

Vivian (Jiexiao) Ying

May 9, 2017

The Culture of Archives, Museums, and Libraries

Professor Howard Besser

Survive and Serve the Public:

the Ethics of Deaccessioning in the Art Museums and Women Make Movies

Deaccessioning is the elephant in the museum room. Although it is a legitimate part of museum practice according to the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD 2010), the complicated ethics involved in the practice make people uncomfortable talking about it. Given the skyrocketing prices of art and the challenging economic environment, some art museums have to consider deaccessioning as a means to acquire new works or even to survive its financial crisis. The latter is controversial because people wonder if museums can still fulfil its mission to serve the public, if they are to remove the works from their collections.

Deaccessioning also happens outside of the museum world, and caught in the dilemma of self-sustainment and public responsibility. Women Make Movies (WMM), for instance, is a non-profit independent distributor of films by and about women. After an inner financial crisis in 1982, WMM decides to gain more financial independence by focusing on education market distribution and managing the collections in a professional way. Like the public-service oriented art museums, on the one hand, WMM aims to increase the publicity of women films, so that a diversity of women's voices could be heard. On the other hand, WMM can only keep

a manageable collection. It has to survive by focusing on the marketable films and deaccessioning some films once every three to five years.

In this paper, I will discuss the ethics of deaccessioning, which are embedded in both the art museums and the non-profit cultural organization WMM. I will address to the following questions: What is deaccessioning? Why is deaccessioning necessary? Are there alternative methods? How to deal with the ethical controversies, such as the sales proceeds in art museums and the selection of films to be dropped in WMM? I will draw heavily from the Policy on Deaccessioning from Association of Art Museums Directors (AAMD) which exemplifies the ethics considered crucial by the museum professionals. I will refer to the interviews with the executive of WMM, Debra Zimmerman, and show WMM's strong awareness of the ethical responsibility in the practice of deaccessioning. I hope to illustrate that the mission of making the objects available is always central to these non-profit cultural organizations. Even in the least desirable through necessary practice of deaccessioning, art museums and WMM still manage to apply various strategies to find a way out of the paradox: to survive and serve the public.

I. Definition of Deaccessioning

Before we get to the definition for deaccession, let us look at the etymology of the word first to better navigate among the several types of definitions offered by different scholars. If accessioning refers to “the inscription of new items into the collection inventory,” and deaccessioning means the reverse of accessioning, then deaccessioning means “any removal of entries from said inventory” (Vecco 2015, 221). Therefore, deaccessioning originally incorporates the involuntary loss, such as thefts, misplacements, accidental or deliberate

destructions. Deaccessioning may also refer to the items in the museums that are removed from the register but still function as props for exhibitions, illustrative material for teaching programs, or experimental materials for conservators. Its rich connotation and lack of shared definition propel the scholars and professionals to propose their own definition of deaccessioning.

According to the definitions listed by Vecco (2015, 221), Byrne (2000) frames deaccessioning as the permanent removal of items from a museum's ownership and custody, but he confines the term within the wall of museums and excludes the similar actions in city halls or universities. Crivellaro (2011) describes deaccessioning as the permanent disposal of public property to the private sector, and thereby excludes the exchanges among public collections, which is often included in the academic and professional debate. Besides, Malero defines deaccessioning as "the permanent removal of an object that was once accessioned into a museum collection" (Malero 1991, 273), which precludes the following situations. First, if the object is on loan to another museum, it is not "permanent removal." Second, if the museum acquired but never accessioned the object in question, then disposing it is not deemed as deaccession.

For my discussion about deaccessioning in art museums and *Women Make Movies*, however, I rely on the definition provided by Association of Art Museum Directors, because WMM is not guided by any rule of deaccession, while art museums in the US are regulated by the Policy on Deaccession initiated by AAMD and subject to sanction if they violate the ethical rules (AAMD 2010). AAMD defines deaccessioning as "the process by which a work of art or other object (collectively, a "work"), wholly or in part, is permanently removed from a museum's collection." By including the transfer of objects to public collections, AAMD

implies that deaccessioning can be a legitimate process of museum management because it does not necessarily result in the loss of public accessibility of the works.

I will extend the definition of “deaccessioning” from the museum world to Women Make Movies because WMM shares some problems and missions with the art museums. Like art museums, Women Make Movies is a non-profit organization that aims to make objects, in this case, the films made by and about women, available to the public. WMM serves the public by fighting against the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of female on the screen. Such commitment to empower women through its film collection makes WMM akin to a cultural institution. Meanwhile, WMM tries to gain fiscal independence from the governmental funding and strives for self-sustainment to render stable support to female filmmakers. To ensure its healthy growth, WMM needs to deaccession some films every couple of years to make the collection manageable.

