

Summary: MFA Theses – Archiving

Dear ARLIS/NA colleagues,

I'm the Subject Librarian for Art & Architecture at Washington University in St. Louis and I am working with our Graduate School of Art to have our MFA written theses (usually 20-40 pages) and related files added to our institutional repository, [Open Scholarship](#). As I prepare to meet with the faculty, I would like to gather the experience of a other institutions. If you could answer any of the following questions I would be very appreciative. I'm happy to summarize the responses.

1. How, and in what format (print, online) are MFA theses archived at your institution?

Overview: For all eight respondents, the libraries archive the MFA theses, not the schools/departments. Three collect print, five collect (or will imminently) online.

Two institutions which presently collect print indicated that there is interest among faculty and students in collecting online theses.

Public university in the Southeast

Up until this semester, our MFA theses (CD and printed material) were kept physically here in [art library]. This semester we're embarking on a digital submission process. I pursued this arrangement with the Art Department because the media on which theses were being submitted were not sustainable over the long term.

Private university in the Northeast

To date, Grad Studies has only collected print versions of the theses which the library then receives to be cataloged and housed. The most recent years of bound books for each department are shelved in Reference. Any non-traditional bindings or theses with original artwork are sent to Archives to be shelved with the older theses. The students choose how they wish to bind their thesis so they vary; with many being more like artists' books. There is growing interest on campus in having the theses more widely available by having them in a digital repository and this year we've begun looking at different options. I would be very interested in the responses you get to the pointed questions you've raised.

This is speculation on my part, but I think many of the students are anxious for this [online theses] to happen. They see a much more global audience having access to their work. However, I'm not sure they're even thinking about the issues you raised. Some students have also been spending a small fortune on their finished books, but I would hate to see that go by the wayside and just have digital pdfs. I know that I've often been asked by a faculty member who works closely with the grads on their thesis writing if I could include their abstracts into the cataloged record. Much as I would love to, it would be impossibly laborious to have to type each abstract into the record being created. So that's one huge benefit I see to having the digital repository. Space for us is also becoming an issue and the physical volumes take up a lot of that ... another huge benefit!

Private university in the Midwest

We at _____ are just gearing up for a full-scale institutional repository, so I can't answer most of your questions. _____ does have an electronic space for theses in PDF which will, I am sure, be folded into the larger institutional repository.

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It makes me uneasy because I doubt that anyone was thinking hard about copyright when it was first initiated in 2002, so some images may be of questionable status. I do think the questions you list below will be addressed as our repository grows and becomes more sophisticated.

Public university in the Southeast

At [public university], I was not only an adjunct professor of art and an art librarian, but I was also an MFA student. I got to see the MFA thesis from both sides – as the creator and as the information provider. Starting in maybe 1995 or 2000 _____ required all theses in all academic departments to be deposited electronically. Before this, all theses were deposited in paper form, and are in the main library fully accessible and cataloged. I don't know if there were any checks in place to make sure a candidate actually deposited, but I believed they got most of them. The MFA thesis at _____ requires two parts – a written paper of 5-20 pages discussing pretty much anything related to the thesis work; and a thesis show (most students got an exhibition space to themselves for a week or two). The paper usually had images or representations of the artwork – but historically speaking the "pre-1995" MFA thesis didn't show the artwork very much. Today, you cannot collect a diploma if you have not submitted electronically through the Graduate School. Around 2002 _____ put together the "Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Database" or ETD. I know a lot of schools do something like this, but it is not very common. A great resource really. When I turned into a librarian and was still teaching BFA and MFA students, I found that this type a resource was sorely needed. A lot of students wanted to know what some of their favorite photographers did in their grad days, like Lebowitz or Crewdson.

Private University in the Northeast (same respondent as above)

At [private university], it was a different story. Most academic departments operated on islands – meaning the collection of theses and dissertations was left to the department (or more accurately, the secretaries). I never found one "ETD" at _____, even though _____ has some great finding aids and other amazing resources for collections. The _____ MFA is a bit different, and gets even more complicated depending on the studio. Photography and Graphic Design had a more tangible MFA thesis that someone could look at. Painting and Drawing and some of the other areas did not leave much behind in terms of a thesis. All had shows, but none were required to leave a thesis behind. In the mid 70's Photo and GD started to make efforts to keep a "thesis". It started as a pile of photo boxes in the closet, but in 2003/2004 they were rescued by the Special Collection department [at art library]. They were hastily "cataloged", and protocols were put in place for Photo and GD only to deposit the theses to the Arts Library each year. The thesis was usually a one page artist statement and a set of 10-20 loose photographic prints, all in an archival photo box. Sometimes there were other ephemera or documents, but not a lot. As a project I carried out while at _____, I did the next best thing to creating an ETD for the Photography MFA theses – I added five additional layers of information to the EAD finding aid for the collection. Instead of just a list of names and years of graduation as it was before, the finding aid now has more robust information to research by. I should note that these theses are basically inaccessible – you need an appointment with the Arts Library Special Collections to see the theses. Not very convenient or researcher-friendly.

So two very different ways of handling MFA theses – one very friendly and the other very "hidden". I prefer the [public university] method – I am happy that my thesis is easily accessible to any researcher. When I was assisting an MFA student in thesis right before I left for [private university], we were trying to find _____'s thesis but were having difficulty. Six months later I knew why. In my mind, I would like to see ArtStor or the like try to create a central place for MFA theses. The scientific community already does this with little effort, so why can't we?

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Public university in the Midwest

[Online thesis deposit is required,] but we have made exceptions (see answer below).

