

Ruth Wallach

Shades of Grey: Thoughts on Archiving Personal Born-Digital Collections of Ephemera

Unlike the journey of the Persian princes of Serendip, my discovery of the existence of public art in Los Angeles was emphatically not a matter of my extraordinary sagacity. It was by sheer accident that I fell into documenting the City's public art in 1996. In April of that year an extremely well respected librarian colleague of mine, Dr. Dennis Thomison, died. Dr. Thomison's interests in the history of Los Angeles and his work to document the City's ethnic history on the Internet, as it existed in the mid-1990s, inspired me to pursue my own inquiries into what constituted Los Angeles. The City's urban history offers a case study for the development of other American cities, particularly those, like Charlotte or Houston, which grew exponentially after World War II. Already in 1946 Carey McWilliams wrote that he considered the entire Southern California region to be a suburban extension of Los Angeles. McWilliams also pointed out another distinguishing aspect of the City: "As a result of the centrifugal tendency, however, the density outside the central portion of the city is high....this general tendency has made for 'space both within and without the city.'"¹

This view of Los Angeles as an agglomeration of urban spaces within and without what should be central core formed the basis for my understanding that the City functions on both the physical and symbolic levels. What separates one area from another in Los Angeles and its surroundings? Architecture? Street signage? Official gateways? Ethnic and socio-economic demographics? The freeways? Word of mouth? In pondering these questions I was struck

by the odd fact that I was not aware of there being much public art in the greater Los Angeles area. I occasionally saw murals and graffiti, but not sculptures. In my experience, cities were, among other things, a visual form, and many cities announced themselves to the world in part through sculptures placed in public places. Perhaps, I thought, I was just not terribly observant or knowledgeable, and therefore missed things. And so in 1996 I decided that I would pay my respect to Dr. Thomison's memory and interests by collecting information on the public art that existed in Los Angeles. And with this entirely naïve decision, I launched an informational web site on public art in Los Angeles currently at the URL <http://www.publicartinla.com>. I use the word "naïve" because I had no idea what I was falling into, nor did I have a clear sense as to what public art itself is. However, if I knew at that time that even in 2012 I would still be collecting print and electronic materials for inclusion in the web site, for the USC Libraries collections, and for my own personal files, it is conceivable that I would not have started down this path. Naïveté, it seems, is part of serendipitous discoveries.

In 1996, the Web was an easy place. It required very few skills, and was certainly not a sophisticated visual medium, yet. It was an extremely unstable environment, and many sites were impermanent and did not contain lot of seriously in-depth information. Few people turned to the Web as a first stop for information or research, and many were not aware that it existed. There was no Google. And yet, it seemed to be a good place to start posting information that

was difficult, if not impossible, to find otherwise. This was certainly the case of public art in Los Angeles and Southern California. Starting with the 1980s there were efforts, particularly on the part of the Los Angeles Murals Conservancy, to document the location and condition of modern murals, particularly those sponsored by the Works Progress Administration in the 1930s, as well as contemporary murals and the more permanent graffiti work. Generally speaking, contemporary graffiti practices in the United States were often analyzed as a sociological and political phenomenon and rarely as an aesthetic statement. Within the last two decades there has been growth in research and publications in the United States, Europe, and to a much lesser degree in East Asia, on culture-led urban regeneration, which contain more thorough discussions on civic art practices. Commemorative public art, the broadest catchall typology of artistic expression in public spaces after murals and graffiti, has become part of research in history, sites of memory, and case studies on urban redevelopment.

My main objective for the web site was to create and maintain an inventory listing the title of work, artist, location, sponsoring agency, size, and materials, depending on what information was available. On rare occasions I was able to describe a work's relationship to other works in a particular public place or by a particular artist, but I really tried to keep the inventory simple. I also included small images of the works to accompany the descriptions. The images were and are of low resolution. The purpose of the web site is to provide information without infringing on any intellectual rights that artists or their estates have over the work that can be seen in public places. I was not a web designer, and in the beginning not a very good photographer. I was really a dilettante all around, but at that time there was no competition in providing such information in one place. Into the early 2000s, *publicartinla.com* was the only place to locate meaningful information on public art in Los Angeles. The site's nominal association with the University of Southern California (USC), where I am a librarian, prompted some researchers to donate their own public art files to the USC Libraries² to make them accessible to future historians. Some of them gave me permission to include more in-depth historic information from their files on the web site, allowing me to add an important contextual layer, particularly on recent civic commissioning practices. A few years into this process

