

New models and frontiers for photography collections in the digital age.

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With purchasing funds in most traditional collections limited and costs of holding and conserving artworks running high, new models for collecting and for collections are needed. There has been a digital revolution over the past twenty years which has led to seismic changes in collections, particularly museum collections. When I worked at Tate Liverpool 1998 – 2000 I would have to use the internal internet whilst on site to get information about the Tate collection objects. There was very limited public access to this information. Since then the digital floodgates have opened and nearly all collections are easily accessible online.

This has required a shift of attitude particularly around the commercial and copyright issues of allowing easy access to reproductions of work online. Initially museums were keen to generate income from image use, yet these rules seem over time to have relaxed. Most collections have embraced the potential of using online platforms to increase and broaden access to their holdings. Online visits far surpass physical visits to museums, and online platforms have led to a new and expanded audience for their work.

Photography by its very nature translates well online. The perceived danger of putting photography online is the loss of authorial control and also the loss of income. In its floating disembodied digital form images can be endlessly copied and circulated without the authors consent or knowledge. Some photographers watermark their works digitally, scarring them visually in the process. Increasingly sophisticated image tracking processes are now being developed to try to find ways to prevent image theft and track distribution. Work in this area is in a way parallel to how the music and film industries are trying to prevent 'piracy'. There is still some way to go to resolve these issues.

Many online networks attempt to get around this by having closed forums where logins and codes are needed to gain access to image libraries and collections. The Artist Pension Trust operates in this context. Although they have only existed for twelve years their scale is incredible and they are currently the largest growing collection of international contemporary art. The artworks are kept in storage and are documented and accessed mainly online. Working in a number of international hubs artwork is shared and nurtured through a network of curators encouraged to use and research the collection online. This offers the chance for unprecedented global reach for those artists selected to become part of the collection.

Most commercial art galleries struggle with the costs of having a presence at the major international art fairs and the location of those fairs is moving globally. Europe and America are losing their control of the art markets as art buyers in Russia, the Middle East and China are becoming bigger players. Reaching those new and expanding markets is challenging for individual artists but working collectively online seems the logical way forward.

The Artist Pension Trust is a new model for an art collection in a number of ways. As its name suggests the artists invest their work. The Trust was set up when the contemporary art market was very buoyant. Work is invested in the Trust over a twenty year period. At the point of sale significantly all the artists in the same Trust (250 artists) would also receive a percentage back from every sale. The idea being that artists could benefit each other.

Of course a percentage of money (28%) goes back into the Trust also and that money is then used to develop networks and support for the artist's benefit. Curators involved get to nominate artists but are also encouraged to support their work and to meet with them when they are nearby. The website is used as a network to circulate information on the artists in the collection and there are ongoing plans to provide more career support and mentoring for represented artists. The Artist Pension Trust is about supporting future and emerging talent, and as such it seems fitting that it is using the new frontier of online platforms to do it.

At a point in time when we are told that we are all, however locally based, operating in a global market place it seems appropriate that art collections are developing a greater online presence. Whilst there is still a need for the physical encounter with artworks in venues and exhibitions it would equally make sense for collections of photography to be available for research and dissemination online. It will be interesting to watch over the next twenty years the impact this will have on photography collections in the UK.

With thanks to Allison Gosney Global Artist and Curator Relations for the Artist Pension Trust and Charlotte Sexton Independent consultant with expertise in Digital Strategy for Museums & the Cultural Heritage Sector

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First Published: Uncertain states Keepers of culture June 2016