

Miriam Heard

LIS 505

Repository Visit

Step into Chicago, Illinois and feast your eyes on an eclectic coupling of old and new. Chicago is full of culture; each neighborhood is like a city within itself—bursting with ethnic cuisine, live music, festivals, and art. It seems as though after the Great Chicago Fire, the Windy City was able to pull itself up by its bootstraps and forge a new and improved mecca for industrialization and development.

With such a rich and challenged history, it is no wonder that Chicago has become home to many museums. One such institution is the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (MCA). Founded in 1967, on Ontario Street,¹ as one of the largest contemporary art museums in the nation, the MCA strives “...to be an innovation and compelling center...where the public can directly experience the work and ideas of living artists, and understand the historical, social, and cultural context of the art of our time.”² Another mission checkpoint MCA wishes to accomplish is the incorporation of a diverse audience as well the establishment of a sense of community in relation to the art discussion.³

What better way to create a sense of community and promote diversity than with a museum repository? The MCA Chicago Library and Archives’ mission is to “preserve and make accessible the MCA’s institutional history and to support the research and scholarship of the

¹ “History,” *Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago*, accessed August 1, 2015, <http://www2.mcachicago.org/about/history/1960>.

² “Overview,” *Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago*, accessed August 1, 2015, <http://www2.mcachicago.org/about/>.

³ Ibid.

MCA's staff, interns, volunteers, and external researchers by providing access to exceptional contemporary art research collections."⁴ The mission statement correlates with the Society of American Archivists' core values which offer users an opportunity to access as much material as possible, with the acceptance of restrictions.⁵ Mary Richardson, the library director, concurs that the primary visitors are staff, scholars who are completing their master or doctorate program with most concentrations being art history, other curators from the MCA looking to supply information about a current work on exhibit, and curious visitors from the public.⁶

From the accessibility tab of the MCA's library webpage, it clearly states that there is restrictive access to the collection. Potential visitors must make an appointment to view the archives.⁷ This restriction is in place for many reasons. One is that since the relocation of the MCA to Chicago Avenue several years ago, the library is situated at the basement level of the institution. Entry is guarded by a security officer, and keycards grant access to the hallway and elevator which take visitors down. Unless someone is expecting a guest, the security guard is not able to let public patrons through. Also, by providing Mary and her staff with a reason for the visit, she is better equipped to pull the requested items beforehand, and check the un-archived material to ensure it is in adequate condition to be handled and lacks sensitive information (phone numbers, addresses, etc.).⁸

Prior to gaining access to the collection, a reference interview is performed. Through email correspondence, or a telephone conversation, a librarian gathers information about the

⁴ "Overview," *Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Library and Archives*, accessed August 1, 2015, <http://www2.mcachicago.org/library-and-archives-overview/>.

⁵ Society of American Archivists, "SAA Core Values Statement and Code of Ethics," accessed August 2, 2015, http://www2.archivists.org/statements/saa-core-values-statement-and-code-of-ethics#code_of_ethics.

⁶ Mary Richardson, interview by Miriam Heard, Chicago, IL, July 9, 2014.

⁷ "Accessing the Collections," *Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Library and Archives*, accessed August 1, 2015, <http://www2.mcachicago.org/library-and-archives-overview/>.

⁸ Mary Richardson.

nature of the prospective visitor's inquiry, and determines if the MCA is able to facilitate the research. Occasionally, a guest of the museum may inquire at the service desk about materials housed in the repository. If a brief interaction over the phone is not sufficient, an escort will guide the visitor to the basement for assistance.⁹

Theory has played a crucial role in the development of the archives of the MCA. Up until 2013, nothing had been archived.¹⁰ The library was basically a dumping ground for old material. At one point the library was not even staffed. Those involved in the overhaul of the collection had to start from scratch. Referring to SAA's core values again, Mary wanted to promote access usability, and decided to use date classification for the archives in place of LC which is used to classify the monographs.¹¹ In the OPAC, users have the ability to see the date classification in action when browsing the links provided under the MCA Archival Collections.¹² As of July 2015, there is not a program in place to manage born digital records, nor is there a complete records program. However, there is one in the works.