Since first posting the theses on [institutional repository] in 2006, we have had 55 students agree to post them there, three request that they not be posted there, one who did not give us the needed materials to post, and two who asked us to make the posts available only to those with [university] accounts.

Of the three who requested it not be posted, two were concerned about losing copyright control, and one was concerned that a previous acquaintance might track the student down via this link. The two asking to make posts only available to [university] accounts were concerned about former acquaintances tracking them. I have not heard of any other concerns than these.

We indicate to all MFA students that it is an expectation of the program that they will post their Thesis on [institutional repository]. We consider this similar to publishing their work and believe it is important to bring their work into a public sphere.

Even so, we make exceptions and find other solutions for unusual circumstances such as a student who is concerned about someone stalking them based on info found in a posted work. We try to address this while the thesis is being developed, but we sometimes learn about the concern at the end of the writing.

Public university on the West Coast

I would be very interested in seeing a summary of responses to your questions.

Our MFA theses come in all shapes in sizes, though recently POD books have become popular as a format for the theses. We archive the print copies in archival enclosures and leave any media together with the print volumes. The art department does not have to file the theses as part of our online repository. We house the theses on the Special Collections floor of our storage library.

The MFA theses have a written component and it is stored in the archival box. The print on demand books are coming mostly from Lulu and Blurb. We have only just set up our online repository for non-MFA theses; our MFA theses never went through the normal process that most of the dissertations went through. They have always been accepted by the library without the standard guidelines that apply to other theses. I think there would be interest, especially coming from the students, to have the theses available online. They are most often used by current students to look at former student work.

If archived online, please answer the following questions:

- 2. Does the school require MFA thesis (written or exhibition files) to be deposited into your library's institutional (or commercial) repository? If no, is there much participation?***

Private university in the Mid-Atlantic

It was an option to submit e-theses to [institutional repository]. Presently there does not look to be anything in there for Art, but there was enthusiasm about going over to electronic at one point). In 2010, Technical Services was asking for a CD-ROM in addition to e-theses, but not sure if this still the case.

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Deposit of electronic versions used to be optional, but that was changed a year or two ago, so all should be included in the future.

The library does have some print MFA theses; these can be found in our library catalog. The department of Art, Art History and Design also, I believe, holds print copies of their theses.

Public university in the Southeast

Here is what the department will require of the MFA students starting this semester:

1. cover sheet
 2. copyright page
 3. An artist statement (1-2 pages)
 4. Slides from the thesis presentation PowerPoint
 5. Video recording of oral thesis presentation. Art Department staff will record these presentations and supply students with files to upload.
 6. Work samples – images or video clips.
 7. Between 12-20 images, including installation shots.
 8. Include an edited short of up to 5 minutes for media-based or installation work.
 9. Single images are to be submitted as TIFF files (1920 pixels on long side).
 10. Videos files at 300MB are less.
 11. Information about each work sample – both video and still image - needs to include:
 - Title
 - Medium/materials
 - Dimension
 - Year
 - Brief narrative (optional field)
3. *What, if any, concerns do the students or faculty have with the thesis or related files being available online (plagiarism, others copying works)?*

Public university in the Southeast;

Private university in Northeast

The worry about theses being copied at [public university] was never really an issue for two reasons. 1 - Someone at the Grad School had made the ETD requirements so that only a PDF 10mb or less could be submitted. That kept the image resolution down, and therefore the images were never of any real quality.

As for the text no one was ever concerned in the School of Art, since the written portion was never of any depth. 2 - The other reason copying was not an issue I think has to do with institutional culture. At [public university] there was more of an open sense of community and sharing and critiquing. The thought of not sharing work for all to see was foreign. Students were always concerned about someone stealing their work, but that concern was outweighed by the pursuit of sharing the work. I worked really hard on my thesis, and would be upset if it was difficult to find. If someone really wants to take an image out of the thesis, fine - but they are small images that are only good as a desktop image or a PPT presentation. And I want that actually.

Summary: MFA Theses – Archiving

I guess you could break it down to this: the MFA theses at [public university] are more "traditional" thesis, with an actual paper that can be electronically accessed. At [private university], the MFA thesis is more "classical" in the sense that it is a portfolio of images, and not accessible electronically (unless someone digitizes the whole collection - which will never happen).

To bring this back to Wash U, I think a lot of your decisions will be based on the format of the theses. Above all, I would take over custodianship of the collection, as they did at [private university], since the School of Art are not very good care takers. Plus, at the very least you can create a simple finding aid, providing even the most base level of access for researchers.

The whole "digital reproductions of art" issue is really what people make of it. Now being in the museum environment, they have the same concerns over piracy of digital images. Everyone, including the top curators, seems to forget that people will still come to see the real thing regardless of the quality of the digital reproduction. In fact, I argue that the better the digital reproduction, the more encouraged a person might be to go to the museum and see it hanging. Of course, it is a more difficult case with digitally-born artworks

4. *How are concerns with online theses addressed (for example, digital watermarking of image files)?*

Public university in the Southeast

We had discussions about what level of access would be granted to the material. The faculty supported very open access to the content and worked out file sizes that would be reasonable for all parties. We agreed to not collect "the work" (e.g. an entire video art piece) – we collect representations of the work (e.g., a clip of a video art piece).

Public university in the Southeast

Low-resolution, small images.

5. *What type of restrictions or embargo, if any, are usually recommended or selected?*

Public university in the Southeast

No embargoes – that was decided by the faculty.

Public university in the Midwest

Mostly open, but students can restrict to university community or not post at all if concerns present (not common).

Public university in Southeast

All theses must be electronically deposited. Theses are fully accessible and in catalog.