

Head in the clouds feet on the ground

Author:

Johnson, Vivien Joan

Publication details:

Artlink: Australian contemporary art quarterly

v. 26

Chapter No. 1

pp. 76-78

0727-1239 (ISSN)

Publication Date:

2006

License:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/au/>

Link to license to see what you are allowed to do with this resource.

Downloaded from <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.4/44450> in <https://unsworks.unsw.edu.au> on 2024-04-25



200604045

head

feet on the ground in the clouds

➤vivien johnson

Last year in Auckland, we announced the birth of the *Dictionary of Australian Artists Online* (DAAO) a project destined to revolutionise understandings of the artistic landscape of Australia. The occasion was a conference session devoted to the scholarly legacy of the late Joan Kerr, who laboured for decades compiling more than 6000 scholarly biographies of Australian artists. To maintain and dramatically extend her work remains the DAAO's promise and long-range objective. However, over the past five months, in the process of conceptualising how to convert her research (and the other foundation works) into a 'web based knowledge management system', a vision beyond Joan's wildest dreams has begun to take shape and the DAAO can lead us into it.



Vivien Johnson. Photo Britta Campion/Un...

Expressions like 'sophisticated search functionality' enliven the conversations of the computer programmers and other content management specialists whom the DAAO has engaged to build this amazing art historical research engine. I prefer this statement, from an earlier draft of the DAAO's Request for Proposals to supply and implement a web-based knowledge management system, explaining the technical requirements of the system :

'Searching by scholars is the key reason for the existence of the DAAO. While online browsing is an enhanced version of reading a book, searching and filtering results has hitherto been impossible. The DAAO will therefore be the first large scale piece of digital research infrastructure available on Australian art history.'

In the final version of this document, 'sophisticated search functionality' replaced 'Searching by scholars' as the key reason for the DAAO's existence, reflecting months of intense work necessarily focussed on the technology itself. My role as Editor-in-Chief requires me to remain focussed on the human dimension of the Dictionary: the scholars whose ends it will be a means to and without whom it would not exist. However, I don't disagree with the final draft's definition of the DAAO's future place in Australian art scholarship as the 'central resource for digital research available on Australian art history'.

A good way of explaining how the DAAO will make art scholars' lives both easier and richer might be the following scenario, devised by a Client Working Group set up by the DAAO's Advisory Committee to assess user needs and requirements. Wendy is writing a book on Conrad Martens and wants to reconstruct the commercial, intellectual and creative field he inhabited. Like a true scholar, she wants to source comprehensive information about Martens' circle and others he was in contact with, rather than rely on vague generalisations about his historical context. How could the DAAO assist Wendy's research? From Conrad Martens' DAAO biography, Wendy could follow the links to the DAAO biographies of other artists mentioned in his entry. The extended biography of Conrad Martens also contains numerous references to locations where significant activities occurred and specific dates in Martens' life when they occurred. By searching on a combination of these locations and the dates of these activities, Wendy will be able to produce a list of significant others in Martens' life. More data could be obtained with a Keyword search of the biographies (short and extended) for 'Conrad Martens'. Still working from the entry for Martens, she could search on the societies and galleries with which Martens was associated, or follow links through mentions in the entry of his patrons to their biographies in the Australian Biographical Dictionary (online) which might also be a source of information about the lives and families of Martens' pupils.'

Here's one of my favourite fantasies of the possibilities of digital art history research which the DAAO could make a reality: an exhibition of paintings which map the Seven Sisters (Pleiades) Dreaming 'songline', one of the most extensive in Aboriginal cosmology across the entire continent. How could the DAAO assist me in putting such a show together?

- › Search on Indigenous in the 'cultural background' field and the Seven Sisters Dreaming in the 'Indigenous artist Dreamings' field
- › Search on Indigenous artists who have made this Dreaming the subject of their work in the 'subjects' field
- › In addition to biographical information about the artists, the DAAO also provides contact information about the art centres which represent them, and
- › Information about copyright on their works and who manages it
- › Information about where works by these artists are held and links to images of the works
- › Further information may be found in exhibition catalogues listed as references on the DAAO site and in auction catalogues and sales records.
- › The DAAO also provides links to such public access sites as Google, Picture Australia, Australian prints, the ADB etc.

