

Ephemeral Collections

The Evolution of A Database

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This paper is a short introduction to the archival software developed by A Foundation through its subsidiary A Database. This software was developed to provide new tools for archiving, understanding and preserving contemporary art, in response to the absence of effective and museum standard online archival systems.

The system was developed in response to a specific deficit. However, it exists within a cultural economy that has gripped institutions in the last decade, described by French Philosopher Jacques Derrida as 'archival fever.' Archival fever is of course synchronous with the evolution of pervasive media including email, which have blurred what is public and what is private, what is on and off the record. A Database is unique in relation to existing museum quality databases presently in use because it has embraced one of the most radical currents in this economy – 'open source' software.

Open source means, most simply, that the software can be grown through collective intellectual capital. In an era where the iphone spawns new applications every day, this

philosophy looks very rational. However, A Database was the first archival tool for the sector which embraced the ecology with which we are all increasingly familiar.

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A Database (AD) is a not-for-profit online and open source database environment specifically designed to represent artwork and visual culture effectively in a democratic environment. As a concept, AD originated in 2005 by Geoff Laycock,

James Moores and Hatty Vidal-Hall. After completing the pilot project, the system has evolved consistently allowing the inclusion of multimedia content, more user interaction and distributing the data generation and access control to the partner organisations.

Further improvements to the system architecture make it more easily scalable and ready to include new partners' contributions. Most of the current collections have published their archives and are freely searchable by curious members of the public or professional curators or artists with a specific research inquiry. The development of the system to date has been supported by A Foundation, Arnolfini, Arts Council England, Bloomberg New Contemporaries, Design Museum, FACT, Liverpool Biennial and private collections keen to see an effective and secure collections management tool that is also easy to search online. The system reflects the collective expertise of these contributors and affirms the observation made in *Archive Fever*:

*'The archivization produces as much as it records the event. This is also our political experience of the so-called news media.'*¹¹

Mission and challenges

Contemporary art practice expresses its content in a variety of formats that expands the boundaries of the traditional inventory of art objects. The artwork itself acquires its meaning in a complex web of reference. Often the object itself dematerialises, for example when the artwork is a performance, or a statement, the action itself adding critical meaning in a series of site-specific installations. Preservation of artworks increasingly means preserving the idea or intellectual property that constitutes the

The screenshot shows the 'A Database' website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'A Database' in large letters, followed by a search bar and links for 'Overview', 'About a Database', 'Services', and 'Contact'. Below this is a secondary navigation bar with tabs for 'Who', 'What', 'When', and 'Where'. A search bar is also present. The main content area displays the profile of 'Yoshi, Yohji' and a specific work titled 'Mr. Denanāng'. The work details include:

- Work Type:** video installation
- Date of work:** 2007
- Materials:** medium: DV camera, TV monitor, mixed media
- Style Period:** contemporary art
- Technique:** video installation, construction
- Collection:** New Contemporaries
- Description:** **LESS!** Selectors' Comments: Mr Demanding seems to reflect on global mass entertainment fixations, albeit in a wretched lo-fi style. There's a kind of Blue Peter bathos to both works, but they are also very witty. Ideas about nature, consumption and mortality we mixed in there too, but in a light, easy-going manner.
- Artist's Statement:** Yohji Yashi's works land somewhere between sculpture and installation, employing cameras and TV monitors to synthesise fictive spaces which are combined with toy-like sculptural contraptions. In these agglomerations childlike bathos, the tragically abject, and very humour conspire to disrupt the integrity of the space and disarm the viewer.
- Source:** "Bloomberg New Contemporaries 2007" exhibition catalogue
- Date of source:** 2007

 To the right of the text is a large image of the artwork, which appears to be a circular, glowing object with a camera lens and various mechanical parts. Below this are several smaller thumbnail images showing different views or related works. At the bottom of the page, there are links for 'Home' and 'Terms of Use'.

contextual and cognitive relations, as much as preserving the object itself.

New technologies, although allowing for scalable indexing and archiving of objects, also present new problems. Unlike most archival paper for example they are subject to obsolescence, degrading, etc. The multiplicity and kaleidoscopic explosion of art production which characterises the global arts market is a barrier to traditional archives. Therefore emerging systems need to find solutions to create less hierarchical but reliable archives suitable for research from the diversity of contemporary platforms that have defined the emergence of web 2.0.

