

# Virtual Cycles of Discovery: Promoting Art Research in the 21st Century

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Video link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tv9sX\\_iFIAM&t=23m00s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tv9sX_iFIAM&t=23m00s)

The Museum of Modern Art [MoMA] in New York continues to be a great place to see some of the best modern and contemporary art in the world; whether it is the permanent collection or special exhibitions, we take a lot of pride in what visitors see when they come to the galleries; and we hope they take away a souvenir booklet of our highlights, available in at least nine languages.

Our displays follow a pretty traditional model – objects on the wall or in the galleries, arranged in a compelling way; my talk was originally entitled ‘Reaching Out to Gather In: Promoting Art Research in the 21st Century’, but I recently heard a phrase that I think is very timely, which is what I believe all of us will be addressing [at this conference] in some form: ‘Virtual Cycles of Discovery’. You might ask *why*, since we have a long history of successfully sharing our collections via the traditional means of acquiring, cataloguing and access. Many institutions would be content just to continue doing that to the best of their abilities.

However, I think that at MoMA’s Library and Archives there is a new attitude that is not so much only about *collecting* but rather how we *promote* those collections. We also acknowledge that the catalogue, as good as it is, is certainly not the only way to promote our wonderful collections and is sometimes even insufficient as a promotional tool. If our goal is to embed our collections successfully into teaching and learning, to use the broadest terms, then we need to be prepared to let others make the case for our collections. Therefore, I would like to share examples of how the Library and Archives connect and collaborate with new stakeholders.

## Background and History

MoMA was founded in November 1929, and its founding director, Alfred Barr, recognised that publications and research should complement exhibitions. As a result, what started as a small curatorial collection was more formally established as a library in 1932, and in those days a library was a convenient place to put anything that was deemed of enduring value, such as letters, files and documentary photographs. This kind of situation was not unique to MoMA, and indeed the story of most museum libraries follows this track; as the collections became richer in content, the obligation to share them with a larger world than just museum staff became a goal (see fig. 1).

