

1. BACKGROUND

This poster documents the development of Best Practice Guidelines for the Collection Management of Objects at New York University's Fales Library and Special Collections, using David Wojanowicz's *Magic Box* as a case study. The research consisted of a literature review on the description, visual documentation, and public presentation of objects within an archival context; a survey of thirty-one repositories on their collection management of objects; and the creation of metadata and digital surrogates for the *Magic Box* and their incorporation into an EAD finding aid. Although the resulting Guidelines



are specific to the intellectual ethos of the Fales Library and Special Collections, as well as to the unique forms of archival materials they collect, the complex set of issues raised by the research, and by the arrangement, description, visual documentation, and public presentation of the objects in the *Magic Box*, raise interesting questions for archival practice in general.

2. INTRODUCTION

The Fales Library and Special Collections houses rare books and manuscripts in English and American literature, an extensive Food and Cookery Collection, the Downtown Collection, and the general Special Collections of the New York University Libraries. In their management of collections they are committed to "preserving creative works of artists and writers in their original formats, paying close attention to the book as a physical object and other media in their original state when possible." Fales "preserves manuscripts and original editions of books that are rare or important not only because of their texts, but also because

of their value as artifacts."¹ Their Downtown Collection, which seeks to document New York's SoHo and here, an extensive Food and Cookery Collection, that began in the early 1990s and includes a broad range of materials from manuscripts, zines and flyers to films and videos, stage models, and three-dimensional objects, makes this stated commitment to the dual archival and textual value of materials especially challenging. It is the physical diversity and theoretical state of the objects within the Downtown manuscript collections that made the need for Guidelines for Collection Management of Objects so pressing.

3. METHODS

I undertook research for the development of the Guidelines at many levels. I did a literature review to ascertain what metadata standards archivists, librarians and museum professionals were using when describing objects; I researched existing protocols for the digital visual documentation of objects; I tested collection management database software; and I looked at existing online solutions for the presentation of description and digital surrogates of objects in an archival context. Under the guidance of Senior Archivist Ann Butler, I developed a survey on the Collection Management of Objects, which was given to 31 repositories. Concurrently, I worked with one of the objects in the Downtown Collection, David Wojanowicz's *Magic Box*, applying what I was learning to its description and the documentation of its contents and its relationships with other collections.

4. THE MAGIC BOX

David Wojanowicz (1954 - 1992) was an artist, writer, musician, performer, photographer and activist - a pioneer to represent the downtown New York City scene in his creative output. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, Wojanowicz made and acted in super 8 films, performed in the band *Three Jews Kill 4 - No Motive*, and exhibited artworks in downtown New York galleries. With the deaths of many of his friends from AIDS-related illnesses, and his own diagnosis in the late 1980s, Wojanowicz directed much of his energy at demanding greater awareness and governmental intervention in the AIDS epidemic. In 1990, David Wojanowicz successfully sued Donald Wildmon and the American Family Association for libel after Wildmon printed decontextualized images from his work as examples of "sexual depravity" in book *Crucial Conversations* (1991). *Diagnosis* was published in 1991. He died in 1992.



The David Wojanowicz Papers is comprised of materials reflecting the prolific nature of Wojanowicz's personality and creative expression, including journals, correspondence, manuscripts, photography, film, video and audio works, printed ephemera, and three-dimensional objects. The objects are some of the more unusual materials they include artworks made by Wojanowicz objects he used as props in his photographs or movies; and objects he collected not as artworks proper, but that served a function within his own symbolic language, such as the *Magic Box*. A pine fruit box of 8 x 17 x 12.625 inches, the *Magic Box* contains fifty-nine objects or groupings of objects collected by Wojanowicz and stored by him in the box. Examples of these objects include plastic toys, religious objects, jewelry, stoves, feathers, and seeds. Most of them are single autonomous items, but some are retained in the groupings they were in when they came to Fales. Although it is a box containing autonomous objects and groupings of objects, it is at the same time conceived of as an item - a contained and autonomous work on its own.

