

More than just a pretty interface: three recent projects at the Visual Arts Data Service

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The establishment of the national image repository hosted by the Visual Arts Data Service (VADS) at the University for the Creative Arts was an early pioneering effort in the 1990s to provide shared online access and preservation for digitised visual arts collections. Over the 15 years since the VADS image repository was first launched, and as the internet has rapidly expanded and transformed, the VADS team has also sought project funding to explore and address new themes and issues that have emerged within the arts education sector. Three of these recent collaborative endeavours are detailed in this article: the Kultur II Group which is supporting the development of institutional repositories in the arts; the Spot the Difference project which is researching the emergence and extent of a perceived ‘copy and paste’ culture; and the Look-Here! project, which has worked with ten partners to foster digitisation skills and strategies in the arts.

VADS image collections

A few years ago a painting was brought to light by a team of art historians who identified the work as a rare 17th-century depiction of the home of the artist Peter Paul Rubens in Antwerp. Yet incredibly, for many years previously this art treasure had been unidentified and used as a makeshift dartboard and slashed repeatedly whilst hanging in a youth detention centre in Buckinghamshire.¹ Following this revelation, the damaged painting was restored and then graced the walls of the National Gallery in an exhibition which highlighted some of the hidden gems found in British regional collections, and the work was also digitised, catalogued and made accessible online via VADS.²

This is just one of the stories behind the 120,000 art and design objects held in libraries, museums and archives across the higher education sector and other arts collections throughout the UK, which have been digitised by their custodians and generously contributed over the years to the VADS

image repository for free use in learning, teaching and research. This online image resource covers the full breadth of the visual arts, ranging, for example, from the elegant ceramics, textiles and crafts held by the Crafts Study Centre, to the bold graphic designs and memorable slogans of the Tom Eckersley Archive, and from the Royal College of Art’s collection of paintings from important artists such as David Hockney and Chris Ofili, to the everyday products and other plastic artefacts amassed by the Museum of Design in Plastics at the Arts University College at Bournemouth.

From 1997 to the present

Like leafing through old photo albums and remembering the fashions and haircuts of the past, the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine offers a glimpse of how the VADS website has changed over the time since it was first launched in the early days of the Web in 1997.³ In an article on VADS in the

Art libraries journal in the same year, Tony Gill and Catherine Grout wrote, 'it is bizarre to note that there were just 130 websites in the world in June 1993, compared to today's 650,000!'⁴ Some 15 years later this number is now reported to be in excess of 485 million, not taking into account the myriad individual web pages, images, videos, e-books, apps, social network profiles and other digital content available online.⁵ In today's ubiquitous internet landscape, what new issues and themes are emerging around visual arts resources in the education sector? And how has the work of the VADS team evolved and diversified in order to address them?

Look-Here! project

The Look-Here! project is one of a number of recent VADS projects which have explored new avenues, in addition to continuing to provide access to the rich, unique and diverse pool of digitised images for which VADS is most well known. The Look-Here! project was a collaborative venture between partners in ten university art and design collections, and obtained funding through the JISC e-Content



Advert for Cocoon Knitting Wool, in Myra's knitting lessons no.1: containing the rudiments of knitting and various useful patterns for this work, <http://vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=133567/>. From the collection of Victorian knitting manuals at the Winchester School of Art Library, University of Southampton, donated to the University by scholar and former bishop, Richard Rutt. Image courtesy of University of Southampton Libraries.

programme from the end of 2009 to early 2011. This programme set out to develop and explore the more 'invisible' elements behind digitisation and to foster the skills, strategies and capacity needed to support and maintain digitisation within institutions.

Many of the project partners were completely new to digitisation and others were looking to develop their knowledge further in this area, and the project provided partners with training, guidance and the opportunity to exchange experience and advice through a series of ten joint workshops. These events included a blend of sessions by project partners, VADS staff and a number of invited experts, and each workshop focused on a different theme of interest to partners, including selection for digitisation; copyright clearance and managing IPR issues; image metadata standards and thesauri in the visual arts; digitisation technologies; understanding user needs; Web 2.0 and the use of 'crowdsourcing' to engage audiences; the development of online learning materials utilising digitised collections; and the funding, sustainability and licensing of digitised content.

In parallel with these events, the project partners also began to explore the ways forward for digitisation at each of their collections. Several partners focused on particular collection strengths and specialisms: for example, the Winchester School of Art Library has focused on how it can digitise and promote items from its Knitting Reference Library of rare books, knitting patterns and related materials;⁶ the Library at University College Falmouth has digitised a special collection of images by painter and former Principal, Tom Cross; and the Design Archives at University of Brighton have extended their existing expertise in digitising analogue photographs to also encompass the digitisation of typed and handwritten documents, focusing on a key research theme, the 1951 Festival of Britain. Staff at Bradford College have also considered how to do digitisation 'on a shoe string' in a time of austerity and have developed a pilot digital collection from the College's textile archive by utilising the help of college alumni and only digitising out-of-copyright 19th-century textiles.

