

## ▶ A Database History

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### Introduction

**From living artist to live archive: A ground breaking experiment in digital thinking**

**Artists record the future: The future is digital**

**A Database is pioneering open-source research engine and digital archive for contemporary visual culture**

A Database (AD) is an unprecedented and unique digital archive system specifically designed for the recording, publicising, storage and preservation of contemporary visual culture. AD has brought together the best of the newest technology from around the world. It tested the system through a pilot project with New Contemporaries and with Greenland Street in Liverpool. The archive of both projects can be accessed online.

[www.adatabase.org](http://www.adatabase.org)

## ► Overview

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### Tomorrow's Art History

While historic works and artists in the great national collections have always been meticulously recorded and archived to the highest museum standards, the same cannot be said of contemporary work. Extensive research makes it abundantly clear that there is no equivalent documentation or record of contemporary art and visual or graphic material.

Until now, these have remained the poor relations of the art world, vulnerable not only through the intrinsically ephemeral nature of many contemporary art forms - installations, performance, live art - but also to dispersal into private collections, dismantling, destruction and disappearance. Much of this is the result of lack of adequate storage space in artists' studios.

### Best Practice

The AD Archive Project aims to remedy this by lifting the archiving and recording of contemporary art onto a new plane, one commensurate with that employed in the museum world. To this end, we are developing new technology based on the proven track record of the cutting edge data model developed by Visual Resources Association in the USA. The distinguishing features of the new software system are:

- its ability to record and archive contemporary art to the highest museum and national gallery standards;
- its metadata schema specifically designed for visual material that takes the user instantly to the image rather than to verbal data about it;
- its ease of use/access for artists and public alike will create communities at both ends of the message while democratising the medium.

### Digital Revolution

Digitally in virtual space, rather than real time in the gallery, is how people will increasingly experience art. Consider the increased recourse of the scholar to the Web and its virtual libraries rather than to the books that once made up his world...

AD is an innovative new tool that reflects - and to a large degree anticipates - the latest thinking on the intrinsic value of art as well as its wider social function. It is equally prescient in its concern to democratise contemporary art through the use of 'open source' technology.

We see the AD as no less than a new Manifesto for Artists in the age of the digital revolution.

## ▶ Concept

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### Living Artist To Live Archive

Artists record the future but contemporary art remains largely invisible to the artistic community itself and to a wider public.

It is a dynamic, vibrant and constantly changing form of expression often lost before it ever reaches the public consciousness.

### A Database Concept

What can be done to rescue the future? By creating a cost-effective, museum standard, online digital resource for artists, arts organisations, educational establishments and the creative industries, the AD is creating the technical means that will enable contemporary art to be digitally stored, catalogued, conserved and made available to the widest possible audience. Contemporary art will be secure and visible as never before.

### Access, Visibility, Conservation

Our research to date has made it clear that there is no software or system available for what we have outlined above. Unless an artist is 'selected' by the market place and displayed in one of the major national or private collections, the work remains invisible and inaccessible. It is no exaggeration to say that the vision of contemporary work in progress remains marginalised.

### Preservation

The two key areas in the long-term preservation of data within a digital environment are the storage of the data in open access (non proprietary) formats and the use of systems that do not rely on the long term survival of a software supply vendor.

## ▶ Technology

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### Resource Discovery

The structure and type of descriptive information about an artwork, such as creator or provenance, is the most efficient way to access it online. These data structures, or metadata schemas, best described as 'resource discovery tools', exist to delineate specifically visual data as opposed to the usual more generic data schemas in use. The present absence of adequately defined data on visual material makes the works in question elusive in conventional search engines. The image has primacy in the AD - a road map to the visual.

Storing data centrally using a museum standard resource discovery tool will enable the public more easily to discover works online.

### Open Source

A Database is being built within the principles of open source technology.

All information resources will be recorded and stored in the open source XML language. All image files, however created, will be archived as uncompressed TIFF image files with a defined colour space. The database will be built using MySQL database software on a Linux Apache web server. The database software and query language is PHP5.

The ethos of AD is to provide a robust system that can effectively and safely record visual culture information right first time. Once this has been achieved the database will securely serve the information without the extra risk of the obsolescence of either database or software vendors.

In addition to this, the AD project will be employing a regular multi media and multi site backup strategy for data security.

