**TERRAS — Digital**

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**Digital Humanities as Catalyst for Digital Art History: The Slade Archive Project**

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The Slade School of Fine Art,1 an internationally leading art school based at University College London, has an intriguing but underused archive relating to students and staff, and their teaching, artworks, and experiences. The Slade Archive Project, jointly undertaken by the Slade and UCL Centre for Digital Humanities,2 is an interdisciplinary, highly iterative, exploratory research collaboration, investigating how digital tools and techniques can open up the archive to the public and increase engagement with its contents. We demonstrate that collaborative work with a centre for digital humanities informs and enhances the use and understanding of digital methods available to art historians—a field that has not, to date, made much use of computational research methods—and encourages and supports new archival research methods.

**The Slade and Its Archive**

Since 1871 the Slade School of Fine Art has educated and trained generations of world-renowned artists.3 The Slade has an extensive archive, including papers, photographs, class lists, student records, audio recordings, films, prospectuses, death masks, and other artefacts, providing rich evidence of the culture and activities of the college. However, this archive is difficult to access, and no attempt has been made to present it to a wider audience. Over time, the archive has been consolidated and dispersed across the university, with records now held by UCL Art Museum,4 UCL Records Office,5 UCL Library Special Collections,6 and within the art school itself. Cataloguing is incomplete, and the documentation systems are not interoperable.



Figure 1. The main body of the Slade Archive, held at UCL.

The art school is both the context and the subject of the archive: any project derived from this archive will be, at least in part, art historical in nature. However, the archive is also of great interest to alumni, family historians, filmmakers, and authors who request access and want to contribute because of an interest in the personal histories *beyond* their conventional scholarly value. In this complex web of priorities, interdependencies, and responsibilities, digital technologies can provide the means to engage with archival content in unprecedented ways.

**Digital Humanities and Art History**

There has been curiously little research that applies digital methods within an art historical context (beyond simple digitisation of collections). Although scholars are starting to question the relationship of digital methods to art history (Rodriguez Ortega, 2013) and are exploring new tools (Rodriguez et al., 2012), these are not yet embedded into art historical methods. The John Paul Getty Trust has been urging art historians to utilize more digital technologies (Dobrzynski, 2014), but it has been suggested that the digital needs of art historians can be successfully met only through the work of many support organizations (Long and Schonfeld, 2014): we have undertaken to do this in the Slade Archive Project, which is inherently collaborative.

**The Slade Archive Project as Digital Humanities Collaboration**

The Slade Archive Project was launched in summer 2012 as a joint initiative driven by a shared curiosity of what could be done with the unique archive materials within the digital space. At the outset, our small team7 working from different areas of specialization had yet to learn what the archive even held. The project was conceived as a flexible and collaborative frame under which various sub-projects could be developed, driven by the specific research interests of those working at the Slade and the wider university, and by available resources or discreet funding opportunities. UCL’s provision of seed funds8 for the initial scoping study of the archive gave us permission to work speculatively, to explore the archive in part by testing ways in which we might activate it, and the consequences and opportunities of doing so.

Framing the project as a digital humanities one opened up access to resources maintained by UCL Centre for Digital Humanities (such as the multi-modal digitisation suite9), gave access to institutional infrastructure for setting up and maintaining digital projects, and allowed us to embed activities in teaching delivered as part of the MA/MSc in digital humanities.10 Digital activities across the life span of the project are many and varied, and have included establishing a digital presence for the archive11 (branding, hosting, and guiding social media activities to encourage public engagement), crowdsourcing the identification of individuals within annual class photographs12 (prototyping a platform to allow the identification of individuals within digitised historical photographs), publishing archived oral history interviews13 (providing guidance on digitisation), and mapping the diaspora of Slade students (using GIS to geographically plot their career pathways).



Figure 2. We digitised a selection of Slade class photographs and, using our own prototype face recognition and crowdsourcing software created by using cheap, off-the-shelf tools,14 asked alumni to help us identify individuals. Visitors to the website can also add comments and add their recollections, and draw connections between students, tutors, and their historical context.

Another subproject is the Transnational Slade project15 in which we identify international students who studied at the Slade in the 1950s, in order to trace the impact they went on to have internationally after graduation. The 1950s were a key period of change between Britain and its former colonial territories, and art historically it was a time when modernism began to enter the work of artists who would play a more visible role in the Independence movements of their countries in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (Dadi, 2010; Enwezor and Achebe, 2001). Yet how art school education has affected the history of art in different parts of the world has not been fully explored. We again used crowdsourcing identification of those within archival photos and gathered input on encounters, memories, and understandings of both the context of the Slade in the 1950s and the international students who were in attendance. This research has already resulted in new art historical understandings: we now know that approximately 10% of students at the Slade during the 1950s came from outside the United Kingdom, which shows how important international students were to its culture and the resulting diaspora. The online audience engaging with this aspect of our project have provided new accounts, information, and archival material that have helped us understand further the Slade’s role in international art contexts, particularly in Sudan and Pakistan.