In a sense, using the *Magic Box* to test best practices for

THE MAGIC BOX

A Case Study in the Collection Management of Objects in Archival and Manuscript Collections

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A Practicum at the Fales Library and Special Collections undertaken under the guidance of Fales Senior Archivist Ann Butler
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the management of objects made the task more complex and confusing, as in its arrangement and its dual status as both one object and many it is atypical of the types of objects in the larger Fales collection. Yet in other ways it exemplifies the spirit behind Fales' ethos of collecting and managing collections, and points to an inherent contradiction embedded by all archival 'objects' (including text-based documents). The status of the *Magic Box* as both a thing and a container for many things mirrors this underlying tension in an archival practice that demands that all documents be treated as though to complete themselves and rely on context for their identity. Making the tasks of arrangement and description even more complex was the decision the Fales librarians had made to not undertake any preservation on the objects, based on their belief that the removal of the objects would have destroyed the complex intellectual relationships that exist between the objects as a single work.

5. THE SURVEY

To discover how other repositories with similar missions and collections were managing objects within their collections, I developed the Survey on the Collection Management of Objects and Artifacts in Archival Repositories under the guidance of Fales Senior Archivist Ann Butler. This survey was sent to selected archivists and manuscript curators at museum archives, performing arts archives, and other repositories likely to collect objects. It consisted of twenty-five questions grouped into the five categories: description, arrangement and acquisition, "collection management", "description", "visual documentation", and "administrative matters".

Of the thirty-one archivists and manuscript curators contacted, eight returned the survey, five of whom responded affirmatively to the question "Does your repository hold manuscript collections in which objects or artifacts are an integral part?" One of the most interesting aspects of the results of the survey is the diversity of objects collected by these archives, which include plaques, pins, locks of hair, ritual objects, masks, architectural models, materials, costumes, and costumes. There was a similar diversity in collection management and other software tools repositories used to document and/or catalog objects - seven different programs are used by the archives, with the most common being multiple programs are used in a single repository. Response to the survey reflected some confusion about what an object in the archival context actually is. One archival listed "photographs" and "index cards" as examples of objects in her archival collections. Another archival initially responded in an email that this collection contained many "objects" such as drawings and photographs. One repository that separates "objects" into its own category reflected the fact that they do not seem to fit anywhere else, rather than that the architect conceived them as objects). More than exemplifying

confusion about what archival objects are, responses suggest that most archivists do not necessarily consider the collection management of objects in archival collections to be an issue of concern; seven of the respondents answered "no" to the question "Is the problem of documentation of artifacts and objects in archival collections an issue that concerns you," while one expressed concern about the lack of common practice.

It may also be the case that many archivists (including perhaps those who did not respond to the survey) do not think of objects as an integral part of the archival or manuscript collections from which they originated. This may be the legacy of the professional's understanding of what archives and documents are. Muller, Feith, and Frain's influential 1988 Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives defines an archival collection as:

The whole of the written documents, drawings, and printed matter, officially received or produced by an administrative body or one of its officials, in so far as these documents were intended to remain in the custody of that body or official.²

This understanding of the 'stuff' of archives as primarily text-based continues to shape practice; and while virtually no contemporary Archives hold exclusively written materials, archival documents are still often conceived of as materials that have been "inscribed" or "recorded". For example, *Describing Archives: A Content Standard* defines a document as "recorded information irrespective of medium," a definition which still explains the lack of medium-specificity, but limiting its insistence on the idea of recording. If objects are not thought of as properly "of" the archives, then their separation from "archival" materials becomes common practice. At Fales the coherent intellectual arrangement of objects received from the same creator is seen as crucial to their status as "evidence" and to their meaning in relation to the creator and to other parts of the collection.

6. DESCRIPTION

There is no clear protocol for the management of objects in archival collections, especially when these objects are conceived of as integral to the collection whose presence they share. The management of objects is instead most properly a hybrid of archival, library and museum

practices. My research into existing metadata standards for the description of objects included looking at *Dublin Core, Categories for the Description of Works of Art Categories: Object, Architecture, or Group, and Cataloging Cultural Objects*, the last of which recommends the use of elements for the description of cultural objects based on VRA Core Categories. Fales will continue to use locally developed metadata elements (identifier, title, description, maker, dates, where made, material, dimensions, and dimensions) for internal control, and a smaller subset of these for public access. They will continue to be integrated into the structural standards established by DACS, which reflects the needs of the community of archives and manuscript collections, and establishes the contextual framework within which to understand the relationships between materials and their creators.

