49th ARLIS/NA “Convergence = Créativité + Collaboration” Conference Report

I’d like to begin by thanking the ARLIS/NA Pacific Northwest Chapter for generously granting me an attendance award for this year’s ARLIS/NA virtual conference. This experience has been profoundly impactful for me as a student and an emerging information professional. Attending the ARLIS/NA conference gave me greater exposure to the broad and rich field of art and design librarianship and archives, as well as current discourses and concerns in the field. Furthermore, it enabled me to meet like-minded students and information professionals who are working locally, nationally, and internationally at the intersections of information studies and arts and culture; the primary focus of my own work. It goes without saying that I felt a deep sense of belonging and excitement to have been introduced to the ARLIS/NA community and the kindness and generosity of everyone I spoke with further augmented those feelings. Cumulatively, this experience has shown me that it is possible to merge my passions for the arts and information into a viable and meaningful career, and has given me a better idea of how to make that a reality.

One of the most tangible results that came out of this experience was my decision to apply to the Dual MSLIS program (from the MAS stream) at UBC’s iSchool and extend my education into library sciences. After speaking with art librarians and archivists working across Canada and in the United States that I met at the conference, it was made clear to me that while having an MAS degree concentration would be beneficial to the arts in an information context, a wider range of career opportunities will open up through librarianship (particularly in the United States) and by having an ALA credit, granted through the MLIS program at UBC. This decision was also informed by an increased understanding of the role and responsibilities of an arts librarian and the day-to-day tasks they perform, which would give me the ability to work closely with students and professors to develop programs and services to fulfill and assist with their information needs.

As a conference “newbie” this year, I wanted to take full advantage of the programming for new attendees that the conference offered. I started this journey by signing up for the ARLIS/NA Conference Guide Program and had the good fortune to be paired with Amy Furness, the Special Archivist & Head at the Art Gallery of Ontario, as my conference mentor. Amy and I arranged a meeting the weekend before the conference to discuss my past work experience, my interests, and my intentions for the conference. From this, we were able to identify relevant professionals that she could connect me with and reviewed the digital sessions to determine which ones would be most relevant to enhance my knowledge in the field. Amy was extremely supportive and checked in with me throughout the conference. She also connected me directly with art librarians and archivists working within my areas of interest and working abroad. Having a conference mentor greatly enhanced the conference experience for me overall and I would recommend it to any emerging information professional and / or student to take advantage of in the future.

I also made it a priority to attend the First-time Attendees and International Attendees Welcome Event where I had the chance to meet with conference organizers in Montréal, graduate students from other information schools, and information professionals working in the arts in a range of global contexts. It was my first “group” socializing experience since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and I have to applaud the ARLIS/NA organizing committee and leadership for being extra accommodating and outgoing to create a fun and welcoming environment to virtually socialize in.
I also met other students and conference attendees via the ArLiSNAP Slack group and joined various channels with the intention to stay involved with the extended ARLIS community online. I also put in the time to connect with attendees in-between sessions in the virtual lounge, engage with the poster hall exhibitors, and familiarize myself with art spaces and resources in Montréal through the Virtual Tours. I enjoyed learning about the history of Arttexte which highlighted printed matter by grunt gallery, my current place of work.

During the ARLIS/NA conference, I made a point to attend sessions that focused on archives (textual and non-textual), public programming and user engagement (exhibitions, outreach activities, collaborations, etc.), artist books, education, leadership, collection management and development, accessibility, diversity, and inclusivity in art libraries and archives. I also arranged one-on-one meetings with four art librarians / archivists with experience working in academic libraries, museums, galleries, and art auction houses to learn more about these working environments – benefits and drawbacks included! – and to gain job search strategies for work in the future.

While many sessions resonated with me, Session #29: Exhibitions – A Collective Journey to the Creation of Library Exhibition Standards presented by Allison Comrie, Kristi Kohl, Elizabeth Meinke, and Carol Ng-He, and mediated by Carmen Peters was particularly insightful. This session stuck with me because of my curatorial background. I was interested in learning more about the differences and commonalities between exhibition-making in an art gallery context versus in a library context, as well as how an ARLIS/NA task force functions. My first impression of creating a set of exhibition standards seemed to me, potentially limiting and dogmatic in thought. However, the presenters / task force members shared how they began recognizing the limitations of their language as their process went on and adjusted their naming to “best practices” to more accurately reflect the goals of the task force. The task force members also shared their vision of the document as “fluid” and “working.” I appreciated how they were very open about their process and were actively seeking discussion and feedback for improvement. The task force also outlined how creating a “best practices” document can give librarians more leverage to advocate for greater institutional support to create exhibitions in library contexts and what tangible actions (such as project planning, budgeting, research strategies, etc.) they can take to build meaningful, manageable, and affordable exhibitions to function as pedagogical tools. In terms of how exhibitions in libraries differ from gallery contexts, there seemed to be more commonalities than differences with the exception of security, climate control (facilities), and staff capacity (librarians wear many hats in addition to being curators!). I would also go so far to say that art libraries and librarians – as public spaces and public servants with the objectives to deliver services and information-based resources to the public – have the unique ability to function outside of the competitive / capitalist environment of the art market and the career-motivated individualism of the “independent curator” while simultaneously performing similar tasks. In this unique position, I believe librarians have the potential to create more opportunities for their audiences to become involved in the exhibition-making processes and recognize the value of sharing different perspectives and experimenting with new approaches to exhibition-making to facilitate learning opportunities. Another great question that was raised in the session related to the creation of exhibitions for different types of audiences who have been historically marginalized or excluded. In this case, there were discussions around best practices for better accommodating disabled communities (increasing accessibility features in physical and digital environments), as well as for displaying Indigenous Art in ways that are respectful of different cultures, communities, and world views. Ng-He recommended the book “Exhibitions for Social Justice” by Elena Gonzales as an influential text that offers guidance on how to include marginalized voices in exhibition-making practices which I look forward to reading. All in all, this session made it clear to me that merging the respective fields and
disciplines of art librarianship and curation more intentionally would be mutually beneficial and enriching.

In conclusion, I also want to extend my thanks to the ARLIS/NA Northwest Chapter and ARLIS/NA at large for recognizing the value of this experience for aspiring information professionals (like myself) and for mitigating attendance barriers by supporting student attendance awards annually. It was an honour to represent the ARLIS/NA Northwest Chapter this year and I look forward to attending future conferences in-person and continuing my involvement in the ARLIS/NA community as a member at the chapter and association levels over the years to come. Receiving this award was a true highlight for me during this challenging year!

With appreciation,
Emma Metcalfe Hurst

***Bonus Photos***