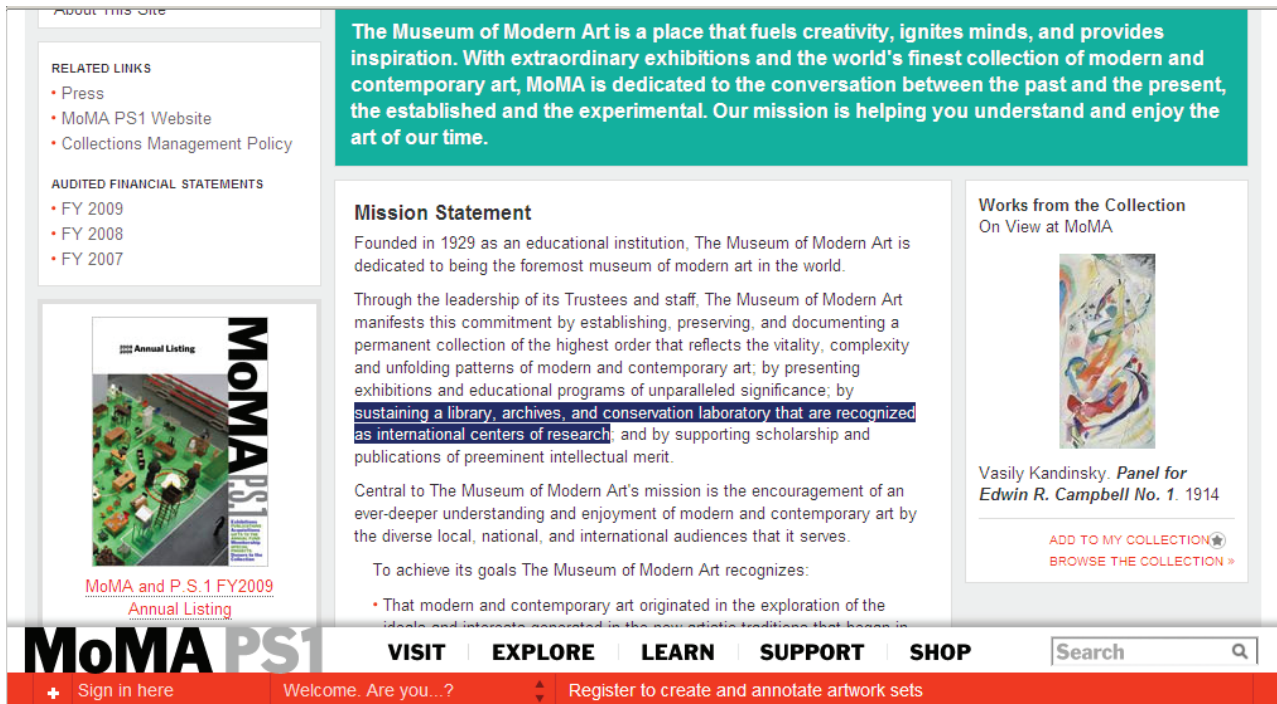


Fig. 1. The MoMA mission statement.

Today, our home is in a beautiful facility which opened to the public in November 2006 after several years of planning, and it has provided us with a showcase for promoting Library and Archival collections. The Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Education and Research Building is located on the east side of the MoMA sculpture garden as part of our midtown facility, which was vastly augmented in 2004 and 2006 (see fig. 2). The Library and Archives occupy most of the top three floors, with the public reading rooms located on the sixth floor in a beautiful environment for research and study (see figs 3-4).



Fig. 2. The Cullman Education and Research Building from 54th Street.



Fig. 3. The MoMA Library Reading Room.



Fig. 4. The MoMA Archives Reading Room.



Yet we do much more than provide access to the material in the Library and Archives, which numbers about 350,000 books documenting modern and contemporary art and over 5 million papers in the Archives. In fact, our new building has allowed us to promote and do outreach about our programmes in a number of ways. We sponsor regular exhibitions drawn from the collections in addition to special events focussing on research resources, working closely with the Museum's curatorial and education departments in conjunction with MoMA exhibitions and programmes. We also have access to MoMA's social networking sites to promote Library and Archival resources to MoMA's huge Facebook, blog and Tumblr communities. In fact, our Tumblr site has over 253,000 followers.

The Library's collection follows a fairly traditional approach to collection development, focussing on documentation of works in the MoMA collection; but I will describe how we expanded the scope of the Archives beyond a classic institutional archive, which historically concentrates on documents created within the MoMA walls. Because the new building is the first purpose-built space for archives storage and access, we have been able to broaden the scope to include archives created outside MoMA. You have heard the cliché 'build it, and they will come'. That has been an effective strategy for adding wonderful holdings to the Archives, including archives of dealers, such as Richard Bellamy and Paul Rosenberg, avant-garde magazine archives, such as *Avalanche* magazine, archives of such writers as Calvin Tomkins and, finally, our crown jewels, archives from collectors, such as the Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus collection and the Herman and Nicolle Daled collection of conceptual art.

It is not enough to just acquire, process and house the collections: we need to promote their use as well. Online finding aids and our online library catalogue ensure that users know what we have / do not have in advance of their visit. Now that we have the new reading rooms, we are in good shape, certainly from the researcher's standpoint.

## Outreach

We have also done some outreach in what we think are creative ways to ensure that our community, both onsite and globally, knows what we have. Here are some notable examples. When the new gallery building opened in 2004, it also coincided with the 75th anniversary of MoMA; to celebrate that we published a picture album portraying the history of MoMA's first 75 years through photographs and documents from the Museum Archives. The Museum's archivist, Michelle Elligott, and long-time MoMA editor, Harriet Bee, combed through thousands of photographs and documents to select several hundred images which tell the story of the Museum and, by extension, the history of modern and contemporary art in America. The publication *Art in Our Time* remains an invaluable resource and is a great example of how a museum's archives can be mined for information.

