

Abstract for MACCH conference: *Participatory Practices in Arts and Heritage* (17 & 18 March 2017, Maastricht, The Netherlands).

Title: **Unboxing the Archives: supporting new forms of participation with digitised content**

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Context

The *Archives & Access* project (2012-2017) is a large-scale digitisation and outreach initiative developed by Tate and supported with a grant from the UK's Heritage Lottery Fund. The project made over 52,000 pieces from the Tate Archive of British Art digitally accessible, and produced a range of interactive digital resources to foster online discovery and use of the collections by broad audiences.

The project therefore utilises the new opportunities digital affordances present for cultural institutions; put simply, digital access enables global audiences to find arts, heritage and cultural content at unprecedented scales and speeds.

Digital access also removes the limits traditionally imposed on archive stores; geographic location, opening hours, or physical mobility no longer posing barriers to discovery. Moreover, digital publication allows novel approaches to indexing, searching, discovering and utilising collections. Topics can be searched thematically with immediacy, affording new connections within and between collections.

Accessing archives: from research to recreation

However, the notional 'archive' has long held connotations of specialism, and as research undertaken for the AHRC by Bob Usherwood et al demonstrates, the "role and value" of archives in contemporary Britain are not widely recognised with a "a lack of understanding about the full range of services [archives] offer" (2005, pp 56) resulting in their underuse.

Moreover, digital access does not ensure engagement, much less participation; if audiences are unconfident with, or unaware of, an archive's potential - if they think archives are 'not for me' - then online publication alone is not enough.

The *Archives & Access* project has taken steps to address this issue through a UK-wide programme of learning outreach, coupled with the production of learning resources. Partnering with five UK institutions and their audiences, in South Wales, the NE, NW, SE of

England and London, the project both facilitated and explored how people can learn through archives. Facilitated activities – which included over 350 creative workshops led by project artists, exhibitions, and community events - engaged with highly diverse audiences, whilst research and practice sharing activities for stakeholders were programmed to foster conversations that developed participatory practice.

By providing digital access and facilitated engagements in corollary, *Archives & Access* has road-tested how free provision of digitised archival resources and dedicated programming transforms the ways in which archives are accessed and understood.

Findings and questions

Tate *Archives & Access* provides a rich trans-disciplinary case study contributing to a wider conversation around how digital affordances may alter perceptions of what archives are and who they are for.

This presentation will describe the approaches taken by Tate to provide this mixed model of access and participation, delineating the inter-institutional links, drawing on project case studies and reflecting on learning outcomes.

Rather than drawing firm conclusions, this presentation will explore emerging questions: what challenges do organisations of varying sizes face when offering digital access to their collections? What mode and scale of participation can be supported? What is the role of inter-institutional collaboration? And how can we best share this learning with the cultural sector?