Meeting Report: The ARLIS Conference 2010

Edinburgh, 14-16 July 2010

The 2010 annual ARLIS/ UK & Ireland Annual Conference, for art librarians, was held in Edinburgh. It is reviewed by Tamsyn Bayliss, who was able to attend the conference with a UKeiG student conference grant.

Background

Figure 1: The Conference Centre

The Art Libraries Society, more commonly known as ARLIS, has existed since 1969 and has sister societies worldwide. It promotes art libraries and supports communication amongst art information professionals. Art libraries are found in various sectors including academic, museum and gallery and public libraries. The 2010 ARLIS/ UK & Ireland Annual Conference was held 14-16 July in the beautiful city of Edinburgh, at the John McIntyre Conference Centre at the University of Edinburgh.

The Conference was attended by many art information professionals from across the UK plus USA, Canada, and other countries.

Figure 2: Conference Centre with Arthur's Seat in background

As a current and soon to be completed MA Library and Information Management student at Loughborough University with a love of art and design, art librarianship is an area that holds great personal interest and focus for my career progression. ARLIS is a friendly and dynamic group of which I am a member. I was very grateful to be awarded the UKeiG Student Conference Grant to attend this Conference, which I could not otherwise have afforded. I hoped to attend to aid my dissertation research on the future of art libraries and to meet more members of ARLIS.

This year's theme was 'ARLIS: The next generation' which was particularly apt for my dissertation. The Conference programme included pertinent sessions about new projects and developments, as well as interesting visits and talks by local artists discussing creative inspiration and by lecturers examining Edinburgh arts and culture. The Conference was a pleasant balance of food for thought, practical advice and a chance to discuss and network amongst the impressive surroundings of the University Conference Centre. This is situated below the natural landmark of Arthur's Seat, which we eventually got to see once the sea fog lifted!

Day 1

After a welcome and introduction by ARLIS Chair Pat Christie, the Keynote speech on the Wednesday morning was by Roger Wilson, Emeritus Professor and Head of the School of Fine Art at Glasgow School of Art. He discussed the changes over the decades during his profession as an artist and teacher and the progress in arts education since the 1960s. It set the theme of exploring factors that have been an impact on art libraries and caused changes within the profession, as well as the future in response. Sessions were divided over the three days under topics of Communicating, Curating, Perfecting, Digitising and Preserving the Future, which sums up many of the concerns and practices of art libraries and art information professionals.

Following the keynote speech, the section called 'Communicating the Future' included two sessions focusing on social networking technologies. The first speaker, Nicola Osborne, Social Media Officer at EDINA, presented a creative alternative to PowerPoint using the Flash based application Prezi. In her 21st Century version of a famous art work by Richard Hamilton, images of online applications and tools were displayed representing her digital life. This included her presence in Second Life and World of Warcraft, reminding us that millions of people interact with such platforms, and how personal, professional and educational life can be merged in such ways. Web 2.0 tools such as the crowd-sourcing website Aardvark was used to gain inspiration for this session, and we saw her page on Paper.li, a website which gathers your most popular Twitter communications and creates a personalised newspaper. All of this was neatly packaged in a mobile phone to remind us about the rising importance of such devices for Internet access.

The second session by Dr Sophy Smith from the Institute of Creative Technologies, De Montfort University, introduced us to her current research. This involved a collaborative artistic project between professionals and young students using Facebook, and was discovering how such social media can improve engagement and blur professional and amateur artistic boundaries. She reported how online social media is overturning old business models in creative industries, and how it can be used to shape arts practice. The need to define 'art' in online environments was considered, such as whether photographs in a Flickr album could be considered art. Facebook was mentioned in relation to the online arts studio 'Muse It' in the

US, an open group for sharing art works. Both sessions raised audience discussion about the shadier side of social networking such as privacy and ownership of uploaded content.

On the first evening we were privileged to be taken to the impressive Dean Gallery to toast the Conference and have a private viewing of their impressive Surrealist art collection. After a delicious meal in the Conference Centre's large dining hall, we had an enthusiastic and culturally enlightening talk by Margaret Stewart, Lecturer at Edinburgh College of Art about the College's large cast collection, Edinburgh's diverse grand architecture and its claim as Athens of the North.

Day 2

The following day's morning sessions covered 'Curating the Future' where we were introduced to the projects and plans of the library and archives at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art by one of their assistants Kirstie Meehan. She spoke of their issues in managing and organising vast quantities of the artist Eduardo Paolozzi's archives. The next session was held by a local artist, Professor Glen Onwin from the Edinburgh College of Art, who explained his creative inspiration and how his short- lasting natural art works are recorded in artist books, a medium which many art libraries hold in their collections.

Following coffee and cakes, visits had been arranged to some of Edinburgh's impressive libraries. Although it was difficult to decide which library visit to attend, I chose the National Library of Scotland, where we were introduced to the Rare Books and Conservation department. It was a great opportunity to see behind the scenes at a legal deposit library and appreciate the size and scale of the enormous collection. It was a fantastic chance to see some of their impressive rare book collection, admire some special decorative Scottish book designs and be shown the processes the Conservation department use to maintain books in the vast collection. I find this interesting in regard to art libraries; despite the useful e-resources and online information available in the arts, the subject has less e-information than others and printed materials are still in high demand. A great many have special collections, and the literature in relation to art history is still popular and will not be disposed of or become redundant any time soon and thus needs to be maintained.

On return to the Conference Centre, poster sessions were viewable over lunch, including information literacy projects and a crowd-sourcing tool created by EDINA to connect maps with detailed historical data (http://edina.ac.uk), plus stalls by sponsors of the conference.

