

EDITORIAL

Several years ago in this journal, I contributed a paper predicting an uncertain future for art librarianship in Canada¹. I pleaded for a new approach to our profession, one that looked beyond the individual mandates of our institutions towards a national art information strategy. There were a number of issues surrounding Canadian art libraries which put the profession and its purpose at significant risk. Parent institutions were restructuring due to financial restraint. Technology was changing more rapidly than most libraries were able to respond to. The commercialization of information was increasingly threatening acquisition budgets. Retiring art librarians were not being replaced. Many public art gallery libraries in Western Canada were operated by volunteers rather than by professional librarians. These dedicated individuals were often unaware of the art information trends, techniques and resources outside their institution. Choices were being made within institutions constraining their libraries without regard for the large role these libraries played regionally and nationally. The future made many of us very uneasy.

Today, our parent institutions continue to restructure and technology continues to develop at blinding speed. Commercialization of information is a reality. Librarians are now more involved, building new services using the power of networked technology to share their efforts locally and globally, to communicate and share ideas with colleagues and patrons wherever they are.

The art information available to our users from web-based resources and commercially licensed products is without precedent. The sheer volume has created a glut of information in place of its former scarcity. Users now depend on librarians to help them navigate and authenticate the wealth of information at their disposal. Librarians are also involved in structuring web resources, and designing user interfaces that are intuitive and efficient.

Technology gives librarians the power to take on new responsibilities. We are broadening our interests to take on new roles, distinct from those associated with traditional librarianship, encompassing curatorial, archival and design roles. It is also that very same technology that allows others to adopt roles formerly thought to be the

exclusive domain of librarians. Despite the blurring of responsibilities, it is an exciting time to be an art information professional in Canada.

Against the backdrop of commercial information services and web-based information, the data available to users around the world is becoming remarkably similar. The expertise of librarians is more important than ever to assist users in the evaluation of and navigation to retrieve that information. Unique collections will become more important for both local users and distant users on the networks. All libraries and documentation centres, both large and small, have their role to play in building and sharing resources. Local and regional artists who have not been in the spotlight in the past can provide context, perspective and assume new importance as we try to understand and explain ourselves. A sense of time and place is increasingly important to understand the variety of human experience now communicated to us through new media. However strong or frail and tentative their expression ultimately becomes, it speaks to us about ourselves.

This issue of *Art Libraries Journal* illustrates the wide variety of art documentation activities in Western Canada. The region is larger than continental Europe yet has a population of less than nine million people distributed among seven provinces and territories. The geography includes coastal rain forest, arctic tundra, expansive prairies, and rugged mountains. Despite the sparse population, a wide variety of cultural institutions has taken root in the past 100 years. Each documentation centre, whether it is a museum library, a college library, a university library, or an artist-run centre, makes an essential and unique contribution, a contribution that acknowledges place and time, and helps to define culture in Western Canada.

Melva Dwyer describes the development and growth of art libraries on the Pacific coast of Canada, an area isolated by distance and rugged mountains from the rest of Canada. Kathy Zimon chronicles the evolution of the Melva J. Dwyer Award, honouring Melva's lifetime contribution to art librarianship. This prize, the only one of its kind in Canada, is now awarded to recognize authors of outstanding reference publications about Canadian art. Liv Valmestad provides a tour of the artist-run

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centres in the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba. With the advent of desktop publishing and the world wide web, artist-centres are becoming important sources of documentation on contemporary art alongside their more traditional purposes in exhibition and artist support. Lindsay Moir contributes an article on the Glenbow Museum's collection of immigration literature, publications developed by the government to attract immigrants to the young country of Canada and their impact on the history of the settlement of the area. Ruth Millar reviews the evolution of new tools to provide access to important local history collections in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Maureen Flynn-Burhoe outlines how technology can enable new ways of visualizing and understanding art that is not easily interpreted using the conventions of western thought and art scholarship. She describes her use of hypertext and multimedia to study the work of the distinguished Inuit artist Jessie Oonark.

As the articles in this and previous Canadian theme issues reveal, the documentation of Canadian art and visual resources is proceeding with vigour and determination. Recently Canadian members of ARLIS/NA have founded a Canadian national chapter. Representation within ARLIS/NA is stronger than ever with participation by Canadian members in almost all committees and interest groups. Larger numbers of Canadians participate regularly at the annual conferences. A Canadian, Karen McKenzie, is presently the Vice President/President Elect of ARLIS/NA. Two Canadian cities have hosted the Society's annual conference in the last five years. While a national art information strategy remains elusive, this demonstrated energy and strength injected into our profession is an encouraging and optimistic sign of things to come.

Reference

1. 'A national information strategy for Canada'. *Art Libraries Journal* vol. 15 no. 1 1994, p.7-9.

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Deputy Editor's note:

Cliff Eyland is a painter, writer and curator who has a longstanding obsession with libraries. Since 1981, he has made drawings on 3" x 5" index card formats. One of his earliest library installation projects was to file reproductions cut from Arnason's *History of Modern Art* behind the artist entries in the card catalogue of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Library. His most recent and most publicized installation took place in 1997 at the Raymond Fogelman Library at the New School for Social Research in New York City, where he has inserted over a thousand index cards covered with drawings, glyphs, charts and calligraphy into assorted volumes of the book collection. He lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba and is represented in Toronto by the Leo Kamen Gallery.

Eyland's musings on the organization of knowledge are spreading to this issue. The *ALJ* installation consists of one original drawing on a 3" x 5" white index card slipped between the pages of every copy. Eyland simply says, 'The drawings don't mean anything. The project owes something to Borges.'

Editor's note:

My thanks to Peter Trepanier for this final issue of the recent *ALJ* series on Canadian art and art librarianship. The concept for this series, as well as the commissioning of the articles and most of the editorial work, has been his responsibility. This concluding number provides a fascinating survey of what is currently happening in the visual arts and architecture in the west of the country.