II. Deaccessioning in Art Museums

I will start with the ethics of deaccessioning in the art museums by looking at the Policy on Deaccession formulated by Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD). The policy aims to navigate the art museums through the potentially controversial sectors in deaccessioning, such as the justification for certain works to be disposed, the utilization of sales proceeds, and the acceptable nature of buyers. Then I will analyze the examples of the art museums to see how they interact with the policy and how to balance their basic needs to survive and their mission to serve to the public.

1. Primary reasons for deaccessioning

AAMD states in the sector of “Purpose of Deaccessioning and Disposal” that

“[d]eaccessioning is a legitimate part of the formation and care of collections and, if practiced, should be done in order to refine and improve the quality and appropriateness of the collections, the better to serve the museum’s mission” (2010). According to AAMD, the six primary criteria for deaccessioning touch on the qualities of the works (poor quality, duplicate, forgery or bad physical condition beyond reasonable repair), the acquisition of the work (illegally imported works) and the collecting goals of the museum (the work is no longer consistent with the mission of the museum).

The reasons for deaccessioning in AAMD Policy on deaccession is gravitated to the works’ quality than the museum’s operation problem, even though the latter is in many cases the reason to initialize a deaccessioning. Such downplay of the fiscal concerns involved in the maintenance of the museums, and the foregrounding of the aim to improve the collections are probably strategies to destigmatize the very conduct of deaccessioning since deaccessioning has been loaded with the bias of moral corruption. By highlighting the professional evaluations, the mission for a better collection, and Policy thereby justifies the deaccessioning as a common practice in the museum, so that the museum could benefit from deaccessioning without risking losing the public faith, as long as it operates with regards to the Policy.

Deaccessioning not only ensures the quality of the collection by removing the disqualified works—be they inauthentic, of poor physical condition, with dubious provenance, or not consistent with the goal of collection—but also contributes to the optimization of museum resources (Vecco 2015, 225). It allows the museum to focus on the acquisition, conservation, and exhibition of more valuable works. Given the limited resources in finance, storage, and staff capacity, and the ever-increasing acquisition of new works, deaccessioning is an

indispensable or even a constructive part of the museum management.

Despite the benefit from deaccessioning, the museum is liable to ethic controversies in the practice of deaccessioning, because not all the works to be deaccessioned are duplicate, forgery or in a bad physical condition beyond repair; some are masterpieces with high market value. Some art museums do expect the sales proceeds from the deaccessioning to replenish the deficits in their operation, which is explicitly prohibited by the Policy. In November 2008, the National Academy Museum in New York, after ruling out the option of selling its Fifth Avenue home, had a vote of 181-1 among its artist-members to sell two paintings from its collection, by Frederic Edwin Church and Sanford Robinson Gifford, to help pay for operating expenses (Zaretsky 2009). Even though the National Academy Museum made a powerful return and reopened in 2011 by raising \$13.5 million through deaccessioning (Pogrebin 2011), the process was extremely tough and its reputation was severely marred because it received sanctions from AAMD, which resulted in the withdraw of loans from AAMD members and their refusal of collaboration on future exhibition (Zaretsky 2009).

Although deaccessioning two pieces of works to ensure the survival of a museum seems a sensible move and more preferable than selling the museum house, the act is highly controversial both from the viewpoint of AAMD and the National Academy Museum's director herself. When the New York Times asked the director, Ms. Branagan, whether the Academy would deaccession any artwork soon, she said: "Are you kidding me?" Her alerted tone and another museum director's regret-tainted encouragement "the deaccessioning is in the past, and they're doing what they need to do" (Pogrebin 2011) suggest the controversy involved in deaccessioning, and the discrepancy between practice and ethical rules.

2. Controversy over Deaccessioning

AAMD limits the utilization of the fund from deaccessioning. “Funds received from the disposal of a deaccessioned work shall not be used for operations or capital expenses. Such funds, including any earnings and appreciation thereon, may be utilized only for the acquisition of works in a manner consistent with the museum’s policy on the use of restricted acquisition funds. In order to account properly for their use, AAMD recommends that such funds, including any earnings and appreciation, be tracked separately from other acquisition funds” (AAMD 2010).