In undertaking this research through the public dissemination, display, and crowdsourcing of otherwise dispersed and inaccessible archives, we are, as curator Matthew Teitelbaum wrote in 1996, ‘learning in public’ (40). As tasks and roles once associated with different professional and disciplinary arenas overlap, our range of activities have expanded beyond the familiar art historical activities of researching in and extracting from the archive, to encompass the collaborative, digitally iterative, and publicly situated work of ‘enabling, making public, educating, analysing, criticizing, theorizing, editing, and staging’ (Weski et al., 2012, 8). The digital aspects of the project provided the means to approach, refine, and choose ways in which to interrogate and understand the nature of the archive, whilst challenging conventional epistemological and disciplinary frames as it brings methods, practices, and theories together in new configurations (Cook, 1997).

**Conclusion**

The Slade Archive Project, as well as enabling us to explore what digital technologies can do to support, encourage, and expand research and outreach activities centred around a world-leading art school’s archive, allows us to conceptually rethink the remit and scope of such archival projects, and the role that digital humanities centres have in fostering and exploring new research techniques within traditional humanities disciplines. Involving digital humanities in this essentially art historical pursuit enabled us to articulate questions that incorporate disciplinary concerns (for instance, the writing of art historical narratives, or the validity of our crowdsourcing efforts), alongside questions of how the archive not only *connects* people, but how people connect and contribute to the archive, and by extension, to our scholarly pursuits. The Slade Archive Project is, then, a practical example of the collaborative endeavour necessary to embed digital methods in art history research, as described hopefully by Long and Schonfeld (2014), and demonstrates the role that a digital humanities centre can have in helping colleagues exploring different aspects of their research. Employing the staff, expertise, and resources of a digital humanities centre does not suggest the need for some overarching authoritative digital humanities role to override the knowledge of archivists, curators, artists, and art historians. Rather it asks if and how the integration of digital humanities methods into the art historical landscape might add to our already rich disciplinary toolkit, and remind us of what we already know from our respective practices, in order to assist us in critically navigating our project together, where new convergences of the museum, the academy, the library, the archive, and the digitised spaces between continue to form new configurations of risk and opportunity in art historical research.

**Notes**

1. http://www.ucl.ac.uk/slade.

2. http://www.ucl.ac.uk/dh.

3. Famous alumni include Gwen and Augustus John, Stanley Spencer, and Ben Nicholson around the turn of the 20th century and early 1900s; Richard Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi in the 1940s; and Derek Jarman, Paula Rego, Euan Uglow, and Craigie Aitchison in the 1950s and 1960s. More recent Turner Prize–winning alumni include Martin Creed, Rachel Whiteread, Antony Gormley, and Douglas Gordon.

4. http://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums/uclart.

5. http://www.ucl.ac.uk/library/about/records-office.

6. http://www.ucl.ac.uk/library/special-collections.

7. Those listed as authors represent the core project team, but we would also like to thank Emma Chambers, Stephen Chaplin, Alexandra Eveleigh, Andrea Fredericksen, Gill Furlong, Colin Penman, Gemma Romain, Frederic J. Schwartz, Tony Slade, Alan Taylor, and Robert Winkworth for their input.

8. The Slade Archive Project was funded initially in 2012 by a UCL internal small research grant in the Arts and Humanities faculty, and then with a small research grant in 2013 from UCL Grand Challenges for the Transnational Slade component, which gave resources to employ a part-time research assistant and to carry out basic digitisation of specific items in the collection. In addition, sponsorship from the Andor Charitable Trust allowed digitisation of archived oral history recordings.

9. http://www.ucl.ac.uk/dh/facilities/digitisation-suite.

10. http://www.ucl.ac.uk/dh/courses/mamsc.

11. http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/slade-archive-project/.

12. http://sladearchive.github.io/.

13. https://soundcloud.com/slade-archive-project.

14. Digitised class photos of the Slade Archive are processed through a face recognition algorithm using OpenCV (Bradsky, 2000). This process produces a location mapping of all recognised faces on the larger images. This information was used to crop image portraits of each person recognised by the algorithm and created a static HTML page for each face identified. With the help of the D3 library (Bostock et al., 2011), we also built an interactive visualisation that highlights each portrait within the class photo. We then asked the public to help identify the sitters using the Disqus (https://disqus.com) commenting system, which has been integrated into each portrait page. Periodically, we collected the public’s comments and integrated the names of the people identified into the visualisation. Our prototype gathered a surprising amount of the public’s interest, partly with the help of some media attention (Weaver, 2013).

15. http://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/slade-archive-project/category/transnational-slade/.

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