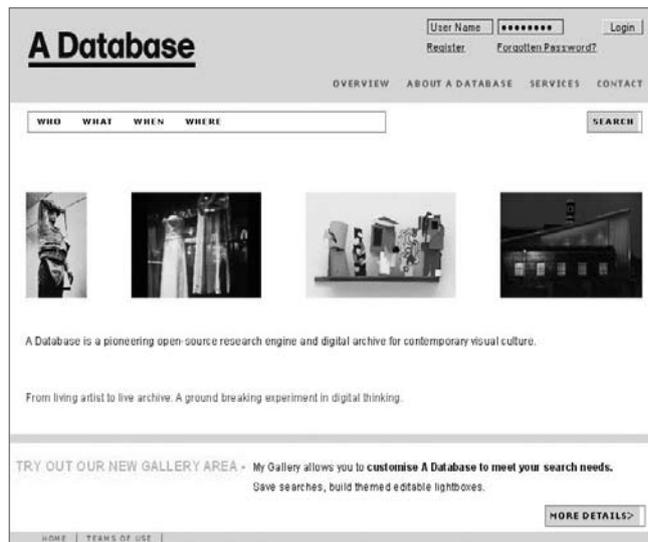
The mission of A Database is as follows:

- To develop a world leading internet-based archiving tool for art and visual culture
- To be a secure repository for discreet public and private collections of artworks
- To be a mechanism for the discovery of artistic and cultural content in the wider internet
- To be a repository for artistic knowledge, facilitating the sharing of experience across the professional arts sector
- To form a community of collections, organisations and users that actively employs the AD system as a mechanism to create and record artistic practice online
- To develop tools for individuals and the commercial art market to facilitate day-to-day working practice while effectively archiving the artistic results of this practice for future generations
- To be a sustainable service in order to protect the contents of the database for the long term use of future generations

General characteristics

A Database is a software technology developed for optimal web based performance, however it is predicated on universal standards of knowledge management. These are its technical characteristics:

- a) It is based on open source technology²
- b) Artworks are represented according to the VRA standard, the most efficient way of storing art content safely and securely while allowing the database to be searched and mapped by all



other heritage and archive-based databases. It represents a best practice baseline on which others users can develop future archives of diverse collections³

c) There are four types of record:

- WHO (artists, curators, selectors, organisations, publishers, designers)
- WHAT (artworks, publications, design objects)
- WHEN (exhibitions, talks, educational programs, production periods)
- WHERE (exhibition spaces, public spaces, locations)

d) Each record can be associated with one or more multimedia assets – images, videos and documents

e) There are four main navigation routes: WHO, WHAT, WHEN and WHERE. Each route provides

a lister that can be refined by selecting the subcategories and sorted by specific criteria. For example: the WHAT lister can be restricted to only painting works, sorted by date, and filtered to select a specific artwork.

f) Searching tools are tailored (filtering, simple search and advanced search)

g) Tools for registered users include: save galleries, save searches, leave comments

h) There is a section for basic collection management available to users for archiving a physical collection.

Structure

a) Each record can be linked to any other record, for example: artist-artwork; event-artwork; event-curator; artist-artist; work-part of a work; curator-event; organisation-events. The links between records provide a dynamic network of derived navigation routes. Each record can be the start of a journey.

b) *Links can be simple (unqualified) or qualified.* For example, a 'WHO' record can be linked to many different other records according to different roles. A person can be the artist for an artwork, the curator for an event and the collaborator for another artist.

c) *Multi-collection.* The works are grouped in collections that can be 'physical collections' or 'virtual' collections (e.g. series of artworks that have been exhibited in the Liverpool Biennial events).

d) *Multi-partition – multi-source.* The data can be accessed, produced and controlled through the main A Database website (www.adatabase.org)

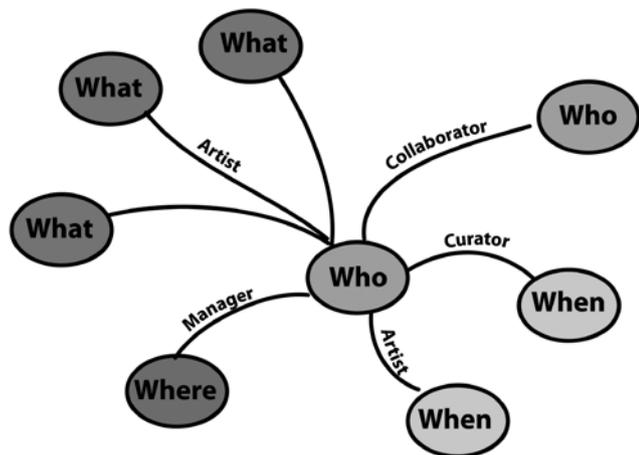
or through the customised partitions that have been created in relation to partner organisations and specific collections (e.g. Liverpool Biennial <http://liverpoolbiennial.adatabase.org>, New Contemporaries <http://newcontemporaries.adatabase.org>, International Times <http://itarchive.adatabase.org>).

e) *Cross-collection.* One record can be displayed in more than a single partition. One artist might have shown work in Bloomberg New Contemporaries and later in their career could be invited to the Liverpool Biennial of contemporary art. The 'WHO' record for that artist would then be visible in two partitions. One location could be the venue for two events organised by two different organisations.