The bulk of the photographs came from the Museum's extensive photo archives, and I am pleased to report that over 23,000 of them have been digitised by ARTstor for inclusion on their site. Digitisation also plays a role in bringing to life MoMA publications, such as our *MoMA Bulletin*, which played a key role in promoting the collections and programmes from 1933 to 2002.

Another good example is the ongoing series featuring archival material in the twice-yearly publication *Esopus*; the publisher and editor of the magazine expressed interest in archival material, so I suggested that he work with our archivist to feature something from the Museum Archives in each issue. The feature is called 'Modern Artifacts' and has been a great way to promote undiscovered avant-garde material in the Archives. We have reached 17 issues, with the most recent in Spring 2017 describing an unexpected, for MoMA, exhibition of Italian Renaissance paintings held at the Museum in 1940.

The series began in 2006. First was an article featuring all of the various iterations of Alfred Barr's famous charts outlining the development of modern art. The reader is no doubt familiar with the final version, but all of the various drafts are just as fascinating, and those are lovingly reproduced in the magazine. Second was a feature showing the correspondence between long-time MoMA curator and advocate of contemporary artists, Dorothy Miller, and James Lee Byars, the endlessly fascinating conceptual artist. We have reached 23 issues, with the most recent in May 2017 featuring the evolution of MoMA's sculpture garden.

Our space in the Cullman building also allows us to exhibit material from the Library and Archives on an ongoing basis, about four exhibitions a year. In addition, we have been partnering with the Museum's curatorial and education department on a number of panels and presentations throughout the year; again, our new space allows us to not only talk about the research resources in a formal lecture environment but also to adjourn upstairs to the Library and Archives reading rooms for closer looks at the material, usually accompanied by a glass of wine. This again has been an effective way to promote our resources and share our collections.

The Museum of Modern Art benefits from the interest and generosity of many individuals, and in 2000 we established The Library Council, a group founded to support Library and Archives activities at MoMA. Members pay US \$2500 per year and are invited to special events focussing on MoMA's research resources. In addition, we publish a specially commissioned artist book every other year. Membership dues and proceeds from the sale of the books augment Library and Archives acquisitions, preservation and processing.

The Museum has long considered oral history to be an important vehicle to preserve the spoken word and to bridge gaps in written documentation for curators, scholars, artists and the enrichment of the general public. The Artist's Oral History Initiative at MoMA centres on the Museum's unparalleled collection and the artists whose work has a prominent presence in it. The ambition of this project is to further expand the role of oral history not only for research, but also for the benefit and enrichment of the broader public. By filming the interviews and making use of a variety of digital technologies we hope to make the results of the project available in a variety of formats – such as on the Museum's website, as well as a research resource in the MoMA Archives. To date we have interviewed Vija Celmins, Dan Graham, Yvonne Rainer, Vito Acconci, James Rosenquist and Ed Ruscha.<sup>1</sup>

## Collaborations

I will provide three examples of collaboration, two internal and one external, that have served the Library and Archives well over the past decade. Contemporary and Modern Art Perspectives [C-MAP] for Art in a Global Age is a new research effort at MoMA, which is being coordinated by the International Program. C-MAP is driven by a desire to deepen the Museum's expertise and to expand the criteria by which quality in works of art and artistic movements is defined. I am proud to say that this initiative was prompted by the Library and Archives acquisition of the Fluxus archives, which challenged us to look at MoMA's collections in a 'non-Western' art way.

The initiative currently takes the form of three dedicated research groups at MoMA, composed of curators and educators, and Library, Archives and publications staff, to focus on global research in the visual arts of the Far East, Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe. The current topics for each group grew out of research for future exhibitions (Lygia Clark, Latin American architecture and the origins of abstraction), a recent acquisition (Fluxus) and a topic of cross-departmental interest (Performance).

