MG: One issue I'd like to talk about is preservation. Once they're digital, how will the archives survive changing file formats, etc.?

R: Digital preservation is possible, both for digital documentation and for original digital art works, but the latter are much more tricky.

B: Well, has Eva Hesse's work survived that well?

R: But of course this kind of preservation comes as an operational and budget need ON TOP of every other existing cost.

J: Rick, do you mean it is not a priority for most institutions?

R: No, just that it cannot usually be carved out of the existing budget. One cannot give up public programs, janitorial services or preserving good ol' paintings to make way for digital preservation. It's a new expense.

B: In terms of digital preservation funding, isn't it sort of bleak out there? I mean, there's the Langlois Foundation, but what other foundation/corporation is really stepping up?

R: No, I don't think it's bleak. The NEA funded us, and they're not usually a radical organization. Plus many other communities are interested in digital preservation. Congress gave the Library of Congress \$100 million to tackle it.

MG: How can new media networks like Rhizome function as alternative models of digital archives -- community-centric, open-ended, constantly writing & re-writing their own histories? Or, do you think that the digital interface -- the database structure -- will change the way people experience / think about the content of the archives?

B: The open-source-ness of Rhizome's archives as well as of ASAP is so great. It allows cultural creators to self-archive, which maybe will help alleviate future challenges.

R: Self-archive is an interesting term. But how does it really work?

B: You are your own archivist! Meaning that you put up your work, tell why it is important, and so on.

R: Jon Ippolito started "The Pool" at Maine which is open like Rhizome's and we plan to start something up here at Berkeley too....

MG: The Pool is a really good example because it has such a specific interface.

B: Jon and I did an online forum about distributed creativity which featured The Pool. It's an interesting experiment in sharing.

R: Self-archiving. Yes, you can input text about your work, to help preserve the words. But preserving the actual digital work is much trickier and most artists are not set up to do it long term (especially after they die).

B: Preserving the actual work...yes, absolutely...I can't tell you how difficult it was to even show a recent Jim Campbell piece at Eyebeam, much less think about preserving it!

R: Beth: we're going to show some older Shirley Shor and Ken Goldberg works and I agree! Hard enough just to resurrect them.

J: I was recently in LA with 40 other arts organizations from around the country and it is really surprising how many places are NOT thinking about this at all, And that is scary. My concern is that the media organizations will have it more together than we visual arts spaces do.

B: Media organizations – meaning Harvestworks or EAI?

J: Anyone more savvy about technology -- Eyebeam, Rhizome, etc.

R: The digital organizations may not be more savvy, but they're more pressed for time. They cannot afford to wait 20 years.

J: Of course Eyebeam has more technology information, while places like Exit Art, FF, White Columns, Artists Space, Creative Time, are way behind.

B: It was a different time when those important spaces came into being. How do we go back and go forward?

MG: Exit Art and Franklin Furnace have always experimented a lot with technology, so it's not surprising that you would be on the leading edge of visual art organizations.

R: I think it's about vision too. Martha and Jeanette see beyond the latest Monet exhibition!

B: That's true. At Eyebeam we record everything digitally--audio and visual. The question is what do we do with the records? I'm fascinated with podcasting – any thoughts?

J: We are doing a podcast of the current show. I think it's a great tool to communicate to a larger and younger group.

R: What's funny too is the pace of discourse around this. Net.artists and curators communicate via listservs and blogs, not via conferences, journals and books, so the pace is much faster.

B: Well, it does seem like the "latest and greatest" way to record and preserve.

R: It might be useful to tease apart "record" from "access" from "preserve" -- very different activities, but often conflated.

MG: Are listservs criticism?

B: Or, if I can add, do they promote or inhibit criticism?

MG: Or, produce or correct criticism?

R: I would suggest that listservs are criticism, but they are not Criticism. In the same sense as modern vs. Modern. They are discourse, but they are not recognized by any existing (cultural/Academic) authorities.

B: You can get so much information from a listserv. But do you actually want to write to the list? It takes a certain personality, I think.

R: It does take a different personality; it's a different culture really.

B: Do you think online forums are dead?