Content generation could also be extended to smaller organisations and commercial galleries, and even to single artists with collections.

Lines of expansion

As described above, the A Database system allows different organisations or individuals to produce content for a specific record. This information is then available for use by anyone for free online if the authors wish to publish their records. The system is designed to replicate a professional archival ecology, but in



in addition to professional archivists, academics and curators, it is suitable for use by many others including artists, curious browsers and those in higher education. A Database, while originating from an initial innovative vision, has been successfully evolving thanks to the experience with a variety of partners each with specific needs for archiving, representing and sharing their data. There are three lines of expansion underway at present:

1) *Redefining the visualisation systems*. As the search expectations of users evolve, maintaining a high conceptual overview of the system and its future opportunities is a priority. With the system growing and the content being generated by multiple contributors, it has been necessary to define a protocol and visualisation systems for regulating the editing process and safeguarding intuitive access to the content. Different contributors could be producing content for the same object, requiring a strategy for making the content available in an intuitive and structured way.

A solution can be achieved by redefining the structure and the visualisation of a record as a juxtaposition of layers. Ideally each layer should be controlled by a different administrator. In each unique partition, such as the Liverpool Biennial, only the layer controlled by its administrator is displayed. However the main A Database website displays all the layers. These can be sorted according to useful criteria (most visited, favourites, most recent, advertised etc). This enriches the data with a historic and multidimensional sedimentation of information, which is highly valuable for representing the variety and dynamism of the contemporary art world.

2) *Expanding the range of possible content generators*. This would make A Database increasingly inclusive. The first stage of the project was defined by a limited pool of data input: only A Database staff generated and edited content on the system. The current stage is now seeing other organisations producing content that they input directly on the system. Each organisation is inducted into the system protocols but can then autonomously take possession of its data for distribution. Across the public and private sectors of the visual arts the management of knowledge around artworks is key to their mediation and distribution.

Like the evolution curve seen by social networking applications, we envisage a growing number of organisations with unique partitions, which would generate more and more sophisticated layers of historic material. Content generation could also be extended to smaller organisations and commercial galleries, and even to single artists with collections. The binding

principle would remain the knowledge structure which chronologically maps each unique object in the database.

3) *Flexible generation and hosting of data.* The third line of expansion involves the way data is generated and where it is physically hosted in terms of the servers. As more users come online, a central server model is costly and also high risk in terms of the stability of the archive. In a first stage, partnership organisations would mirror their records to the A Database system. This would distribute the impact of a system failure and increase the flexibility of the archive. A second stage could include some content originating from alternative online repositories accessible through A Database routes. This would allow A Database to continue to evolve.

The potential of such a structure would then be enormously amplified when combined with user registration functionalities and Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 features.

Why A Database?