Therefore, when the Academy neglected the rule of applying the sales proceeds to acquisition only, AAMD sanctioned on the Academy to make its life even harder. Along with AAMD, American Association of Museums (AAM) also states in the Code of Ethics that “disposal of collections through sale, trade or research activities is solely for the advancement of the museum's mission. Proceeds from the sale of nonliving collections are to be used consistent with the established standards of the museum's discipline, but in no event shall they be used for anything other than acquisition or direct care of collections” (AAM 1991). Compared with AAMD, AAM is more flexible by allowing using the proceeds to the “direct care of collections,” which refers to “an investment that enhances the life, usefulness or quality of a museum’s collection” (AAM 2016, 7). Although the definition of “direct care of collections” seems broad and offers negotiable areas, a matrix¹ by AAM makes it clear that a usage that is both a “quick fix” (filling budgetary gaps, covering routine operating cost or regular maintenance) and “makes institution-wide impact” absolutely falls out of the criteria

¹ See the matrix of “Direct Care of Collections” of AAM in the Appendix A.

of “direct care of collections”. Therefore, according to AAM Code of Ethics, the National Academy Museum’s expense of house renovation and operation fees are not acceptable uses of funds from deaccessioning.

Although AAMD and AAM have reasons to adopt a strict ethical rule regarding the use of sales proceeds from deaccessioning, such as preventing the curators from being liable to moral hazard because of the free flow of cash (Vecco 2015, 224) and discouraging the museum directors to consider selling the works as a permanent fundraising tool for the institution (Ardis 2016, 246). However, it is problematic to cancel the possibility of saving a struggling museum by deaccessioning a small portion of its collection, regardless of its strategic adaption following the first-aid. Considering the *raison d'être* of the museum, to serve the public, no one would agree that keeping a collection intact and inaccessible to the public is more desirable than having a museum operating with a smaller collection. If the museum is closed, then the works indeed disappear from the public vision, not to mention educating the public by exhibiting the works in a well-studied context.

As some lawyers or law scholars argue (White 1996, Zaretsky 2009, Ardis 2016), in the cases of deaccessioning for survival, it does not make any sense to ask a museum to apply the fund from deaccessioning to the acquisition of new objects only, when the museum is on the brink of shutting down. For instance, the New York Historical Society closed its doors in February 1993 after existing for 188 years because it could not afford to operate anymore. In May 1995, after being approved by the New York court to deaccession sixteen million dollars’ worth of Old Master paintings and apply these funds towards operating expenses, the Historical Society reopened and has held a series of successful exhibits, created a study center and

developed a program by which the building space can be rented to the public (White 1996, 1065-66). If the court had not approved the deaccessioning, the public would not have the chance to visit the museum, enter the study center for women's history and witness its revival.

Considering the cases of the National Academy Museum and New York History Society, the restrictions of AAM's Code of Ethics and AAMD Policy on Deaccession on sales proceeds could have been more tolerant with respect to the specific situations. AAM's broader notion of "direct care of the collection" is constructive, which extends the acceptance of fund usage from acquisition to long-term development of the organization, and that is more practical to the flat economy of the museum world. AAMD could support the art museums better if they could assist some innovative museums in carrying through the hard days. AAMD may examine the future plan for development of the struggling museums and supervise the museums to make sure directors and curators will not abuse the option of deaccessioning.

3. Alternative Methods and Efforts to Ensure the Publicity of Works

Compared with the strict ethical rules by AAM and AAMD, the courts are more flexible in dealing with the cases of deaccessioning, but the courts still encourage the art museums to consider alternative solutions before reaching out to this ethical controversial method. Imaginative fundraising or redistributing the works through a temporary lease than through a permanent sale may achieve a better effect. Renting the work to another museum which might not be able to afford otherwise creates a win-win situation. The income of rental goes to the owner museum while another museum gets an opportunity to display an art piece of astronomical price (White 1996, 1061-2).

Even when the art museums hit bottom and have to choose deaccessioning as the most

palpable choice left in their dire situation, the public good is still of the top consideration. Echoing the advice of AAMD Policy on Deaccession (AAMD 2010) that “the museums may give consideration to keeping a deaccessioned work in the public domain”, the courts suggest a museum to sell works to another museum in lieu of a personal collector to ensure that the works are still accessible to the public. Because museums are public non-profit organizations, and their tight financial budget make them not as competitive as the private buyers in bidding for the works, the directors of the owner museum are often forced to forego of the maximum sale price in order to keep the works in the public domain (White 1996, 1063).

