

# The Dictionary of Australian Artists Online: an introduction

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## ***Abstract***

*The University of New South Wales Library and College of Fine Arts are leading an Australian Research Council funded project to create the Dictionary of Australian Artists Online (DAAO). The DAAO aims to be the authoritative online biographical dictionary of Australian artists. This ambitious project brings together academic libraries, the research community, cultural institutions and information technology specialists into a unique collaboration.*

## Introduction

A plenary session at VALA 2002 serves as a useful background for this introduction to the Dictionary of Australian Artists Online (DAAO). In that session, Joan Lippincott described opportunities for collaboration and connections using cyberinfrastructure (Lippincott, 2002). Lippincott urged coherent development of digital libraries through collaborative projects between librarians, faculty and information technologists. Lippincott predicted that the content developed using cyberinfrastructure would look quite different to the static, standardised formats of commercial publishers. Digital scholarship would have to embrace and exploit multi-media, hypertext functionality and constant change to content. Collaborative publishing would become the model for digital publishing.

The DAAO is an Australian Research Council funded project through its Linkage Infrastructure Equipment and Facilities scheme (ARC LIEF). At first glance, this phrase seems more appropriate to the collaborative purchase of substantial research equipment or facilities, such as telescopes or animal houses. However, library and information infrastructure provisions exist within the ARC LIEF scheme. Our vision for DAAO combines digital scholarly publishing and the creation of a facility to support research. The DAAO is an excellent example of Lippincott's points about digital libraries and publishing. This collaborative project is creating a dynamic, multi-media publishing facility for researchers of Australian art. Even better, access to the DAAO is planned for anyone, anywhere.

However, the DAAO has its origins in the previous stable world of print publishing. This paper will outline the origins of the DAAO project, describe its planned activities and outline issues that the project will face.

## Origins

An Australian art scholar may have already recognised that the title of this Project is very close to a major reference work about Australian artists: Joan Kerr's *Dictionary of Australian Artists: painters, sketchers, photographers and engravers to 1870* (Kerr, 1992). This work was the outcome of a project commenced at the University of Sydney during the 1970s under the leadership of Bernard Smith. This became an ARC supported project to compile a comprehensive dictionary of Australian artists. Kerr took over the project following Smith's retirement in 1981. Kerr's approach was singular and radical, through applying a more inclusive approach that addressed art history as an analysis of cultural practice. With this approach, Kerr brought Indigenous art into the canon of Australian art, and introduced artists from other spheres including natural history, female domesticity and criminal cultures. In the last years of her life, Kerr continued to develop and revise her scholarship, assisted by a strong team of researchers in educational and cultural institutions (Peers 2004). Kerr's ultimate vision was for an online dictionary of Australian artists.

In August 2003, I was approached by Joanna Mendelssohn to consider working with The University of New South Wales' College of Fine Arts (COFA) to submit a proposal to the Australian Research Council to develop the DAAO. Mendelssohn had worked for Kerr and is now an Associate Professor at COFA. Around the same time, Kerr nominated Vivien Johnson as the next editor of the DAAO. Johnson is a major scholar in Indigenous art (Johnson, 1994) and is now a Professor at The University of New South Wales. This high

level of academic engagement in the project was critical at its early stages: the rigour of the scholarship and the clarity of vision convinced me that UNSW Library could play the essential enabling role of bringing the DAAO to life on the Web.

We realised we needed more partners. In February 2004, we hosted a forum for all those interested in supporting the project. Through this, we secured the commitment of four major cultural organisations: The Art Gallery of New South Wales; the National Gallery of Australia; the National Library of Australia; and, the State Library of New South Wales. Each of these institutions has resources and services that are essential for the DAAO. In many ways, a DAAO without them is unimaginable. Two universities joined: Charles Darwin University and the University of Sydney. Our first test of collaboration was the application for ARC LIEF funding. In October 2004, we found out we were successful.

## The Project

The goal of the project is to create the authoritative online source of scholarship about Australian art. The key features of the project will involve development of several modules:

- Content

Three print publications and two databases will be integrated into an online database which will form the 'seeding' of the DAAO. The print publications are Joan Kerr's *Dictionary of Australian Artists* (Kerr, 1992), Kerr's *Heritage: the National Women's Art Book* (Kerr, 1995) and Johnson's *Western Desert Artists: a Biographical Dictionary* (Johnson, 1995). The two databases are Roger Butler's *Australian Prints Database* from the National Gallery of Australia and Kerr's database on cartoonists which was prepared in conjunction with an exhibition at the State Library of New South Wales in 1999. These works are not merely being digitised; they are being integrated into one database. These five works will form the core of the DAAO. Content will change through revision of existing entries and the inclusion of new scholarship.

- Publishing System

This will support collaborative editorial processes, including online submission and peer-reviewing before new scholarship is made publicly available. This system will utilise recent advances in web-based content and knowledge management systems. We plan to archive previous versions of entries, so that future scholars can make accurate references to the DAAO. Version archiving will also provide insights into changes and developments in art history. A sub-system to enable users to post critical commentary is envisaged as well. This system will be specified in 2006.