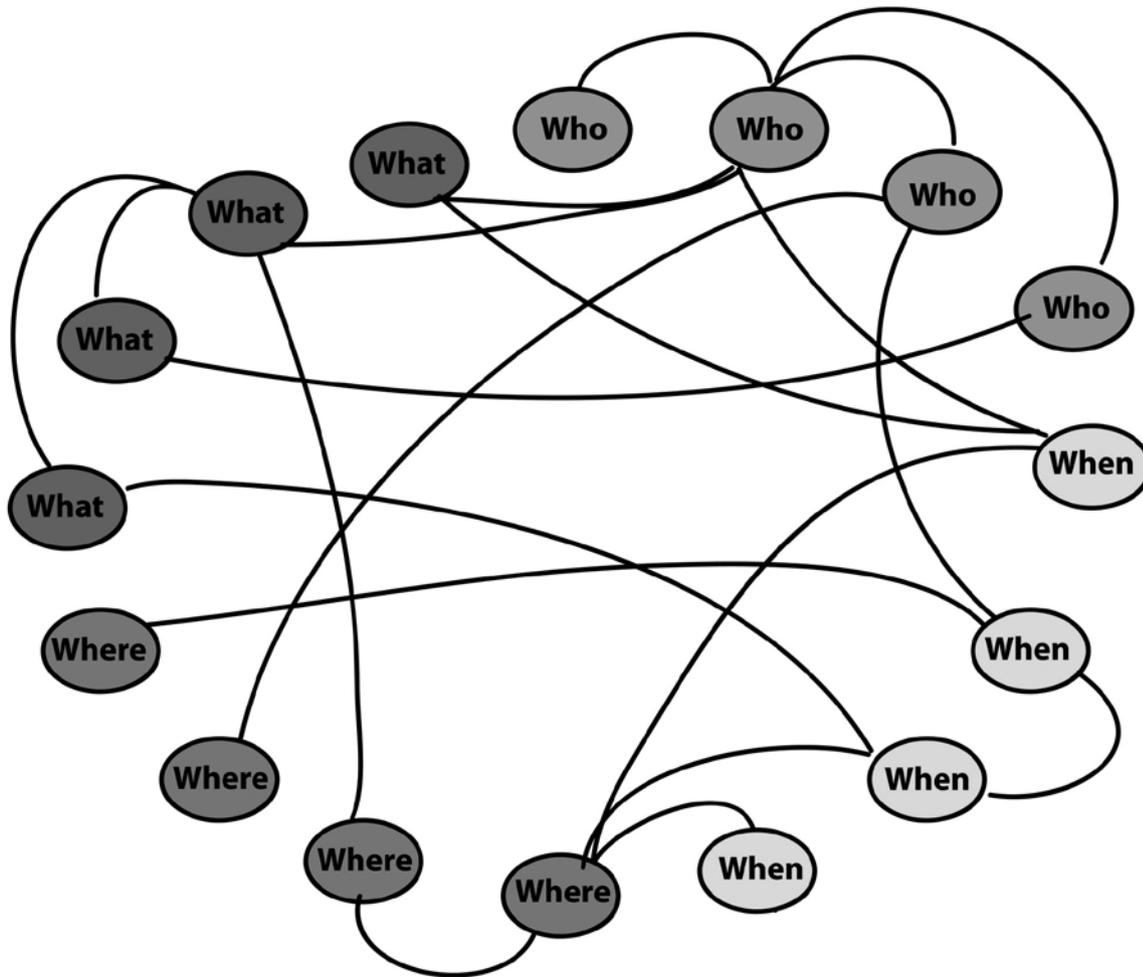
Contemporary art produces a constantly evolving network which exchanges and regenerates ideas. One object or one artist isolated from its context is not fully understandable.

Accessible archiving and preserving cannot be achieved by keeping information segregated in watertight compartments. There are many existing sources of information for contemporary art. These include: artist, gallery and institution websites; art market archives; online press and events information; online art magazines; artists and artworks databases. While together these form a substantial repository of information and services, the following are often missing:

- Standards of representation
- Dates and sources for the information displayed
- Cross-searchability
- Logical paths from one web resource to another
- Exhaustive listers
- Guarantees against media obsolescence
- Accessibility
- Comparable ratings

An alternative digital repository is offered by the collection management systems that work locally on the users' IT systems and occasionally offer add-ons for web publishing. These range from the wider museum management systems to software packages for the small gallery's day-to-day activity. While usually quite specialised for physical object management and commercial activities, these systems provide very limited access to a wider public and are subject to rapid obsolescence.

A Database, through its original approach, stands as unique amongst the present available resources. Unlimited by a specific organisational model or agent in the art industry, it naturally



embraces a variety of sources, providing a structured interrelation of information that acquires more depth and breath for new levels of content. The democratic legacy is guaranteed by the openness of the system. A wide spectrum of

sources is welcomed and all the content gets the same level of accessibility on the system. At the same time chaos is avoided by providing various types of routes according to the projected needs of those who will be using the database.

Users of A Database would have access to:

- An exemplary archiving tool for complex materials;
- Input into an expandable international resource for galleries, museums and other private collections;
- The leading global hub for data on key international collections;
- Networking opportunities for exhibitions, publishing and other outputs;
- A resource for online commercial exploitation of images;
- Statistical data on research trends;
- Editorial tools (e.g. an art magazine could have a partition of all the works, artists and events that have been reviewed).

As any artist, organisation, location, artwork and so on, could have a unique address, a logical map of the artworld would be generated through A Database. The potential of such a structure would then be enormously amplified when combined with user registration functionalities and Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 features. The structure could provide a highly desirable network of shared knowledge, as users take possession of the system. It is towards this spectrum of activity that A Database is developing.

Notes

1 Derrida, Jack. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Prenowitz, Eric. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

2 All information resources are recorded and stored in the open source XML language. The database is built using MYSQL database software

on a Linux Apache web server. The database software and query language is PHP5.

3 AD has been designed around the industry leading XML metadata schema for art called VRA Core 4.0 from the Visual Resources Association on the USA. See <http://www.vraweb.org/>

Sources

Visual Resources Association 'Attributes of a Trusted Digital Repository: Meeting the Needs of Research Resources' An RLG-OCLC Report, Mountain View, CA August 2001 <http://www.vraweb.org>

Buskirk, Martha. (2003), *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*
Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press

Images in order of appearance

1 A Database

2 A Database artist entry

3 Who strand on A Database

4 Web of what-where-when-who connections on A Database