7. VISUAL DOCUMENTATION

By the future collection management of objects at Fales will involve the photography of selected object collections at the item level, and the visual documentation will serve the dual purposes of providing internal control of the objects (some of which are valuable artworks) and providing digital previews of objects on the Fales website. As part of my research, I sought existing guidelines for the digitization of object collections, while there are many Best Practice guidelines for the digitization of flat artworks, photographs, and textual documents, there is very little information on the digitization of three-dimensional objects. Of course, many of the concepts of digitization are transferable from flat to three-dimensional documentation, but the digitization of objects presents unique challenges in terms of lighting, camera specifications, and the need for multiple images for a single item. As part of my research for Fales, I wrote a photography manual for the visual documentation objects based on the *Digitization Standards for the CAAC* and *Artifact Photography Guide*. After I undertook the actual photography of the objects in the *Magic Box*, I found that this manual needed to be greatly revised; the realization that practice is itself a form of research which projects that was one of the recurrent themes of this project.

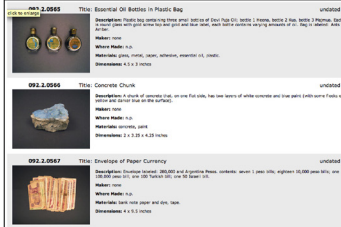
8. ONLINE ACCESS

Many institutions have created websites that provide access to materials via digital surrogates, but very few have done so in ways that reflect the intellectual arrangement inherent to archival practice. Digital exhibits that use archival surrogates generally do not situate the images within their archival context. One of the goals of my research I did find projects that retain this context, either by employing forms of description and arrangement that mirror finding aids, or by integrating digital surrogates into each item's description. The *Magic Box* is the Archives of America's *Alfred Vance Churchill Papers Regarding Young Fessinger Vance*, an exhibit

that makes the entirety of this small (0.5 linear feet) manuscript collection available via high-quality, navigable image files. The exhibit starts from a home page that describes the collection and provides a link to its finding aid. Digital surrogates of the objects are presented in a hierarchy that mirrors the collection's series, box and folder structure, and closely follows the feel (if not the appearance) of the collection's finding aid. This exhibit provides a user-friendly, accessible, and the level of informational detail accessible to researchers; and because it makes clear the relationship between the documents and their provenance, it augments the archival finding aid. Another successful project is the Getty Research Institute's *Ivan Brown Papers*: *The Art Objects 1958-1986* series of the collection consists of a group of fluxus and surrealist art objects, which are represented in the online finding aid by a container list with item-level descriptive metadata and image thumbnails for each object. Because the images are embedded directly into the finding aid, and exist alongside their item-level descriptive metadata and within the contextualization of the finding aid's structure and notes, the objects are more easily understood in terms of the larger collection and its creator. This was the model we chose to emulate at Fales.

9. THE PRODUCT

The new Object Series of the David Wojanowicz Papers online finding aid would need to provide access, as well as serve as a form of preservation by lessening the handling of the objects. Most importantly, it needed to keep the objects situated within the context of the *Magic Box*, and within the larger manuscript collection. Starting from the EAD of the published version of the Guide to the David Wojanowicz Papers, I worked with the NYU Digital Library Technical Services (DLTS) Business Analyst Brian Hoffman to integrate item-level descriptions for the over 1000 objects in the collection, as well as image previews for the objects in the *Magic Box*. I added the descriptive metadata to the existing xml, and we then ingested the entire file into the Archives ToolKit, where I added digital object identifiers that linked to the URIs for each image file. The greater part of the work consisted of my giving feedback on iterations of the stylesheet as Hoffman continually adapted it to enable item-level image and metadata display that was consistent with NYU's many published finding aids. While using the Toolkit was not the only way to create digital archival objects, the DLTS set us on a way of receiving more consistent EAD from the three special collections repositories at NYU. The Wojanowicz finding aid now has item-level description for the objects in the collection, as well as thumbnail previews which link to higher resolution service images for each object. The finding aid will continue to be the access model for the public presentation of selected object collections at Fales.



1. Fales Library and Special Collections. *Collection Development Policy for General Special Collections*. <http://www.gsu.edu/libraries/specialcollections/>

2. Fales Library and Special Collections. *The Fales Papers*. 2008. The Fales Library.

3. Fulk, J.A., Jans, T., and Miller, E. *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*. New York: New York: 2008, p. 13

4. American Archives Association. *Archivist's Handbook*. American Archives Association, Chicago, IL, 2004, p. 204.

5. <http://www.iaa.org/iaa/Default.aspx?tabid=743>

6. <http://www.iaa.org/iaa/Default.aspx?tabid=743>

7. <http://www.iaa.org/iaa/Default.aspx?tabid=743>

8. <http://www.iaa.org/iaa/Default.aspx?tabid=743>