Sustaining Access to Feminist Art: The Judy Chicago Research Portal

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Introduction

This poster presents a case study in developing an online portal aggregating the archives of Judy Chicago, a contemporary feminist artist, held in multiple institutions. The project represents a model for collaboration, iterative development, and improving access and discoverability for both feminist art archives and for collections at smaller institutions.

Feminist artist Judy Chicago has been creating art since the mid-1960s, and continues to be a prominent voice in the field. As a pioneer in both the making and teaching of feminist art, Chicago's archives represent a valuable resource for scholars, curators, and art educators.

Through the portal’s inviting and welcoming interface, primary documents—artworks, photographs, manuscripts, and correspondence—from Chicago’s 60-year career are accessible to anyone with an Internet connection. Rather than being sequestered in multiple archives, Chicago’s papers and artworks are easily available to inspire and educate new generations of students, artists, curators, and researchers.

Improving Access and Discoverability

The portal enhances discoverability by finding commonalities among diverse records across multiple institutions that would otherwise be difficult to bring together. As metadata was received from the partners, it was not only mapped to the portal’s schema, but in some cases, was enhanced with portal-specific metadata that tagged items as belonging to specific bodies of work, themes, and formats. This layer of metadata was developed to provide consistent access to items on the portal. It included: "Terms for bodies of work, such as: the Dinner Party, Early Feminist, Pop/Emergent, Terms for themes such as: Collaboration, The Body/sexuality, Site Specific Works. Terms for various formats, such as: Artwork, Documentary Photos, Documents.

Alternative text was also added for image thumbnails and was eventually shared back with the partner institutions for use with their own images. In this way, work done for the portal project was leveraged to provide a concrete, labor-saving benefit for the partner institutions for use with their own images. In this way, work done for the partner institutions for use with their own images. In this way, work done for the partner institutions for use with their own images.

Collaboration

The Judy Chicago Research Portal arose out of a desire to create a single point of access to all of Chicago’s archives and artworks, which are housed at five different institutions:

- Penn State University Libraries
- Harvard University’s Schlesinger Library
- National Museum of Women in the Arts
- Nevada Museum of Art
- Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation

The portal was planned, designed, and developed at Penn State, which coordinated input and contributions from the four other institutions, as well as from the artist’s studio and Through the Flower, a foundation established by Chicago. Partners meet quarterly via Zoom conference to review milestones, share announcements, and weigh in on decisions that impact the future of the portal and access to Chicago’s collections. Although team members from Penn State lead these meetings and perform most of the metadata and development work on the portal, they have attempted to foster an egalitarian structure in which partners can contribute according to their own schedules and capacities. Penn State employed an iterative development process in which change and adaptation become the rule. The portal was initially designed in a pilot phase with representative contributions of fifty items each from the three original partners. As excitement about the portal grew, additional partners were added, the possibility of creating a single access point to all collection holdings led to a broader project scope. The team developed a content curation strategy that strove to balance each partner’s presence on the portal regardless of whether they had hundreds or thousands of items in their collection. It was decided that the portal would accommodate up to four hundred items from each partner.

A Model for Resource Sharing

The project demonstrates how a large institution with relatively robust IT and metadata resources can deploy them to highlight records at smaller institutions that might not otherwise be able to showcase their holdings as prominently. This inclusivity is especially important in the case of feminist art archives, which are often not widely known or may not be fully processed or digitized. In addition, this model speaks to some of the goals of feminist art, where groups of women worked together.

From the beginning, partner collections were in varying states of processing and access. Some had full finding aids and were largely digitized and accessible online, while others had only an inventory list. The portal was conceived to address this challenge by giving records from all partners a presence on the portal. Flexible and improvisational, the portal team pooled its collective resources to ensure that holdings at all institutions were included on the portal. In this way, Chicago’s art historical prominence could be leveraged to drive traffic and attention to a wider variety of collections and institutions.