

Limited Axis

When AXIS—Visual Arts Information Service, a company with charitable status, based in Leeds Metropolitan university, came into being in 1991 it declared that “the database should be free to artists.” With a view to achieving a totally comprehensive register its literature stated that “entry will be open to all professional visual artists, crafts people and photographers.” When I spoke to Yvonne Deane, the Chief Executive, in ‘92 she appeared to espouse socialist and democratic ideals underlining that the service would be free to artists and artists would “receive reproduction fees” through copyright agreements. Computer terminals would be sited in public places (libraries, galleries, museums) implying anyone could freely access AXIS at any time. It all sounded too good to be true, so much so that over 90% of artists questioned wanted their work to be included.

At the time of writing (Aug ‘97) there are two AXIS terminals in Scotland paid for by Lottery cash (£7,450) sited in Bridge House, the home of Hi Arts in Inverness, and in Glasgow’s CCA. Both facilities are by appointment only although in Bridge House this is not a hard-and-fast rule. The receptionist told me about 20 people have come in to use the PC since it was installed about a year ago. She blames poor publicity for this and says users are normally artists wanting to view their own files.

In Glasgow the PC is less publicly sited in the main office so they are strict about making an appointment. Whereas in Inverness access is available 5 days a week, in the CCA time is restricted to between 2 pm and 6 pm on Wednesdays and Fridays. Understandably only 42 people have used the PC between April ‘97 and now. Chris Lord, CCA’s marketing manager, blamed staffing problems for this. CCA has applied for Lottery money to improve its overall computer facilities and plans to move AXIS into the more accessible foyer.

For reasons best

known to itself SAC originally set itself up in opposition to AXIS and spent approx. £40,000 developing its own IVAC electronic register which boasted 236 artists’ files. IVAC had, from the outset, been a dubious, ill-considered project which allegedly ran with a software package that had been rejected by AXIS. SAC hired a consultant in Broughty Ferry to redesign it and make it workable. Artists’ slides were collected in Edinburgh then carried to Broughty Ferry for scanning at an estimated cost of £25 per slide. At the same time Boots in Dundee was advertising this facility for 50p per slide.

SAC had borne the costs of registering the 236 invited artists and when it abandoned IVAC officially in August ‘95 it agreed to hand over an £88,000 three-year package to AXIS, to cover the costs of bringing another 723 Scottish artists on board, plus the costs of establishing another 4 AXIS points in Scotland. The first of these are scheduled to come on stream in September this year: Gracefield Arts Centre in Dumfries and Art In Partnership in Edinburgh.

Rebecca Coggins of Gracefield told me that their AXIS facility was already in place and that it was located in their resource room but in order to monitor usage the service will be by appointment. AXIS will control the advertising of this facility. Gracefield were asked to nominate 40 local artists, their fees paid by SAC.

A spokesperson for Art In Partnership, a private public art agency in Edinburgh’s Cowgate, said it was now more likely to come on stream in October ‘97 because they were still trying to finalise the package with AXIS. They too have applied for Lottery funding to purchase the necessary hardware. The PC will be sited in their studio gallery and will be advertised by AXIS. The facility will be available by appointment only from 9 to 5, five days a week.

Up to now 426 Scottish artists (236 being transferred from IVAC) are registered on the AXIS database. AXIS has decided to operate in partnership with various organisations and its current Chief Executive, Kate Hainsworth, believes this system to be the most effective way to progress. Up to now artists have been nominated and paid for through these partnerships. SAC has borne the brunt of these fees by paying £35 per artist. Local Enterprise Companies in Argyll, Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland have paid the same with 39 artist in total nominated by arts centres in their respective areas.

In future artists will be invited to apply for self-funded registration at a cost of between £50 and £60. This scheme is being introduced “as part of a wider strategy to develop more comprehensive representation of artists.” However, to qualify for self-funded registration artists will have to meet the following criteria set by AXIS’s board of directors, a mix of professional artists, arts professionals and business advisors.

Criteria

The Artist must normally conform with 3 of the following criteria including the first or with four of the following criteria not including number one.

- a) Had a degree or other appropriate qualification in a relevant field
- b) Had:
 - at least 2 public exhibitions or
 - at least 2 public performances or
 - at least 2 public installations or
 - at least 1 public exhibition and 1 public performance or
 - at least 1 public exhibition and 1 public installation or
 - at least 1 public performance and 1 public installation
 but not including a degree show
- c) Received at least one prize, award, bursary of professional practice
- d) Received at least one public body or corporate commission or at least 6 private commissions
- e) Been engaged by contractual agreement in an artist’s placement scheme
- f) Had work purchased for at least one public or private collection
- g) Had work available for sale through one or more commercial galleries or agents within the last five years
- h) Obtained membership of at least one professional association or society
- i) Had work reviewed or featured in an art journal, magazine or newspaper

These Criteria and their application will be reviewed at least annually by the AXIS Board.