To balance the tension between “maximizing dollar value and protecting the public’s right of access to cultural artifacts” (White 1996, 1063), there are several strategies in securing the works to the public domain. The owner museum can contact several museums which show interest in the same work and are willing to exhibit the work on a rotating basis. Such strategy not only makes the work more affordable on the potential buyers’ part, but also achieves the goal of better serving the public, because rotating exhibition could reach a larger audience of scattered in different places. Courts could also implement “preemption agreements” which gives a qualified cultural institution “a right of first refusal,” which is the option to match a bid made by a private bidder within a specific number of days. The New York Historical Society, Sotheby’s, and the New York State Attorney General has implemented such agreement, which adds to the chances for the works to remain accessible to the public (White 1996, 1064).

There is an exception to the protective rules as mentioned above, though, if the price offered by the private buyer is significantly higher than that of the public buyers. In this case, “the increase in income outweighs the decrease in access” (White 1996, 1065). Even in the

least ideal case, the transfer to the private is still coherent with the serving-the-public goal, in the sense that the museum can maintain proper function by using the sales proceeds, which otherwise would shut down and the cannot treat the public with art works. On the private buyer's part, they are sometimes required to periodically display the works in public to partly meet the museum's mission.

As mentioned above, some art museums struggle to survive and the deaccessioning for them means the possibility to continue existence and accomplish the mission of serving the public. Restricted by the national museum alliances such as AAM and AAMD, the art museums have difficulty fixing their financial problems in operation by utilizing the sales proceeds from deaccessioning due to the ethical controversies, even though it is tolerated by the courts. In fact, deaccessioning for survival does not necessarily involve or lead to the corruption of the art museums. Art museums like the National Academy Museum could make a successful return with healthy development. And during the deaccessioning, art museums still privilege the public welfare by managing to keep the works in the public domain.

III. Deaccessioning in Women Make Movies

1. Primary Reasons for Deaccessioning in WMM

For Women Make Films, deaccessioning refers to returning the master files to the filmmakers and no longer distribute their films. The primary reason for deaccessioning was related to the way WMM used to promote films before the advent of the Internet (Zimmerman 2017). Before the invention of the Internet, WMM's major promotion strategy was sending the catalogues of films. If WMM wanted to include all the films it had in the catalogue, then the catalogue would be too thick and the cost for each would be too high, so WMM had to remove

some titles from the catalogue to secure the precious space for newly acquired marketable titles. But now with the help of the Internet, the website has become a major venue for film orders, and WMM could display as many films as they want on the online catalogue. As WMM no longer needs to calculate the space and it is free to keep the films, WMM seems to have no primary reason to deaccession films.

Other problems still exist though, such as the limited room for storage and a small scale of team of WMM, which explain why WMM still deaccessioned films in 2011. As WMM continues to acquire eighteen to twenty-five films annually, it is impossible to keep several copies of each film and accommodate the whole collection without ever deaccessioning some films. To make the collection stable around five hundred films, WMM has to deaccession films every couple of years (Zimmerman 2013, 151). In addition, a manageable amount of films could optimize the staff efficiency. WMM only has eleven staff and four interns, who usually help to organize the files and match the bills once a week. When the time comes for sending royalties to all the filmmakers twice a year, it is laborious to stick the address to five hundred envelopes, and consumes much time of the staff to and insert the corresponding letters into each envelop and send them out. Considering the large proportion of the letters are to inform the filmmakers that not any individual or cultural institutions during the past six months had purchased any copy of their films, and therefore they could not receive any royalty, it was hard to justify that such labor contributed to the welfare of the filmmakers and the organization in an efficient way. Efficiency of the small team weighs heavily, because as a non-profit women film distributor, WMM has to develop self-sustaining strategies when the government fund fluctuates between presidential terms, such as the decline of funding in women's course in the

1980s under Regan's presidency.

Therefore, it is reasonable for WMM to deaccession the films with poor distribution performance and redirect the efforts to distribute more marketable films. The deaccessioned films are not necessarily films of bad quality, since the films that are ever accessioned to WMM collection were the best among the 1000 films reviewed in that year (Center for Media 2001). Most films are deaccessioned because they are out-of-date, such as the story of lesbians coming out of the cabinet, which is not an issue anymore (Zimmerman 2017). In other cases, some films lack the potential to strike a success in the education market, which WMM specializes in. Deaccessioning of such films allows WMM to put more efforts in what they are good at, and encourages the filmmakers to seek more suitable distributors and optimize their influences. Deaccessioning, in this sense, is not necessary negative, but can benefit both the distributor WMM and the filmmakers.