Here's another: as a sociologically minded art scholar with an interest in Indigenous art, I might want to know what percentages of the Indigenous artists come from each state and within that, what percentage come from urban centres, regional areas and remote communities. The DAAO will be able to deliver a breakdown of Indigenous artists on a state-by-state basis into urban, regional and remote practitioners.

It can tell me how long people have been producing art for outside audiences in various locations across the continent and Tasmania. Other possible search operations towards a demography of Indigenous artists could include: What percentage of artists are women? What percentage are over fifty? art school trained? descendants of other Indigenous artists? Or what percentage of all Australian artists are Indigenous? The figure 50% is often bandied about, but what is this based upon: Australia Council applications? The census? The DAAO will operate with the most inclusive possible definition of 'artist' that (we hope) will still make it possible to get the job done: A significant body of work and identification by oneself and/or others as an artist. Do artists who have to keep their day jobs figure in the ABS statistics? Artists who don't get grants or enter the public collections? In terms of multiculturalism, the DAAO will make possible explorations of artists of Greek or Jewish or Armenian or any cultural background you like, or any combination of them; or from one's local area or at a particular time in Australian history. Artists influenced by Indigenous art and culture: the subject of Aboriginal art and its influence on non-Indigenous Australian artists can at last begin to be explored, not through the narrow lens of anti-appropriationist rhetoric, but through the lives of the artists who have ventured onto this contested terrain. And so on: immigrant artists, refugee artists, war artists, outsider artists, maritime artists, transgender artists; the art of architects, designers, politicians, teachers, graffitiists and poets. What books and exhibitions we could do! Think of all the other kinds of research-based activities around Australian art that the Dictionary could support. The DAAO's user base potentially embraces anyone in the world with an interest in Australian art. Art trails through the Dictionary, art tours of locations immortalised by Australian artists – the educational and cultural tourism applications are staggering.

Think of all the other kinds of research-based activities around Australian art that the Dictionary could support. The DAAO's user base potentially embraces anyone in the world with an interest in Australian art. Art trails through the Dictionary, art tours of locations immortalised by Australian artists – the educational and cultural tourism applications are staggering.

By what technological wizardry will the DAAO build an art history research engine to convert word processing documents into accurately and efficiently machine searchable fields? The first task was to devise the 'schema', the set of fields into which the DAAO's biographical data will be entered. This field structure will be crucial to the searchability of the DAAO – and its power as a research instrument. Information will be 'mined' from the foundation works and later collected for new entries to be entered in these fifty fields.

Content Mining and Content Migration are what the tech-heads call without discernible irony 'prose normalisation' – in other words, the transformation of normal written prose into a structured database format, a filtering operation which involves identifying common or recurrent features of biographical information in the text and cutting them into the fields which the editorial process of the DAAO has identified as significant. Items automatically identified by the machine like proper names, dates, or maybe a set of occupational categories, are identified by the machine and moved across into the database fields. Human mediation refines the raw data by sifting through the texts to locate more conceptually complex items of information.

You might be able to get your head around that, but actually doing it is quite another matter. Here the DAAO is blessed with the services of its Content Analyst/Manager Eric Riddler, who has methodically and meticulously set about performing that Herculean task. Here is an example based on his entry in Joan Kerr's *Heritage* :

[Heritage] <SOURCE> LEVI, SARA <ARTIST NAME> (1870-1942)
<BIOGRAPHY: BIRTH/DEATH: DATES>

Flower <SUBJECT: THEME> and landscape <SUBJECT: THEME> painter <MEDIUM>, craftworker <MEDIUM> and singer <OTHER ARTISTIC ACTIVITY>, was a member of one of the founding families of Melbourne's <BIOGRAPHY: BIRTH: LOCATION> Jewish <BIOGRAPHY: CULTURAL BACKGROUND> Community, eldest daughter of Alfred Levi and Rachel, née Benjamin <BIOGRAPHY: FAMILY>. A resident of St Kilda <BIOGRAPHY: LOCATION: ADDRESS> for many years, Sara's landscapes were often painted in Melbourne's <SUBJECT: LOCATION> suburban parks <SUBJECT: THEME> and beaches <SUBJECT: THEME>. As well as Brighton Beach <SUBJECT: LOCATION>, favourite subjects were Fitzroy Gardens <SUBJECT: LOCATION>, Richmond Park <SUBJECT: LOCATION> (now a golf course and freeway) and the River Yarra <SUBJECT: LOCATION>.