R: In the same way that many folks feel uncomfortable sipping wine and standing at an art opening...

B: Yes, I agree, I'd rather see the art myself and put my kids to sleep!

MG: On the new media listservs lately, much discussion has centered around mainstream critical writing about new media, and how "wrong" it is.

B: Which listservs?

MG: Rhizome, especially.

R: Yes, I often feel that the mainstream art world still does not "get it." But that's nothing new (to either digital art or any alternate/emerging genre), is it?

J: Well, we are also part of the mainstream. We disagree with that reality but we are part of it. I don't think of what we do as alternative, it's just another way to

express the culture.

R: Good point, Jeanette. I am comfortable as part of the mainstream. Just that my area of digital art is a specific part of the mainstream, not well understood by certain other parts perhaps.

B: Eyebeam has had some experiences with reporters who really don't understand new media at all. It takes a toll.

MG: I feel like a certain self-consciousness has been generated about how the lists have to take on the task of writing new media. Which may or may not be true.

B: Too bad art critics can't be more interdisciplinary. Maybe the next generation of critics will be?

R: I often feel (no insult intended) that the mainstream mistakenly views digital art through the lens of visual art alone. Sometimes I think digital discourse would make more sense in the performing arts communities....

MG: Especially with web-based work, I think there's a tension between expectation and experience - net art is not much like surfing a commercial site, but should it be?

B: It should be intuitive!

MG: I wonder if digital archives, once they are online, will deal with the same questions of database and interface that a lot of net art has struggled with.

R: Well, Mariam, I guess net.art is like video art in that it occupies a "commercial" media space, but on purpose to leverage that confusion and bypass the baggage of whether it's "ART." The question is whether it's interesting content...

B: Perhaps we are still at the stage where net artists are so fascinated with the technology that the content is secondary, and perhaps in the future this will reverse.

R: Beth, I clearly see a generational aspect to what you are saying in my teaching.

B: Will you explain how so? I'm curious.

R: The "first wave" of net.artists were often formally concerned with the medium, but younger kids are not so much.

B: Yes, that's true, but I still think we have a ways to go, don't you?

R: Well, formalism or other ways of commenting on the medium itself is not bad per se, but we do need to allow a broadening of the practice in net.art.

That is, we need to allow "alternative practice" even within net.art.

J: The next generation is so comfortable with what we call new media that they probably don't even call it that. I recently asked one of my interns if he remembered a time before computers and he said "No, only a time of slower computers." Gulp!

MG: I know we're still a ways off from that point, but have any of you given thought to what your archives will look/feel like online? Will they be archive art?

//here's how far you got in the edit

B: Maybe someone will just invent a way to archive new media in all its formats? Any takers?

MG: Has anyone thought about interface yet?

J: We are not there yet.

R: Design/design/re-design...the million dollar question! I have not given interface a lot of thought yet, except to separate it from my content. I want my content to be adaptable to different venues with different interfaces.

MG: That's a great point.

R: By "my content" I mean digital archives I'm working with.

B: The question for Eyebeam is once you have archival material, how do you deposit it? where? why?

MG: I was thinking about the Database Imaginary show at the Banff Centre last year, or the show at PS1 a while back about storage and archiving in art. It would be great to get some of the artists who have been interested in archives and databases involved in the design of your interfaces.

R: I love shows about archiving, storing, and libraries and information. GAS has a photo series up now by an Australian artist who took photos of documentation at AMNH. So cool...and interesting.

B: Oohh -- I think immediately of Kevin and Jennifer McCoy and their "database" art.

MG: Maybe multiple possible artist interfaces, adding another level of interest, attraction, accessibility, value or whatever you want to call it.

R: Since I'm all about separating content from interface, I'd like to have in fact multiple interfaces to my archive representing different cultural readings of the material.

J: I think we are visual art spaces so our online archives of course will be well designed - congratulations to Martha and Franklin Furnace who continuously redesign their site - but we shouldn't over-design it. It has to be really easy to use.

MG: True.

J: I am still amazed how many people don't know how to use the internet, my trainer only checks her email once a week!