From WMM's counterpart in the UK, a non-profit feminist distributor, Cinenova, we can observe what happens when an organization fails to adjust to the changing environment and survive by deaccessioning some films. Cinenova is established in 1991 from the merger of two feminist distributors, Circles and Cinema of Women, and now offers an extensive archive of women's film and video work, extending from experimental films, narrative feature films, artists film and video, documentary to educational videos (Cinenova 2017). Unlike WMM, Cinenova was unable to be independent of government subsidies and achieve financial self-sustainability. Consequently, Cinenova shrinks from an active distributor into a volunteer-based organization.

One major problem for Cinenova was its "lack of commercial viability" in "the changing

marketplace” (Knight and Thomas 2006, 6, 12). According to the observation of Laura Hudson, a former Cinenova worker, “[W]hat happened in the late 1980s, and most of the 1990s is that people think that the fight [against patriarchy] has been won, and there’s no longer any need to redress the balance. Unfortunately, that’s not the case, but the funders’ priorities have changed and shifted, and they’re no longer going to put money into something that is a women’s cause” (Hudson 2004). To survive the financial hardship and the low ebb of feminism, Cinenova discussed some commercially savvy strategies, such as “actively promoting only the more popular titles, consigning others to an archive collection and de-acquiring those titles that had become outdated,” which are what WMM has been doing, but Cinenova never puts them into practice. Cinenova has a concern that if they archive or deaccession certain titles, those titles would effectively cease to be visible and available in the UK, and consequently, a large portion of feminist film history, however outdated the work seem to be, would disappear. Considering the founding principles, Cinenova believes such oblivion of feminist history disqualifies them as a feminist distributor (Knight 2006, 16).

Cinenova’s reluctance to make a substantial change in its collection and operation mode leads to its ultimate failure to be financially independent. Unlike the staff of WMM who “clean” their catalogue regularly and deaccession those films that “become outdated due to political changes or...do not stand the test of time” or the films that they simply do not have the needed resources to market and make them successful (Knight 2006, 15), Cinenova is heavily burdened by their intention to preserve an intact collection of films. To make matters worse, due to the lack of education market for films in UK, Cinenova has to promote the oversized collection at a low price, which is labor-intensive and leads it to be caught in the vicious

“growth-shrink” circle. Namely, Cinenova has no staff to deal with the increased workload brought by the increased transactions, and hence they could not maintain the growth (Knight 2006, 9). The overemphasis on the integrity of the collection and its refusal to deaccession any films make Cinenova lose more than it should have. Cinenova could have played a more active role in distributing feminist films and videos by focusing on some while archiving or deaccessioning others, so that the feminist history is preserved and Cinenova can function better and promote more challenging films.

Comparing US-based WMM with the UK-based feminist distributor Cinenova, we can see that deaccessioning can boost effective promotion, gain financial independence and optimize staff efforts, which facilitate the growth of the organization and expands its influence in the public domain. In this sense, deaccessioning is indispensable to the course of sustaining feminist culture and having films made by and about women accessible to the public.

2. Ethical Responsibility of Keeping Films Available

Although deaccessioning usually start with the films that do not yield much distribution revenue, such films are not automatically kicked out of the collection, because WMM is fully aware of its ethical responsibility. WMM’s mission is to represent a variety of female voices, and all the business decisions are merely an effort to make WMM afloat so that it can continue ensuring a diversified representation of women. Therefore, WMM not only keeps films that have markets but also picks up four to five films each year that they know it is hard to find them markets. In these cases, WMM believes in the filmmakers and hopes to play a role in establishing the filmmakers’ career, and supports them to move from one film to the other (Center for Media 2001).

One reason of not deaccessioning the films of little income is WMM's relation with the young filmmakers. WMM trusts in the filmmakers and feels the responsibility for discovering and supporting the young directors. For instance, WMM still distributes a 30-minute narrative about a 12-year-old girl's coming-of-age story, which does not fit WMM's root market in universities and colleges, but WMM believes it is a beautifully made film and the filmmaker is brilliant (Center for Media 2001).

