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Creating a Publicly Available Image Collection for The South Side Community Art Center's Art Collection: Case Study at the University of Chicago

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Abstract

A two-year project to make the collection of the South Side Community Art Center more widely available resulted in the creation of a devoted, publicly available collection hosted by the University of Chicago Visual Resources Center in their LUNA database. Collaborators included a former Art History faculty member, interns, and the board of the South Side Community Art Center.

Keywords
digitization, archives, Black Arts Movement

Author Bio & Acknowledgements
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Introduction

The South Side Community Art Center (SSCAC) formally opened in Chicago in December 1940 with funding from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project, but it had ties to the Bronzeville artists' community for many years prior to its inception. The Center is located at 38th Street and Michigan Avenue and was a hotbed of creative and cultural output for the black community in the 1940s. At its inception, the core mission of the SSCAC was to be a place to teach, make, and exhibit works of art made by black artists in Chicago, a mission that still holds true today. The Center is located in an old single-family house purchased with funds raised by the community. The funds from the WPA supported faculty, staff, programming, and repairs and renovations to the Center's building. Of the 110 community art centers that received WPA funding, the SSCAC is the only one still currently operating.

Many renowned artists and authors passed through the SSCAC, including Archibald Motley, Jr., Charles White, William Carter, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Richard Wright. Over the years, the SSCAC developed a collection of artworks, many made by artists in the community. While the collection includes works from a variety of art historical periods and movements, the strength of the collection is works from the Black Arts Movement from the 1940s through the 1970s.

Rebecca Zorach, Mary Jane Crowe Professor in Art History at Northwestern University, has served as an advisor and consultant to the Center for several years. Zorach was previously on the faculty at the University of Chicago, where she collaborated on several special projects with the Visual Resources Center (VRC) pertaining to her current research interests which include art of the 1960s in Chicago and art made by African-American artists specifically. These projects involved digitizing and describing unique archival collections of several Chicago artists, including photojournalist Robert Sengstacke and Chicago muralist Mark Rogovin.[1,2] In Summer 2011, Zorach approached the Visual Resources Center with a new project idea to help the South Side Community Art Center digitize, describe, and display its art collection.

Zorach received strong financial support from several grants to fund the project. She received a Partnership-in-Scholarship Grant for African American Historic Places from the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which was designed to create partnerships between African American institutions and Universities or other institutions that could help with historic preservation. The grant was to be used to create and emphasize new forms of public access to the SSCAC. Their funds could not be used for cataloging or collections work, so the money from the University of Chicago was put towards hiring interns to photograph and catalog the Center's collections. The grant money was put towards related research, public programming, and the creation of a blog called Art of a Community Speaks.[3] Zorach matched funds from a University of Chicago Arts Council Curricular Innovation Grant and her own research fund, and she

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[1] http://sengstacke-archive.lib.uchicago.edu
[2] http://pawma.lib.uchicago.edu
[3] https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/artofcommunityspeaks/

received yet another grant to hire a conservator to examine the paintings in the Center's collection. Megan Macken, former director of the VRC, consulted on metadata assignment with Zorach and her interns before the collection inventory and cataloging began. The interns used a Google Docs spreadsheet to keep track of the basic tombstone cataloging data, and this spreadsheet was later shared with the VRC. The data collected by the interns was fairly accurate and complete, despite being limited by the records available at the Center.

Project Management at the Visual Resources Center

The VRC used existing workflows and image collections systems to prepare and present the SSCAC collection. This included a FileMaker Pro instance of VCat (a VRA Core 4.0 compliant database) to catalog images, and the LUNA online image database for display and delivery of the collection.