1. <https://www.moma.org/research-and-learning/research-resources/archives/oralhistory?x-iframe=true#aohi>

Each of these original research initiatives will continue for three years, allowing for sustained and deep exploration of the subject. The main geographic foci for the groups reflect the Museum's long-standing connections to these regions, its commitment to conducting deep, prolonged research on these visual arts communities and the connections between the three themes and the arts of the Far East, Latin America and Central and Eastern Europe. I am pleased to report that librarians and archivists are deeply 'embedded' in each of the C-MAP initiatives and play a major role in travel, acquisitions, seminars and exhibitions. These initiatives also illustrate how barriers that once existed between departments at MoMA have been broken down, so that it is truly a cross-departmental collaboration.

The group works closely with MoMA's International Program, a long-established department devoted to the promotion of modern and contemporary art globally. It has a very serious scholarly and research component, which has resulted in the publication of a number of important publications around the theme of primary documents. Examples include: *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s* (2002); *Listen, Here, Now! Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde* (2004); *Modern Swedish Design: Three Founding Texts* (2008); *Alfredo Boulton and his Contemporaries: Critical Dialogues in Venezuelan Art, 1912–1974* (2008); *Contemporary Chinese Art: Primary Documents* (2010); and *From Postwar to Postmodern: Art in Japan, 1945–1989: Primary Documents* (2012). Forthcoming titles include publications devoted to Latin American architects from 1920 to 1985 and contemporary Arab art.

Recognising that collaboration is key to long-term viability for art documentation centres, MoMA was a founding partner of the New York Art Resources Consortium [NYARC], which consists of the research libraries of three leading art museums in New York City: the Brooklyn Museum, the Frick Collection and the Museum of Modern Art.<sup>2</sup> With funding from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, NYARC was formed in 2006 to facilitate collaboration that results in enhanced resources to research communities. We benefitted from the expertise of Columbia University's chief librarian and library innovator, Jim Neal, to help us work on a framework to advance a series of programmatic services, with a potential for transforming the environments in which these activities take place and broadening the collective audience served by the three libraries.

Our collaborations caught the attention of what many consider the newspaper of record, *The New York Times*, with a full-page article on 14 March 2010, describing the ground-breaking aspects of our cooperation. It is just this kind of coverage and attention that verifies the major role that art documentation still has in the 21st-century information landscape.

## Exhibition History Website

I will conclude with the latest example of how we have pulled together digital assets from around the Museum into a new tool that really inspired me to change the title of my talk to 'Virtual Cycles of Discovery', since it does precisely that: releases data on every MoMA exhibition from its founding in 1929 to the present. Like many cultural institutions, MoMA had done a decent job of digitising various components of its collections, including objects, press releases and installation photographs. However, with the hire of a digital strategy manager, she set about to manage the disparate digital assets that existed on different platforms. She had the good sense to seek leadership in that endeavour from the Library and Archives staff, since we had long advocated for a centralised approach to sharing our information. As a result, an exhibition history website was launched in 2016.<sup>3</sup> It brings together, in one search, information about every MoMA exhibition since our founding. Not only can you find installation photographs and full text of press releases, but we also digitised every MoMA exhibition catalogue and

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2. <http://www.nyarc.org/>

3. <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/history>

linked it to the exhibition history website; all freely accessible on the web. This was further enhanced with a full exhibition checklist that allows for keyword and name searches across every MoMA exhibition; as far as I can tell, this is a unique resource – many institutions have provided images of their collections or publications, but this is the first to link all of that together in a great online resource, resulting in an almost endless, virtual cycle of discovery.

### **Two Optimistic Perspectives**

- 1) Collaboration will continue to be imperative for continued success of art / museum libraries.
- 2) Increased value of special collections, rare items and unique archives within the art library environment will ensure ongoing research value.

### **Two Pessimistic Perspectives**

- 1) The need to recognise the perception that specialised libraries, and maybe art collections in general, are seen as elite.
- 2) More institutional resources are needed for the digitisation of the rare and unique materials held in art libraries; however, budgets remain flat for large-scale initiatives.