- Linking

The DAAO will link to other online resources in Australian art and develop functionality for the DAAO to be linked from other services that want to do this. The DAAO does not envisage major digitisation efforts by itself. Instead, it will link to online images created by digitisation programs in our major libraries and galleries. Another category of linking will involve other online biographical services. The DAAO has commenced discussions with the Australian Dictionary of Biography Online and the proposed People Portal now being

discussed as People Australia from the National Library of Australia. This proposal envisages providing a portal providing online linkages to information about Australians in a range of services.

- **Searching and Access**

The web will provide multiple pathways to the DAAO site. Once there, users will have rich searching functionality to explore the wealth of data available. A long list of searching attributes is being developed, including artist name, period, genre, individual works of art, themes, places and cultural groups. Open access to content is a key goal of the project. Contributors will be encouraged to adopt an open approach to re-use of their intellectual property, through such regimes as Creative Commons.

- **Governance**

The project team is based at UNSW Library. Overall direction is provided by an Advisory Committee. Two sub-committees report to the Advisory Committee; one addressing editorial issues; the other developing the technical solutions. A Client Working Group will be established to provide advice and feedback on users' needs. Membership of the Client Working Group will be drawn from regional galleries, secondary and tertiary art students, art teachers and local historians.

- **Duration**

Current plans are to have the DAAO Project completed by mid-2008, with a preview version becoming available in 2007.

## **Challenges and Issues**

Many librarians reading this paper may ask why a university library would commit resources to a project like this. Some would argue that our key role is providing services for our users to access information. Why become involved in projects that involve the creation of information, and associated maintenance costs? Grant funding does not meet all costs, and it runs out anyway.

At The University of New South Wales Library, the DAAO is a companion project to two initiatives: the Australian Digital Theses Program (ADT) and the ARROW (Australian Research Repositories Online to the World) Project (ARROW). Until the recent past, the majority of library and information infrastructure projects funded under ARC LIEF had been directed towards the discovery of information resources. Such projects emphasised indexing, cataloguing or abstracting components. The rise of the Internet has enabled libraries to find new roles in improving access to unique information resources that they held. Digitisation projects are one obvious and successful example, particularly for cultural heritage organisations. For academic libraries, improving access to theses through the Australian Digital Theses Program has brought benefits to libraries and postgraduate students. Projects such as ARROW extend this through libraries providing services for researchers to manage a wider range of original digital content types. The DAAO sits firmly within this cluster of programs aimed at finding new roles for libraries in the digital era. In the print only era, university libraries always made some effort to manage research outputs generated by their faculties, whether they were working papers, technical reports or theses. The digital era

provides the opportunity to make our information management skills essential to university management of research information. These projects have elements of risk in them, but the support of government funding allows experimentation and innovation. If this new role for university libraries turns out to be successful, then our budgets will need to be re-organised and re-directed.

This leads to a major issue for the Project. Sustainability is clearly an issue. While The University of New South Wales Library can make commitments to maintaining the developed system, this addresses just one aspect. Resources will be needed to manage the DAAO, to ensure scholarship is high quality and that fine arts scholars in Australia are committed to it. We see collaboration as a key element in sustainability. Collaboration among partners will ensure the optimum development of the DAAO. Collaboration between the technical and academic streams of the project will reinforce each other. The editorial oversight managed by academic staff will ensure new content is of high quality and rigorously researched: the DAAO will not be a vehicle for popular or low quality writings. The integration of the DAAO into academic practices and scholarship in Australian universities is a key to its sustainability. Financial sustainability will be addressed as well, through attracting sponsorships or foundations. The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy is an interesting model of establishing a foundation to sustain an online publication (SEP), whereby the interest earned on an investment account will meet ongoing operational needs.

Intellectual property is a major challenge for the project. The works of Kerr and Johnson were commercially published, so the rights to transfer them to the online environment need to be negotiated. Kerr's *Dictionary of Australian Artists* has over 200 individual contributors whose intellectual property rights must be respected. The inclusion of Indigenous artists is a serious challenge, particularly for moral rights. Rights clearances for the use of images will be needed. The project is committing substantial resources to intellectual property matters.

## Progress

By September 2005, key members of the Project Team are in place. A web site is being established at <http://www.daa.org.au>. Regular meetings of the Management, Editorial and Technical Committees are under way. Intellectual property issues are being resolved. The interest in the project is wide, with many state libraries and galleries outside NSW and the ACT indicating strong support for the project.

Key achievements have been:

- The establishment of a Client Working Group to advise on user needs. This group has representatives from researchers, librarians, teachers, students, gallery guides and curators. The group has established priorities for the user interface.
- The development of a tender document for the technical development of the DAAO system. This will be issued in parts. The first part was issued in November 2005. It addresses data migration matters.
- A logo to support as branding and marketing has been developed.
- A data schema for each biographical entry has been finalised. A content analyst has been appointed to analyse the data in the print publications and databases being used to populate the DAAO.

- Intellectual property rights for use of material in the founding print works are resolved.

The DAAO is a major undertaking. Its success will depend on the strength of collaboration between research libraries, cultural organisations, researchers and information technologists.

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