## ▶ Aims and objectives

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Since first conceiving the idea of AD, our principle objective has been to bring a new dimension to the archiving and recording of contemporary art and visual culture. To this end we aim to:

- ▶ to increase the visibility of contemporary art and its production
- ▶ establish an effective, creative framework within which artists and arts organizations can maintain and grow an archival resource
- ▶ provide training and documentation about best practice principles, methods and skills for the objective capture of works
- ▶ create a robust data structure specifically designed for the recording of information about contemporary works
- ▶ respect the integrity of intellectual property ownership status of works
- ▶ enable cross-collection searching
- ▶ contribute to the discourse among arts and creative organisations on making themselves, and the knowledge that they hold, more accessible

The future with AD looks something like this:

- ▶ AD will democratise contemporary art by making it visible and available to a global public
- ▶ create a global community of artists
- ▶ become the primary resource for contemporary art research and public access
- ▶ become an integrated part of the art education process: artists will become responsible for recording and archiving their work as they produce it
- ▶ allow artists to display and sell image reproduction rights directly on-line
- ▶ facilitate on-line submissions to exhibitions, prizes etc. Digital submission will democratise the field by encouraging a wider range of artists and easing the task of juries
- ▶ provide a locally downloadable archive and collection management tool for collections and artists with a more substantial back catalogue

- ▶ enlarge the scope of art education image providers globally by licensing use of the AD to them
- ▶ provide cost-effective and financially accessible print-on-demand image surrogates for the public with direct payment to the artists
- ▶ create an information centre for research into contemporary visual material and its production
- ▶ provide affordable virtual studio and storage space
- ▶ provide digitisation services for arts and visual culture

AD puts that future within your reach.

As André Breton said in the ground-breaking Surrealist Manifesto as long ago as 1924:

'In this realm as in any other, we believe in the pure joy of the person who refuses to admit defeat, sets off from whatever point he chooses and arrives wherever he can.' Come with us.

## ▶ Pilot Project

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AD has undertaken a pilot project prior to the wider development and application of A Database. A living archive is one that starts now: everything from this point forwards and backwards is recorded and preserved. The existence of the data allows the works and the artists to be found in perpetuity both in relation to evolving interest from users and, once the works themselves have dispersed to collections, walls and spaces across the globe, continues to make them available.

To this end, the pilot project will archive and digitally preserve the works of the New Contemporaries exhibition, with the resulting archive presented online - both on the AD and New Contemporaries websites.

Ownership is not in question here: it remains with the artist and AD will distribute work as instructed by NC or the individual artist. This is the beauty of the open source principle.

The pilot project was delivered in Spring 2007.

## New Contemporaries

The annual exhibition was first set up in 1949 for the British Society of Artists Galleries and known as Young Contemporaries. In the early years the exhibition went from strength to strength, gathering much critical and audience attention. Until the 1969 exhibition, artists and art specialists had selected Young Contemporaries. In 1969 and during the controversial exhibition of 1970 at the Royal Academy, students controlled selection themselves. The 1970 exhibition was the last for a few years.

In 1973, tutors from some London colleges - including Gillian Ayres, Paul Huxley and William Tucker - banded together to revive the exhibition. A new constitution was drawn up. The exhibition was renamed New Contemporaries and its first show was at Camden Arts Centre in 1974.

By the 1980s, the exhibition was held regularly at the ICA and a permanent committee supported the exhibition management until 1983. Each year, the exhibition was selected and organised by students. The last exhibition fell victim to financial difficulties and the organization was disbanded in 1986.

In 1987 the Arts Council of Great Britain commissioned a feasibility report on New Contemporaries to look into the future viability of the exhibition. The report was published in 1988 by Richard Shone, who then became the Chair of a Volunteer Board of Directors, and a new constitution and new structure for the organisation was established. For the first time, the exhibition was supported by professional administration and adopted a model of curatorial and college independence, inviting an outside team of selectors from the arts profession each year.

The exhibition was re-launched at the ICA in 1989 and toured to four regional centres. From 1989-1994, the exhibition was sponsored by British Telecom; from 2000-2006 it has been sponsored by Bloomberg. Apart from 1995, due to the absence of a sponsor, the exhibition has maintained an annual presence. In 1996, the exhibition attracted the patronage of James Moores and a commitment to the city of Liverpool, where it premieres every two years as part of the Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art. New Contemporaries is a revenue client of the Arts Council England. Since 1995, the administration has been based in Manchester.

[www.newcontemporaries.org.uk](http://www.newcontemporaries.org.uk)

## ▶ About Us

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A Database was created in 2006 by the A Foundation to initiate the digitising and archiving of contemporary art to the highest standards.

AD is the logical extension of AFoundation, which was created in 1998 to support the development and exhibition of contemporary art in Liverpool. A Foundation (Registered UK Charity Number: 1098692) was the vehicle through which its founder James Moores initiated the Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art in 1999. This is now the UK's largest contemporary visual arts festival. In 2008, it will be at the forefront of the events surrounding Liverpool's year as European City of Culture. [www.liverpool08.com](http://www.liverpool08.com)

In September 2006, AFoundation also launched the newly refurbished Greenland Street site, three former industrial buildings in Liverpool at the heart of the old port area, as the base of its activities in the city. These historic warehouses now form one of the largest exhibition spaces in the UK.

In the same year, AFoundation established London's newest arts community at Rochelle School on the Boundary Estate in London's East End.

AD has benefited from additional funding from the Arts Council North West.

[www.afoundation.org.uk](http://www.afoundation.org.uk)

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