The VRC did not import any of the data from the spreadsheet directly into our FileMaker Pro database because of the issues with data formatting and completeness. Instead, we cataloged each image individually in our instance of VCat using the interns' spreadsheet for basic tombstone information. The VRC, often with Rebecca Zorach's help, researched life dates and proper spelling for artists' names, assigned subject headings to all works, and massaged the data in the interns' spreadsheet to be Core 4 compliant. Because the VRC, Zorach, and the intern all had simultaneous access to the Google Docs spreadsheet, we could make notations on the spreadsheet indicating works for which we had questions, and were able to get answers to those questions by highlighting things and adding notes right beside the data.

As part of the grant Zorach received for the project, she was able to hire a conservator who prepared conservation reports of paintings in the Center's collection. Zorach provided these PDF reports to the VRC, which was extremely helpful since they included signatures and other distinguishing inscriptions, noted the materials and support, and also provided a reference image of the work. The inscriptions found on the works helped us date or attribute works that were unclear on the spreadsheet. The photographs allowed us to confirm an image identification in instances where the professional photographer misnamed the image file. Cataloging all of the artworks in FileMaker Pro was time consuming, but we were able to use an existing data schema in our LUNA database and, as a result, did not need to create a new data structure to display the metadata online.

Zorach delivered more than 400 TIFF image files to the VRC on a hard drive. The image files needed no processing on our end because they had been photographed professionally as part of the grant funding. We did need to rename the image files to match the unique 7-digit accession numbers we use to track data records in FileMaker Pro.

The VRC uploaded 426 images and comprehensive data records to LUNA one month after we received the data. We achieved such a quick turnaround time because the tombstone cataloging data was readily available, additional information existed in the completed conservation reports, and Zorach and her interns were available to answer our questions quickly. The VRC estimates about forty hours of staff time were spent cataloging and uploading them to

the database. At that point, the images were available for use by the University of Chicago community in the password-protected Art History Department Teaching Collection, which is where the VRC saves images digitized and cataloged by faculty and student request for their research and teaching.

Initial Use of the Collection

In Winter Quarter 2013, Zorach taught an undergraduate course on "The Black Arts Movement in Chicago" and the SSCAC images were available in LUNA prior to the start of the course. The class spent a fair amount of time at the Center, and the students' first assignment was a visual analysis of an artwork they viewed in person. Having the SSCAC's images in LUNA provided a great reference for students throughout the course, especially since other assignments for the course required more open-ended searching in the database. For example, the second assignment required students to write a biography of an artist, and Zorach encouraged her students to use LUNA in addition to other research tools, including historic newspaper databases to locate primary-source material. The final assignment was a group project to plan a segment of an exhibition with individual object proposals. LUNA proved extremely useful because it provided the students the ability to view, download, group, and present images easily.

Throughout the duration of the course, Zorach sent the VRC a handful of updates to the data that had been revealed through her students' research, such as more accurate life dates or correct spellings for an artist's name. We were able to edit the data in our FileMaker Pro database and in the LUNA collection so that the most accurate and up-to-date information was displayed to the public.

A three-pronged exhibition called "AFRICOBRA in Chicago" launched in Spring 2013 based on Rebecca's research and collaboration with the SSCAC as well as student research accomplished in her course. This exhibition took place at three different venues on the south side of Chicago: the South Side Community Art Center, the University of Chicago Logan Center, and the DuSable Museum of African American History. Zorach notes that she and her interns set priorities and goals for the collections inventory and LUNA project, in part by focusing on the exhibition component of the project.

Making the Collection Public

Zorach's grant proposal originally stated that the SSCAC would take the data and images resulting from the collection inventory and photography and use it to create a collections website on their homepage. The SSCAC's website does not feature any artwork images from their collection, not even in their gallery and exhibition announcements. The Center's previous director had hired a web designer who would begin a complete website redesign with a collections component, but he left without finishing the project. Zorach approached the VRC about the problem and the former director suggested that the VRC could create a devoted, publicly available collection of images and data in LUNA. To Zorach and the Center, this was a

more amenable solution than the Center developing a collections website from scratch.