The main collection of the library encompasses contemporary and modern historical books that relate to exhibitions and art. The archival collection is institutional material such as the exhibition records that were produced during the process of creating a show, the collection of publications released by the MCA, promotional material, recorded performances, collections of video and audio recordings that the museum produced which are mostly exhibiting artists' interviews, and audio tapes of lectures by art historians.¹³

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² "Library Catalog," *Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago Library and Archives*, accessed August 2, 2015, <http://catalog.mcachicago.org/>.

¹³ Mary Richardson.

In the past, there was not a strict selection policy. After the establishment of a systematic approach to the collection, the library and archives have implemented new procedures. In regard to the monographic material, use of online resources and periodicals aid in the collection development process. As part of the curation department, Mary learns of the needs of the curators and stays abreast to upcoming exhibits which allows her to purchase or highlight material that relates to the exhibition.¹⁴ Only one copy of archival material that is from outside of the MCA is kept. Five copies are kept of programming that originated at the museum, while two of those copies are in open stacks, and three are safely housed in storage. If programming is from a visiting exhibit, three copies are kept with two in the stacks and one in storage. The goal is to keep the best of the best, but the most pristine is to remain in storage. The archive collections also consist of house artists books. These are curated and selected outside of the repository by a curator so they are not cataloged, but there is a finding aid available in the curator's office.¹⁵

Considering the repository is only two years out from being a glorified closet, there is still a considerable amount of backlog. Greene and Meissner mention in their article about more product and less processing (MPLP), that archivists should focus on providing access to all holdings on a basic level instead of using valuable time processing a few to the most detailed level.¹⁶ What still needs to be addressed from the exhibition archives span from years 1967-1999, and there are boxes more that have not been assessed.¹⁷ Tapes are in the process of being digitized, and material that cannot be repaired in house is contracted out to certified preservationists.¹⁸ Mary and one other staffed librarian have to tackle whatever comes their way.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005): 237.

¹⁷ Mary Richardson.

¹⁸ Mary Richardson.

In review of the material, MPLP is in place. Scanning the OPAC record for Alain Jacquet exhibition records from 1967-1968, there is a very simple date call number, a description of how many folders, some in house subject terms, who processed it (Mary), and a brief summary of what the records include.¹⁹

The library and archive collection is a faint whisper among the boisterous presence of the MCA as a whole. There is no social media outlet for the department, and all promotional advertisement on the library's rather hidden webpage links to the MCA directly. The repository is more or less known about throughout the information science and art community. Anyone familiar with museums and who has a thrust for history or the finer details, may also stumble upon the library, but as Mary mentioned in her interview, her patrons are institutional or scholars.

Sanford stressed the importance of flexibility when it comes to advocating for archives.²⁰ Mary has put forth measures to steer the repository far away from the era prior to 2013. Being a proactive participant in exhibitions, and acknowledging the needs of the curators ensures value is established. If the public has limited access, Mary has to look within the institution to validate the importance of the library and archive collections. The donors are reading the programs, learning about the artists, reflecting on Chicago's cultural epicenter, and opening their wallets to support preserving history and providing future visitors with a remarkable experience. And it is all thanks to Mary and the other librarians who retain archival records, maintain a relevant main collection, and catalog the resources in a user-friendly way.

¹⁹ "Alain Jacquet [exhibition records]. 1967-1968," *Museum of Contemporary Art Library and Archives*, accessed August 3, 2015, http://catalog.mcachicago.org/cgi-bin/koha/opac-detail.pl?biblionumber=17139&query_desc=.

²⁰ Gregory Sanford, "Advocacy in the Service of Archives: A Continuing Issue at the Vermont State Archives," in *Many Happy Returns: Advocacy and the Development of Archives*, ed. Larry J. Hackman (Chicago: SAA, 2011), 240.