That afternoon was another pre-chosen selection of two Breakout sessions, under the category of 'Perfecting the Future' all of which sounded interesting. I attended two sessions that appeared most focused on the future and relevant to my research. The first, ran by Leigh Garrett from the Visual Arts data service (VADS) discussed sustainability and efficiency in digitisation projects, as researched in their recent 'Look-here!' project

(http://vads.ahds.ac.uk/projects/look-here/). The findings showed various ways in which respondents to their survey currently undertook such projects and funding, and found how certain aspects need to be included for the project to be successful, accessible, cost-effective and sustainable. This includes collaboration, embedding digitisation in the organisation, measuring value and impact and the desirability of the collection. The second session by Holly Hatheway, Assistant Director at Robert B. Haas Family Arts library at Yale University (http://library.yale.edu/arts/) focused on public services. Issues of visibility, approachability and trends in academic libraries were raised, mentioning the increasing emphasis on accountability, digitisation, collaboration and improved scholarly communication. Teaching tools were also mentioned as a way to encourage communication, such as Ask Live for instant messaging; however, it was commented that Web 2.0 tools used in this library had decreased due to under-staffing and lack of interest from library users. The session concluded with talk of the future for new art librarians, mentoring and ARLIS/ NA's New York chapters support for Library students amid decreasing opportunities, such as lack of internships. Both were thought-provoking sessions including discussion from delegates about their library's practices and opinions on issues raised.

Following the drinks reception and dinner, we had an inspirational talk by Newcastle-based artist poet and publisher Alec Finlay. His various projects use new and old media to create interactive art and poetry. His latest work is an audio-visual word map which leads participants through the Scottish countryside as guided by the Japanese poet Basho, using Flickr as one medium to deliver this.

Day 3

The final day offered sessions explaining many the considerations and developments in 'Digitising' and 'Preserving the future'. The morning's session included a useful lecture by John Hargreaves from JISC Digital Media called 'Copyright considerations when sourcing, using and reusing images'. An important issue in most libraries, especially art libraries and art librarians, who need to advise their various users how to comply with copyright. It was recommended to keep due diligence files when securing copyright permissions, be aware of the multiple rights holders often existing in online images and make use of the trustworthy and cheap image banks available.

The following session was held by Annette Ward, Scottish Power Research Fellow and Development Manager and Stephen J. McKenna, Professor of Computing at the University of Dundee, representing the FABRIC digital art and image retrieval project

Figure 3: Edinburgh

(http://www.computing.dundee.ac.uk/projects/FABRIC/index.htm), soon to be publicly released. This collaborative project working with textiles from Liberty's in London and the V&A museum gave a fascinating insight and detail on the CBIR technique of image searching, which seemed ideal for visually orientated practical artists and students. Although the CBIR concept (Content based image retrieval for searching on ideas such as shape, colour and texture) has been used before, this was reported as the first one not based on words and metadata. It has been created to help designers search for inspiration, and reminded me of the traditional preference for browsing through shelves for inspiration and serendipitous discovery in an art library. Images were organised using algorithms to group similarities or differences, rather than long pages of possibly irrelevant, repeated or badly organised images. It was an interesting concept of which I had limited previous knowledge, and is a very creative and dynamic way to search and discover.

The afternoon's topic of 'Preserving the future' presented two different types of sessions, the first focusing on Edinburgh's public library and challenges facing LIS, and the second explained the accessibility of digital collections of a group of Scottish institutions. The first,

Entitled 'Leaping off the Edge' was by Hil Williamson, Library Development Officer at City of Edinburgh Council, and began with some pertinent points about art librarianship. She considered art librarianship will not be around in five years due to retirement or retraining, and questioned if libraries will even exist in 15 years. I personally believe art librarianship has a good future, perhaps not as we know it, but the skills and knowledge of art librarians will still be in demand

Figure 4: National Gallery of Scotland

amidst the digital revolution. However Hil mentioned plans for the expansion of Central library that holds the art department, and believed the future of libraries would lie in digitisation, rare collections, research and publications and the library 'as a space' for contemplation, social gatherings and as a cultural venue.

The final speaker Amy Millar, Project Officer at the Marischal Museum of the University of Edinburgh, showed us some of these aspects in progress here in the city and spoke of a current collaborative project across nine Scottish

Figure 5: Edinburgh Castle and Princes St Gardens

university museums. Sixty per cent of the collections of these museums were un-catalogued, although they are recognised for being of national significance. This project aimed to create description across the entire holding, enhance item-level records and create additional object images. Problems encountered included various issues around time and planning, copyright and IT, plus the need to create standardised keywords.

The plenary speech by Pat Christie raised positive and realistic points about the new direction and future of art librarianship. She believed the profession has faced fast change and will be straddling librarianship, curating and collecting. Her reflection on the Conference sessions was that of oppositional forces of challenges and opportunities. A Twitter feed (archive: http://twapperkeeper.com/hashtag/arlis2010) and a Conference blog (http://arlisconference2010.blogspot.com/) ran through the Conference, and the Conference will be written up in the quarterly ARLIS News-sheet, which I have contributed to.

Figure 6: Victoria Street

Attendance at the ARLIS Conference was very rewarding for me. I was also lucky enough to win a prize draw of a recently released art librarianship handbook. I plan on staying involved with ARLIS and believe professional societies such as ARLIS and CILIP to be very supportive and beneficial. I am very appreciative of receiving the UKeiG grant to attend the Conference in Edinburgh and think the Student Conference Grant is an excellent chance for new professionals. It is very beneficial to network, gain up-to-the-minute insights and become involved in a relevant professional society. This was an excellent chance to meet many friendly art information professionals and hear about their professional environments, practices and projects, as well as learning about the very interesting developments and projects from each of the sessions.

Tamsyn Bayliss is completing the MA Information and Library Management course at Loughborough University and is soon to begin working at the Courtauld Institute of Art library.