In the next few months a team of content miners will beaver away at the thousands of entries in the foundation works to mark them up ready for uploading onto the DAAO site. Online trials should begin by March or April 2006. By the end of the year we should be fully operational.

How the DAAO grows once the foundation material is up and running is really over to the art scholars of Australia, our prospective partners in content development and peer review. The DAAO will function as a computer-based community ruled by a hierarchical system of access rights² to enable the DAAO to manage content efficiently. Everyone can contribute to the site and thereby enrich understandings of Australian art history. Suppose you want to contribute a biography of an artist not yet in the Dictionary or in the Dictionary with only minimal information. You contact the Editorial Board and request approval. When it is given, this will be notified on the DAAO site to avoid duplicated effort, although it is perfectly possible to have more than one entry on an artist on the DAAO site. Part of our purpose is to demonstrate art history in the making, to show how it grows and refines itself through dialogue. In addition to writing biographies, we will be asking authors to enter information on their chosen artist in as many as possible of the identified fields in the DAAO schema. This process will be facilitated

by drop-down menus and thesauri to ensure that the DAAO retains the high level of searchability that has been retrospectively built into the foundation works.

The EDITORIAL BOARD will be responsible for running a peer review process that complies with DEST requirements. To facilitate and manage this process, the Board will develop a REGISTER OF ART HISTORIANS drawn from knowledgeable individuals and organisations who will from time to time be asked to review contributions to the DAAO. This register will be posted on the DAAO site. All draft entries will be reviewed by at least two people, either members of the Editorial Board or persons from the register to whom the Board has delegated responsibility. This will apply to entries written by members of the Editorial Board. When entries are sent by people not on the Board or the DAAO register of art historians, they will be read first by DAAO editorial staff, who will be responsible for vetting contributions against author guidelines and other DAAO protocols and preparing the material for consideration by the Editorial Board. If these maintainers deem it appropriate, the new entry will be referred directly to the Board member responsible for the area of expertise in which it falls, or if in doubt to the Board, for the verification process. Before final posting, all new entries will be circulated to the Editorial Board for comment and final sign-off. These functions where practicable will be carried out online. Finally the finished biography will be published on the DAAO site and its addition to Australian art history duly noted.

It would take more time than I have to describe the other functions of the DAAO as set out in the design brief, so I'll finish with a diagram of the Dictionary's 'highest level information architecture (manage, create, discover)' – and an invitation to all the art scholars of Australia to add your name to the DAAO's register of art historians and join us at the beginning of a great adventure. ☺

This is an edited version of a paper delivered at the AANZ Conference *Eyesites* Sydney University 1-2 Dec 2005 © Vivien Johnson. (For about the author see page 54)

1 Paraphrased from the Report of the first CWG written by Eric Riddler, the DAAO's Content Analyst/Manager.

2 At the base of the pyramid are the basic site visitors or browsers, who will be able to search, browse and read entries. Members will have access rights as for browsers, but will also be able to add comments on the entries, one of the key features that will differentiate DAAO's online format from print publishing. Authors will have access rights as for Browsers and Members, but will also be able to write and review entries. Maintainers will have access rights as for Browsers, Members and Authors, but can also review entries, manage thesauri and give or deny access to Member level. Editors (members of the Editorial Board) will have the same access rights as those below them on the pyramid and can commission reviews and new entries from Authors and authorise publication and give or deny access up to Maintainer level. The Editor-in-Chief will give or deny access to the Editor level. At the apex is the System Administrator (or as the tech-heads say 'Root User'), who looks after the physical server and the software that runs it, and can access the system and make changes to the structure of the database.



Dictionary of
Australian Artists
online.