With the cooperation and approval of the SSCAC's Board of Trustees, the VRC moved forward with creating a devoted, publically viewable LUNA collection for the SSCAC images in December 2013. The Director of the Visual Resources Center drafted a collections agreement, and it was decided that 57 images created by unknown artists were to be removed from the publicly available collection in LUNA. The reason for the request to delete images of works by unknown artists is not entirely clear to us, but it may have to do with copyright concerns and the lack of accurate collections records on the part of the Center. However, ephemeral works like posters and pamphlets would stay in the publicly available collection even though the artist was unknown.

LUNA's features made it an ideal solution for hosting a public collection for this arts organization on several levels. First and foremost, the infrastructure, including a VRA Core 4.0 cataloging template, already existed and nothing needed to be built from scratch. Additionally, we were able to include the SSCAC logo in the upper left hand corner of the landing page, as well as include text describing the SSCAC's mission and a copyright statement prepared by the SSCAC. The public has access to the fully searchable database, faceted browsing, and the ability to download reference images from LUNA. Users can also zoom and pan through images in the viewer and save images to a media group.

With the help of the University of Chicago Digital Library Development Center, we created a redirected web address so that it appears more in line with the SSCAC's own web presence and is more readily shareable than the link automatically generated by LUNA.[4,5]

Zorach notes that the process of making the collection publicly available took significantly longer than expected. The images were available to the University of Chicago community in LUNA in January 2013 but were not made publicly available until December 2013, nearly a year later. The Center had several concerns about making the collection public. The Center has a small staff and there were legitimate concerns about what would happen when the images were made live, since no one could predict the impact on staff from requests for use of the collection and for reproductions. There was also some anxiety about copyright and who actually owns the images. Zorach suggested that the online collection was a risky experiment for the SSCAC, but that the potential for good things to come out of the challenges, such as the possibility to take in revenue from reproduction requests or a boost in programming attendance, was worth the risk. The SSCAC is still discovering works in its collection, as well as actively acquiring works, so it is the VRC's hope that at some point another batch of images and data will be added to the LUNA collection.

Conclusions

Although they have yet to do so, our hope is that the SSCAC will include a link to the

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[4] http://sscacc-collection.lib.uchicago.edu
[5] http://luna.lib.uchicago.edu/luna/servlet/uofclibmgr2~4~4

LUNA collection on their website and promote it on their social media platforms. The VRC promoted the collection on its blog, Twitter account, and Facebook page. We also added the collection as an external link to the Center's Wikipedia page.

To our great excitement, we have had several people contact the VRC about using the collection. In February 2014, a few months after the public collection was launched, the organizer of the Chicago Heroes and Arts Adventures workshop (a partnership between the Borderbend Arts Collective and the Chicago Parks District) called to ask about using images of artwork by Margaret Burroughs in their upcoming workshop. In February 2015, the Community Arts Programmer of the UChicago Charter School wrote to say that students in a teen group she manages would be using images from the SSCAC for a project. We are encouraged that the collection has seen so many positive examples of fair use by Zorach's students and members in the community.

In addition to the publicly available collection devoted to the SSCAC, the entire SSCAC digital collection remains in the VRC's primary collection in LUNA, the Art History Department Teaching Collection, including the works by unknown artists removed from the publicly available collection. The VRC is archiving copies of the TIFFs locally since it remains part of our flagship collection. However, we are not the repository of note for the digital images. The SSCAC has been given copies of the TIFF files, the Google Docs spreadsheet, and a copy of the data exported from our FileMaker Pro database. The Center will handle all requests to view the works and to reproduce the images.

This case study provided us with the unique opportunity to collaborate with a local community collection and a faculty member to create a resource that benefits everyone. This was our first opportunity to work with an arts organization that was independent from the University, and we were thrilled to offer and deliver a publicly available digital collection that the Center had never had before, bringing attention to its storied history and current endeavors. The SSCAC collection, combined with the Robert Sengstacke Photography Archive and the Public Art Workshop Mural Archive, provide an unparalleled collection of images and information about Chicago's south side artistic community at midcentury.