Kate Hainsworth insists that AXIS promotes an inclusive policy but within that ‘Sunday Painters’, i.e. art club amateurs, are excluded. When I put the case for ‘Outsider Artists’, i.e. self-taught, compulsively creative amateurs, she said that there was no reason why someone like that could not meet their requirements for self-funded registration. Her response indicated that AXIS’s method of filtering applications is suspiciously ill thought through and out-moded. It is obvious that AXIS has not fulfilled its original remit to provide a free service to all professional visual artists, crafts people and photographers. Further it now espouses elitist principles that contradict those of 1991 which suggested AXIS would be an educational aid to inform the public about contemporary art practice in the UK as well as providing a service for commissioners and researchers.

Instead of setting up an open access web-site that would be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, globally, AXIS has run with a system of CD-Roms that are laboriously updated every 3 months. Hainsworth believes that this control mechanism can assist accessibility if CD-Roms are marketed commercially and insists that AXIS will persist with the system. The most recent information states the AXIS web-site, which up to now has been used for limited on-line exhibitions, is currently under review and that further

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details will be available in Autumn 1997.

The CD-Rom software is very user-friendly. The programme begins by offering a form to complete, then 3 choices: Search Artwork Information, Search Artist Information, Finish Searching Register. The first offers a range of artwork types from Architecture to Woodwork. By highlighting Bookart one can click on Number of Hits—10. One can then view each Hit, i.e. artist who exhibits 3 images of work plus CV etc. The second choice allows one to scroll through all the artists' names. By highlighting a name the programme offers 1 Hit and permits one to view the file. I found a number of glitches which would suggest that the cross-reference system is less than rigorously applied. For some reason 10% of artists on the register have a text only entry. Other options such as gender, Disability and Cultural Identity assist one in locating artists.

Scotland is divided into 29 Local Authorities, some of which have no Hits. Edinburgh and Glasgow have over 90 each. Highland has only 58 and I know that there are more artists working throughout the region than that. Neighbouring areas fare no better. At this stage the register is woefully inadequate. Serious research by this method is impossible.

It is, however, possible to have a print-out of a CV for £1.50. Anyone requesting a copy of an artist's CV and Contact Sheets via AXIS is charged £2.75. The artist receives no copyright payment and AXIS says it has a "licence agreement with each artist", defining how it can, and cannot, distribute digital and printed images of the artist's work free of charge at access points and gives the artist's consent to AXIS, providing reference quality illustrated print-outs of images free of charge or at "cost to the artist".

Here we can see how the artist has signed away any

rights of reproduction to his/her work. This shift within AXIS, from a 1991 philosophy that fully protected and honoured the artist's right to financially benefit from AXIS, has in 1997 moved to one which regards the artist as an unpaid supplier of data that is sold to drive a so-called private business supported by State Money.

All things considered, it is not difficult to comprehend the logic of continuing with an awkward marketing tool like a CD-Rom, the continual updating of which is expensive and cumbersome. It appears that AXIS want to control access to their database and, rather than make it an integrated public service, operate it for a social and cultural elite. This is borne out by their insistence that they control the advertising of the service while further insisting that it be available by appointment only.

At the present time AXIS is being sold to artists as a professional service that will benefit their careers through making their files accessible to those who have the power to launch and assist careers through commissions and exhibitions etc. It is AXIS' vain hope that they can advance their standing and credibility by becoming an absolute necessity for artists and researchers and commissioners alike. Successful artists have no need to register and knowledgeable researchers and commissioners will use other more reliable contacts.

As an example of how AXIS is grabbing at loose straws in its marketing campaign I quote from an open letter dated 4th August '97 and addressed, "Dear Artists...Your chances of getting work through us are therefore increased with each new entry." This singular argument for joining a fairly exclusive club is not an attractive one. There are no added incentives, such as a totally free and totally accessible service for everyone in the community to use. The letter continues,

"We want new artists to feel welcomed to AXIS. How can we do this?" and then invites artists to attend a forum in Leeds on 20th August to air their opinions. They can also do this by completing a questionnaire. The letter ends on a revealing note—"PS. If you would like to be involved in the forum, we can offer you a free update of your CV and new images of your artwork worth £29.38."

Kate Hainsworth told me she is confident of achieving a fully comprehensive register by the millennium. I would suggest that in 28 months from now AXIS will be little further forward after absorbing much more money and that many artist, artists-run organisations, groups and galleries will have empowered themselves by setting up their own *free* web-sites.