Whilst a number of partners focused on particular special collections in their holdings, others looked at digital provision across multiple collections or departments. For example, the Special Collections and Archives Centre at University of the Arts London (UAL) has investigated and developed charging policies and procedures across their collections to deal with the increasing number of requests by external users for digital images for commercial purposes. At the Library of the

University for the Creative Arts (UCA), a digitisation audit was undertaken to identify all the digitisation activities taking place across the university, to provide an overview to inform the development of a proposed digitisation strategy and new digitisation unit in the Library. The Library has subsequently obtained internal funds to develop this unit, and to undertake the 24/7 project in 2012 to digitise student reading list material and a selection of other library items for use in learning, teaching and research.

The approaches adopted by the Look-here! project partners are detailed in a series of case studies which have been shared on the project website, along with information about the project workshops and project conference, and links to a number of the resultant image collections available online.⁷

Kultur II Group

A recently emerging field in the arts education sector is the development and management of institutional repositories for staff and student research outputs in the creative arts. The art and design-based disciplines present additional challenges compared with other academic subjects, with the products of academic enquiry in the arts not only including the traditional book or journal article but also less conventional practice-based research activities such as exhibitions, performances and installations, involving more complex, multifaceted and multimedia documentation.

The development of online research repositories has been driven by a number of factors, such as the open access agenda; ambitions to increase the visibility of research outputs, to raise research profiles, and to encourage collaboration between scholars; the need to satisfy the requirements of UK research grants to disseminate outputs to the public; and the potential to assist universities with preparing their submissions to the forthcoming Research Exercise Framework (REF) in 2014, which will be used as a yardstick to determine the allocation of research funding from 2015 onwards.

This field, particularly in the arts, is still fairly



Lots Road Power Station, by John Minton, 1953, from the Royal College of Art Collection, <http://vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=176670/>. The Royal College of Art painting collection includes examples of work by former staff and students, and the College also holds a photographic record of student work from final year degree shows, dating from the 1960s.

young and the first two exclusively arts-focused institutional repositories were launched at UAL and UCA in 2010, as a result of the JISC-funded Kultur project led by the University of Southampton, utilising the technical expertise of its EPrints Services team, in collaboration with the two arts universities and VADS. This project is discussed in greater detail in an earlier article in the *Art libraries journal* by Wendy White and Clare Hemmings in 2010.⁸

Subsequently VADS has extended this collaboration further through the formation of the Kultur II Group in the same year and through follow-on projects such as Kultivate and eNova. The Kultur II Group is a community of practice which is open to all staff across the sector who are initiating, managing or otherwise engaging with institutional repositories and research deposit in the creative arts, and the group currently includes representatives from over 40 universities. One of the

central themes explored by the group over the past year is the issue of advocacy, and the dialogues, training and promotional activities that can be used for supporting, encouraging and assisting arts researchers in depositing their work. This and other key topics have been examined through a series of events, case studies and toolkits that have been developed for repository staff dealing with arts research deposit.⁹

Technical development is also being undertaken as part of the Kultivate and eNova projects to further augment the EPrints open source repository software, which is the most widely-used institutional repository software in the UK, with new enhancements that are specifically attuned to the needs and behaviours of arts researchers.¹⁰ User requirements have been gathered, and planned enhancements include adjustments to the MePrints plug-in and the inclusion of an image gallery display on individual researcher profile pages; improving and building on the way that arts projects are presented and grouped in the EPrints repository; and visual enhancements to the IRStats plug-in which displays download statistics for each research output.

Spot the Difference project

The Spot the Difference project is another recent VADS initiative that started in 2011, and is researching the concept of 'visual plagiarism'.¹¹ The increasing use and growth of the internet is often reported to have given rise to a perceived 'Ctrl+C, Ctrl+V boom', a culture of copying and pasting content found online, and an apparent increase in the incidence of plagiarism.¹² Yet whilst there has been extensive research and guidance on the nature of text-based plagiarism in universities and the issues surrounding it, relatively little work has been published on the topic of plagiarism in non-text based media.¹³ The Spot the Difference project seeks to address this gap and to undertake research into the complex and nebulous notion of 'visual plagiarism'. The project is a joint endeavour between VADS and the Centre for Vision, Speech and Signal Processing at the University of Surrey, and has been made possible through an innovation grant from the JISC e-learning programme.