R: Yes, we need a "basic" library-type interface for a certain use of the material, and then perhaps other interfaces too.

M: Speaking of digital archives, we save all the previous avatars of FF's website, never throw anything away.

J: I find now that we are being approached by more artists that work with technology, and what you call "net.art" and we try to include it naturally within the context of the show and not isolate it, but I feel that there is still a distance between the artists. Rick, how can we bring net artists together with other artists, I fear that they feel some kind of intimidation here.

MG: Jeanette, one of the ideas that's been discussed on Rhizome lately is that net art is really a time-based art, not a visual art.

R: Yes, thus my comment about "performing arts" communities...

J: All art is visual.

MG: All art is visual, yes, but the idea being that what is missing from some critical / viewer understanding of net art is the time element, that is the idea that

you should be giving it that precise duration of attention that you give to a film or video.

B: Do viewers really spend time with net art and/or video ... meaning the time needed to really see the piece?

MG: Well, some net art is about computational time, i.e. infinite time.

R: Yes, Jeanette, most art is visual (except for sound art). But nonetheless, visuality may often not be the main purpose for a work of net.art. For my own net.art for instance, it's much more about constructing a social environment, watching and organizing interactions, than it is about visual interface.

J: Well I guess I disagree, I think even sound is visual, look at the writings of Kandinsky,

M: How about all art is conceptual? This is where the visual, performing, and net.art worlds meet.

MG: I agree, Martha.

R: Visual Art has a specific language and discourse that does not always apply to digital / media art, which is sometimes more time-based or performative.

J: This is very interesting and needs more discussion (and probably wine) but I am not referring to specific visual art terms

R: Also some digital art is specifically invisible; it's about the invisible, microscopic processes within the machinery (process being the operative concept though). Jeanette, I know you're not talking about specific visual art terms, but I meant to say that the language of visual arts is sometimes what creates that separation from digital artists. Digital artists are not so much about visuality as visual artists; it's often there, but as a byproduct, not a central concern. So, to see it as central misses the point (as does the mainstream art media).

MG: Yes, because sometimes digital artists are speaking another language entirely - a (mathematical) language of process.

J: LOL. I was thinking the opposite to be true.

MG: I really liked your phrase about constructing social environments for interaction in your work, Rick. It seemed relevant also to what Franklin Furnace funds these days - live art on the Internet - that idea of the net as a social, performative space.

R: Yes, I think of my work as "social sculpture" in the Beuys sense. Sometimes more than visual art. And certainly not all net.artists work like this, but some do.

MG: I definitely do!

J: Rick, I totally understand what you are saying, I just feel that as someone who looks at art, enjoys art, etc. there are a lot more similarities for me in all of these methods of working.

R: So, I guess in the end we're all right (how nice eh?) because even net.art includes the visual centered (John Simon) and the performative (us) and other strains as well.

M: Adrienne Wortzel just launched a robot that provides psychoanalytic sessions over the Internet, which completely conflates the body of the artist and the body of the net.

B: I need that!

MG: Eliza Redux, right?

B: She showed a prototype of that work at Eyebeam last year.

J: Rick and Mariam, I might not use the same specific language as you do, but I also found myself at the other end of the divide when I was in graduate school for art history. That's exactly why I started Exit Art with Colo - to exit from all those boundaries of definitions.

R: Jeanette, I agree that all artists have a lot in common - creative process, etc. and to some extent visuality often, but oftentimes that latter focus is actually the area of difference (among sameness). Seeing art without boundaries is great, but oftentimes it ends up that the "sameness" by default is the hegemonic discourse of the visual arts.

J: Rick, not having boundaries does not mean having sameness, which I know is not what you were saying.

R: We're in spiritual agreement, Jeanette. All else is just the flesh talking.

J: Martha and I used to spend countless nights on the phone, way into the night, commiserating about how misunderstood we were. Remember, Martha?

R: I love that image, Jeanette!

M: We should do it over IM these days.

J: And now we find ourselves trying to define things so exactly for the archives.

MG: I think one of the reasons why placing the archives online seems to make so much sense is because the net is at the same time at the margins of culture and wide open -- it's ripe for your intervention. Ω