

EDITORIAL

'Animating the archives' was the title chosen by John Aris for the 1989 Aslib Annual Lecture which has subsequently appeared in print.¹ In a sometimes contradictory, but inventive and stimulating text, he declares his belief that we are in the early days of a revolution 'both in how archives can be stored and in how they can be animated'; a revolution which, in its impact on human society, will be no less profound than two preceding revolutions, the invention of writing and the invention of printing.

This ongoing, accelerating, contemporary revolution revolves around 'digital archives', which Aris defines as follows:

I obviously mean documents, and I deliberately use 'documents' there as a very general term to cover not only text, but to include numbers, structured pictures, engineering drawings and graphs, etc. I am also including facsimile images of all types, whether they be text or pictures; sound recordings; video recordings; the vast amount of telemetry that is being poured into the world by various instruments in outer space and elsewhere; the linkages, which it is now fashionable to call hypertext, which consist of combinations of those various things; and, last but not least, software. All of those are documents: all of those quite clearly are digital archives, or the material for them.²

For art librarians, the inclusion here of images (including moving images) is significant but unsurprising; more breathtaking is Aris's development of his vision of the future to encompass 'five-sense fiction' – the recording and re-animating of not just text and images, nor merely the 'two-sense fiction' of moving images with sound, but something more like actual, complete experience, ultimately involving the recording of 'brain traces' and then 'playing those back in such a way that you can somehow experience being Abraham Lincoln delivering the Gettysburg Address' – or, presumably, Jackson Pollock, spattering dribbles of paint across a canvas.

Perhaps it is not a contradiction, if a paradox, to suggest that, with the capacity to record so *much*, it will become more and more necessary *not* to record everything. Consider the following:

... To get a doctorate nowadays ... you have to prove that you have made an original contribution to human knowledge. I believe it is a very serious possibility in the future, that a more esteemed way of earning a doctorate will be by making a worthwhile subtraction from human knowledge.³

This may contain wisdom as well as wit – yet does not every life deserve its memorial, and, in the arts, is it not the case that every subtraction is to be mourned, more or less? I cannot keep all my children's paintings and drawings, but I am not persuaded that it is simply shallow sentiment which obliges me to harden my heart before disposing of any one of them.

But let's allow ourselves to be excited by the possibilities of 'animated archives'. Already film and video have allowed us to record art as never before – in motion; in process of production; in *context*. New forms of art – performance, for instance – have evolved apparently in response to the capacity to record them, although in truth the arts have never been inhibited by the absence of reproductive technology. Videodiscs – which can incorporate moving images – such as those associated with French projects featured in this issue of *Art Libraries Journal*, are 'animated archives', facilitating access to and enabling interaction with, visual images and other data. But – as Aris's example of Lincoln, extrapolated into the field of art, so vividly suggests – this may be only a beginning.

Are we, though, being tardy and sluggish in responding to what is already possible? Our art libraries and slide collections are full of *still* images of *stilled* objects, photographed in museums, floating in space, perched on pedestals, seen against neutral backgrounds. Why do we not provide more videos of artists at work? of *art* at work, fulfilling the purposes for which it was intended? Should we not be actively commissioning, or trumpeting a demand for, film of religious art in *acts* of worship,⁴ or of political art amid the turbulence of political change?

We have the means to document the art of our own times in this way, seen *alive* and in context; the fact is, that so far as times past are concerned, objects which have been lifted from their context are condemned, now, to permanent dislocation, to solitary confinement; in theory returnable to their place, they cannot be returned to their time – nor can it

EDITORIAL

be, except imperfectly, recalled. Lincoln's brain traces surely are lost for ever; Pollock's paint traces survive, and a virtue of the original work is that it – even by itself, even out of context – can to a degree enable us to reconceive something of the dynamic which gave it being. But traditional awe of the 'original' should not blind us to what is lost when an 'authentic' artefact is removed from its equally authentic society and environs; nor should it inhibit us from vigorously exploring the potential of new technology to record art objects as *living* phenomena. An ability to document and to re-animate artefacts in context could enable local museums *on site*, and places and communities which cherish their past in the midst of their present,⁵ to be complemented by 'animated archives', recording human experience and sharing it beyond its own boundaries. Both would have need of libraries, of what can best be recorded and rediscovered in verbal text; and while libraries can and should be providers of digital archives, the latter will in no way replace the calm, contemplative qualities of the written word.

In this issue the *Art Libraries Journal* breaks new ground by featuring *individuals*. John Cotton Dana and Arthur Segal were both, in different ways, committed to 'animating' art collections. John Cotton Dana did not merely develop magnificent collections of books and prints at Newark Public Library: *he gave them life*, ensuring that they would continue to grow, and to reach out to the people of Newark and New Jersey. Arthur Segal's vision of constantly-changing, dynamic collections of original works of art, animated by means of loan and hire, actively leaping the gap between artist and public, has no comparable permanent memorial in spite of having found transient form in a British public library's picture loan scheme; it remains alive as an idea, with a capacity to inspire not only within the specific field of art lending but wherever the need is felt to re-establish connections between art and people at large.

One other individual deserves mention in this Editorial. At its 18th annual conference, held in New York in February, ARLIS/NA presented a Distinguished Service Award to Wolfgang Freitag. Wolfgang has been Librarian of the Fine Arts Library of Harvard University since 1964; during this quarter of a century of service, he has contributed in

all sorts of ways to the contemporaneous development of art librarianship both in North America and worldwide. A Charter Member of ARLIS/NA in 1972, he served as President in 1980 prior to becoming, significantly, the first Chair of ARLIS/NA's International Relations Committee. Since the first international conference of art librarians, which he addressed, at Brighton in 1976, he has been an ever-constant, reassuring, and charming presence at our international gatherings, and a valued member of the IFLA Section of Art Libraries' Standing Committee on whom successive Chairs have been able to rely for advice, encouragement, and support. In addition to all this, he has contributed massively to art bibliography and to the professional literature of art librarianship; readers of the *Art Libraries Journal* know him as among the most thoughtful writers on our specialism. It is appropriate, then, for the *Art Libraries Journal* to record its congratulations to Wolfgang Freitag on a most richly deserved award.

Notes

1. Aris. John. 'Animating the archives'. *Aslib Proceedings* vol.42 no.1 January 1990 p.1-16.
2. *Ibid.*, p.3.
3. *Ibid.*, p.12.
4. This suggestion is stimulated by Michel Albaric's IFLA paper, 'Bibliothécaire et patrimoine religieux', *Art Libraries Journal* vol.15 no.1 p.33-34.
5. Regular readers of the *Editorial* (do such folk exist?) will know that this is a reference to French *écomusées*.