The concept of 'plagiarism' is a particularly grey area in the creative arts disciplines. Arguably no creative work can be completely original and without some element of external influence, and copying and imitation is often seen as an essential step in students' learning and development,

particularly in the early stages of a course and one that forms part of the process of finding their own 'voice' or 'style'. For instance, product design and fashion design students may be given a brief to create items that fit within an existing product range, and many fine art students have sat in galleries drawing the pieces that inspire them.¹⁴ Collage, pastiche, appropriation and homage also have a central place in the history of fine art. For example, Marcel Duchamp famously used 'found objects' or 'ready-mades' such as his signed urinal in 1917 and his postcard of the Mona Lisa with a pencilled-on moustache and beard. Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince also gained notoriety in the 1980s for their even more wholesale appropriation and 're-photography' of existing photographic images. These and other modern artists have sought to provoke and 'stir the pot' around the question of 'what is art?' and to challenge the notions of originality, authenticity and authorship.¹⁵

At the same time, many artists and designers seek to protect and defend their intellectual property rights. The stories of high street chains using the work of independent artists, designers and students without their permission, credit or recompense are usually met with outcry when posted on dedicated 'name and shame' websites such as 'You Thought We Wouldn't Notice' or the Facebook group 'Designers and Illustrators against Plagiarism'.¹⁶ In order to raise awareness and to highlight the impact of this practice on small companies and designers, the German organisation Action Plagiarius has also been awarding the annual Plagiarius Award since 1977 to manufacturers and distributors who have been deemed by the award's judges to be making the most blatant design imitations.¹⁷ Students are also not immune to public scrutiny, and in 2009 and 2010 there were two incidents involving degree students from the UK who had allegedly traced the work of illustrators and presented this work for assessment or competition, which were brought to light on artists' blogs and social networks.

As members of the UK Art Libraries Society (ARLIS/UK&Ireland) and the Association of Curators for Art and Design Images (ACADI) are well aware, there are additional issues around the use and referencing of visual work in staff and student presentations, lectures and essays. Without a suitable collective licensing scheme for libraries to provide a centralised institutional digital image library for learning and teaching, the sector is currently heavily reliant on sourcing images from the internet for these purposes.¹⁸ Yet it is often difficult to ascertain what the terms of use are for online images and to establish their correct reference



Rhoda bag by Sarah Bayley, 2009, constructed using milk bottle tops, shower hosing, a CD, and waste from the pharmaceutical packaging industry, <http://vads.ac.uk/large.php?uid=130696/>. From the Museum of Design in Plastics (MoDiP), Arts University College at Bournemouth, the only accredited museum in the UK with a focus on plastics.

information, particularly if the images have been found on blogs or via the increasing number of social image bookmarking websites such as Tumblr, We Heart It, Ffffound, and Pinterest, where images frequently appear without their original description and metadata.¹⁹

The Spot the Difference project has elicited the views and experiences of academics and support staff surrounding this complex web of issues from across the art and design education community, through a number of in-depth interviews and an online survey, and the project has also conducted a review of existing literature on this topic. The survey has received 158 responses from members of staff from across the sector, and at the time of writing this data is in the process of being analysed and synthesised.

In addition, the project has set out to investigate the potential uses and relevance that visual search technology may have to offer in this complex area, with particular reference to a visual search pilot that is being developed by the Centre for Vision, Speech and Signal Processing at the University of Surrey.

Visual search technology analyses the actual content of an image rather than the textual metadata associated with it, and well-known examples include the Tin Eye reverse image search engine as well as the visual search feature launched by Google Images in June 2011.²⁰ A series of project workshops was held in spring 2012 to pilot and gather feedback on the application and relevance of this technology; to share resources on the subject of 'visual plagiarism'; and to provide an opportunity to explore, discuss and debate the topic in further detail.

Conclusion

This article has outlined several recent projects which are exploring issues around the creation, management and use of digital visual arts resources in the education sector. All of these projects are very much collaborative ventures which have enabled the partners involved to share their practices, knowledge and expertise in a wide range of areas, varying from knitting, embroidery and textile heritage, through to the application of computer vision techniques and content-based image retrieval.

Within the confines of this short article, it has only been possible to discuss a selection of VADS' recent work, and the team is also involved in a number of internal activities at our host institution, the University for the Creative Arts. For example, VADS staff have also been assisting with the development of a research information system; undertaking technical developments for an image database project; as well as undertaking projects to investigate the use and applicability of PowerPoint, Prezi and other image presentation technologies for teaching in the arts.²¹

In recognition of its work across the sector, VADS has also been granted Research Centre status within the Library and Learning Services Department at UCA, and will continue to foster new projects and partnerships and seek to identify new funding opportunities for the arts education community, to support the creation, management and use of digital assets for the benefit of learning, teaching and research in the arts.

Since this article was first drafted, the team has also begun work on another exciting initiative, the Zandra Rhodes Digital Study Collection project, which is being led by UCA's Director of Research and Enterprise in collaboration with VADS and Zandra Rhodes Studio. The project is digitising and providing online access to a selection of the fashion designer's most iconic and landmark dresses, garments, sketches and artworks, from over the last

50 years, held in Zandra Rhodes' personal archive at her studio in London. Students will be involved in the project from start to finish, assisting with tasks such as the preparation and staging of the garments and helping with researching and entering catalogue information. The UCA Digitisation Unit has also made its first outing as a 'mobile digitisation unit' to undertake scanning of the two-dimensional material. This unique resource will be made available to the wider learning, teaching and research community in 2013; to follow the project's progress, see the project blog at zandrarrhodesarchive.wordpress.com.²²

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