I received permission to post some information from local civic agencies that sponsor public art, such as Metro and the Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles. In the 1990s the agencies did not have presence on the Web; however, some of the art planners saw an opportunity to disseminate information through a library partner. As we enter the second decade of the 21st century, these agencies have their own web sites, which are among the most authoritative current sources of information on the institutional practice of sponsoring and maintaining public art works.³

As time went by, researchers began contacting me for assistance in tracking elusive materials for their own research, and I realized that I was considered to be an authority on public art in Los Angeles, by virtue of the information I kept adding to the web site. With the explosion of Internet sites related to Los Angeles that occurred since the mid-2000s, I find that information from *www.publicartinla.com* gets repeated elsewhere. Some refer to it as an archive. I am flattered, but worried. Yes, there is a lot of information on the web site, and much of it is good, and probably as good as it gets. Because it has been in existence since 1996, a lifetime by Internet standards, it also documents works that no longer exist, or that have been moved from their original site. Despite its s- called longevity, however, *publicartinla.com* is not an archive. Nor are its individual components, particularly the images, of archival quality, and as I look into the future I wonder whether it is worthy of longer-term preservation.

What is an Archive?

The use of terms “archives” and “preservation” is interrelated – why have archives if you cannot preserve them? But what are archives? Strictly speaking, the origin of the concept of “archives” relates to official records of a governing body. However, in contemporary usage we normally call an archive anything that we think is old(er) and thus potentially worth preserving. In other words, an archive is something that has perceived value but which may not be in current use.⁴ The Society of American Archivists defines archives as:

[T]he non-current records of individuals, groups, institutions, and governments that contain



information of enduring value. Formats represented in the modern archival repository include photographs, films, video and sound recordings, computer tapes, and video and optical disks, as well as the more traditional unpublished letters, diaries, and other manuscripts. Archival records are the products of everyday activity.⁵

In order to preserve records of enduring value, archivists not only maintain archival collections, but also describe and inventory them in accordance with accepted standards and practices.⁶ It is this metadata, a cataloging record describing content and container, that allows researchers to access collections of archives and ephemera, presumably on an enduring basis. Since the late 20th century the archivist community has been developing practices and standards for the preservation of born-digital materials, which cover anything from floppy disks to internet-based files.⁷ Archivists are not and should not be the only players in the field of preservation of records of value. Archiving and preserving cultural heritage, broadly defined, is significantly an issue

of economic incentives and of public will.⁸ Until relatively recently we, as a society, could entertain the notion that archiving something potentially preserved it for centuries. In a contemporary environment of rapid technological changes and exponential increase in information and media, we are struggling to ensure that analog and born-digital materials are still accessible even decades from now. We do not even know whether metadata records, themselves electronic, have much longevity.

A standard approach to preserving digital and non-print materials is to separate the content files from the impermanent media that contain them, while describing essential information about both in a metadata record. This is a technological challenge, of course. Preservation of digital and non-print media also includes the practice of creating two instances of storage, one for archival masters and one for access/use copies. The access/use copy is the one that gets reproduced for researchers, and is available for migration to newer formats. The archival master copy's "public" function is to serve as backup should the access/use copy get altered or corrupted. Accordingly, the metadata should also document actions taken for preservation, copying, and migration.⁹





A philosophical area that impacts archival practices and that merits further discussion is that of the authenticity of digital materials. The question of what is authentic and why it matters is not limited to the technological realm, nor is it a new issue. Assessing and protecting the authenticity and trustworthiness of resources is part of ensuring their archival value. But is authenticity a viable concept in the digital environment? As Heather MacNeil and Bonnie Mac write, “The preservation of ‘authentic’ digital materials is perceived to have been made more difficult by the technology itself, which promotes the proliferation of multiple and simultaneous instantiations,”¹⁰ implying that in the digital environment content and container have continuous impact on each other. Publishing a digital work no longer implies having a final, finished piece. It may very well entail the exact opposite – the work’s openness to copying, modification, and contextual reinterpretation, as well as the question of the work’s completion. Does a born-digital item, despite its mutability, retain authenticity? Perhaps the authentic is no longer a fixed notion. This leads to the question of what is it that we preserve in the digital archive? A particular instantiation, intention, meaning, or use? What is the value of documenting a particular moment in time?

On Archiving a Moment in Time

After Dr. Thomison died in 1996, his web site titled *Ethnic Los Angeles* was copied onto a CD and placed in the archival collection at USC, where he was a long-time faculty in the USC Libraries. The web site itself is no longer traceable on the Internet and its only vestige is what is on the CD. Compact disks are not a preservation medium, and in any case, the hyperlinks that Dr. Thomison established in the mid-1990s, when the web site was live, do not work anymore. The disk is a record that something existed at some point. It is like a palimpsest.

Should *publicartinla.com* be preserved permanently as if it were an archive, and if yes, how? By no metric, as described here, is the web site an archive. It is an informational site that gets updated on an as needed basis. Given the amount of information about public art in Los Angeles that is now available through many Internet sites, including those maintained by public art-sponsoring agencies, it is hardly unique. Yet, as I described earlier, it has become historic and contains older materials that are historically more obscure. If I continue maintaining the site and adding to it, the historic nature inherent in its current stability will

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endure, at least for a while. But if I move on to other things and abandon it, or can no longer maintain it, then what? It is hard for me to look at the site objectively, given the many years during which I maintained it and added to it.

Archival best practices indicate that we should always attempt to preserve the original, but in this case, what is the original? The web site is located on a commercial hosting service for which I pay an annual fee. To truly preserve the site, assuming it is worthy of preservation, I will have to negotiate with a more reliable host, one with preservation interests, such as USC. There are two components of *publicartinla.com* that have the potential for longer term archiving. One is the “metadata,” or the descriptive identification of public art works, including those that no longer exist, and their locations. The other encompasses the photographs that are displayed on the web site in low resolution so that they could not be copied for other uses. From 1996 until about 2006 I used

an analog camera, and have several boxes of labeled prints, many of which were scanned for the web site. Beginning in 2005 I started using a digital camera, and have backed up the high-resolution images on disks, not considered to be an archival medium. As I am beginning to contemplate the future of *publicartinla.com*, a future beyond me, I realize that I need to begin organizing these two components, the metadata and the photographs, for a more permanent transfer.

What I have described here is a rather typical state of affairs for many so called “archival” collections. Ordinarily, these are types of specialized, often research-based, electronic materials, that individuals create and disseminate not with preservation standards in mind, but because collecting grey information is an important part of our accumulation of knowledge. How much of the grey information is worth preserving and archiving, and in what formats, is both a philosophical and practical (e.g., economic) issue that affects potentially all of us, individually and institutionally.¹¹

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End Notes

1 Carey McWilliams, *Southern California Country: An Island on the Land* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1946), 234.

2 For example, Michael Several, who wrote several public art guides to downtown Los Angeles for the Community Redevelopment Agency of Los Angeles, donated his collection of research ephemera, currently housed in the Special Collections Department of the USC Libraries. Robin Dunitz, instrumental in documenting murals in Los Angeles and Southern California, donated her files, which are currently located in the Architecture and Fine Arts Library at USC.

3 The demise of the California Redevelopment Agency, however, raises the question of not only the maintenance of its public art web site, but of public art funding in the future.

4 Arthur H. Leavitt, “What are Archives,” *American Archivist* 24 (April 1961): 175-178.

5 Society of American Archivists, “So You Want to be an Archivist: An Overview of the Archives Profession,” accessed 10/29/2012, <http://www2.archivists.org/profession>.

6 See, for example, the Online Archive of California, <http://www.oac.cdlib.org/>.

7 See, for example, University of Virginia, “Born Digital Collections: An Inter-Institutional Model for Stewardship (AIMS),” accessed 11/12/2012, <http://www2.lib.virginia.edu/aims/>.

8 Blue Ribbon Task Force on Sustainable Digital Preservation and Access, “Final Report: Sustainable Economics for a Digital Planet: Ensuring Long-Term Access to Digital Information,” accessed 10/29/2012, http://brtf.sdsc.edu/biblio/BRTF_Final_Report.pdf.

9 Ben Goldman, “Bridging the Gap: Taking Practical Steps Toward Managing Born-Digital Collections in Manuscript Repositories,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 12 (March 20, 2011): 11-24.

10 Heather MacNeil and Bonnie Mac, “Construction of Authenticity,” *Library Trends* 56 (Summer 2007): 45.

11 An excellent web site for issues related to the place of grey literature in scholarship, dissemination of information, and preservation is *GreyNet*; *Grey Literature Network Service*, which was established in 1992. <http://www.greynet.org/>, accessed 11/12/2012.