Another reason is WMM's commitment to women filmmakers from other countries, such as the African women about African issues, where the indigenous people's voices are rarely heard. Given the fact that the US audiences are more used to listen to an American voice describing the other culture than from an African voice, because the latter shows the life from an insider's view. Zimmerman says "in the way we believe that women should tell their own stories, we believe that Africans should tell their own stories. But it does make life harder" (Center for Media 2001). Highly aware of the gender and race issues involved in the film industry, WMM shoulders the responsibility of letting out the voices less heard in the history of representation, even though they require much more effort to reach the audience and make a profit. WMM is determined to compensate for the lack of voices and challenge the audience's watching habits formed by the historical inequalities in representation.

It is worth mentioning that WMM never deaccession films that are controversial (Zimmerman 2017). Although these films are not necessarily of poor sales performance—they could be rather popular in class—keeping such films in the collection can also demonstrate WMM's ethical responsibility of contributing to a diversified culture. According to a former WMM intern Fallica's study (2013), WMM still distributes *Warrior Marks* (1993), which

addresses the complicated issue of “female genital mutilation” (FGM), or more neutrally, “female genital surgery” in Africa. Although the film attempts to get opinions from different positions and does not judge the African women outright, the voice of Alice Walker is privileged over the speech of other African women on the issue. In Walker’s remark that FGM is a “patriarchal wound”, the film is clearly part of the global movement to abolish FGM. Such strong opposition against a non-Western cultural practice is subject to the criticism of being neo-colonialism, which, as Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan argues in their film analysis, “assumes that a Euro-American multicultural agenda travels freely across national boundaries” and reinforces the dichotomy between tradition and modernity “that is so central to colonial discourse and Western, metropolitan subject formation” (Fallica 2013, 269). The feminist stance displayed in the film does not result in its immunization from criticisms. But that does not lead to WMM to consider deaccessioning the film, because WMM embraces a variety of feminisms. Zimmerman says, “we don’t believe that there is a key feminist film – there are many, many different kinds of feminism, and we very proudly call ourselves a feminist organization” (Center for Media 2001). By offering the viewers a controversial perspective on female body, one feminist voice about the cultural practice, WMM is likely to spur discussions of female bodies across the cultures and challenge the notion of a homogeneous feminism.

3. Alternative Methods and Efforts to Ensure the Publicity of Works

Despite keeping the films that are important of the reasons above, for other films that do not perform well in distribution for a while, deaccessioning is still not the sole solution; a milder approach is to archive the films, so that they are still available to the public.

One alternative method is to archive the films. Like the UK-based Cinenova, WMM value

the films of historical significance. As these films are not popular and suitable for active distribution, WMM archives them in lieu of deaccessioning, so that the scholars can visit the WMM office and do research with the materials. Different from other films in active distribution, the archived films are rarely sold to the customers, unless they have very good reasons of purchasing, because WMM cease to make copies of the archived films. Around 15% film of the current collection are in the archive (Zimmerman 2017).

WMM also considers streaming the archive films to make the classic available to the public (Zimmerman 2013, 151). As the small team of WMM is fully engaged in the work of actively distributing the recently acquired films, there is too little time to realize the streaming project. Actually, if the films can be streamed online, it would not be profitable. Even if it charges fees for renting at the streaming platform, Vimeo, the platform which charges the least, would get ten percent of the revenue. As the fee for watching recently released films are as low as \$3.99 for a two-day rental, it would be still less for old films, according to the price set up by other non-profit distributors, including the independent distributor Cinema Guild, Media Education Foundation, and Documentary Educational Resources². Therefore, the idea of streaming the archive films shows WMM's commitment to increase the availability of the films with research value to the public.

IV. Conclusion

My paper examines the ethics of the deaccessioning, the controversies in the process, and the adherence to the mission of improving public welfare during deaccessioning. I extend the

² According to an interview with Amy Aquilino, the Distribution and Sales Manager of WMM, in April 12, 2017.

discussion of deaccessioning from the art museums, the regular field for such issue, to Women Make Movies, a non-profit women film distributor, which also maintains a collection and faces controversies in deaccessioning. The basic dilemma is that as cultural institutions, the art museums and WMM are responsible for making the culture embedded objects available to the public, and are expected to be independent from the trend and preserve the “outdated” heritage to nurture the future generations. However, the art museums and WMM also needs to adjust the collections and survive in the changing political environment and economical conditions, before they can fulfill their mission of ensuring the availability of the valuable objects.

Both the art museums and WMM are faced with the dilemma of survival and serving the public. I argue that although deaccessioning often implies the financial problem of the art museums, if carefully and wisely conducted according to a more flexible ethical guide from AAMD and AAM, deaccessioning can first-aid the operation deficit, offer resources to vibrant programs, make the collections more manageable and optimize the staff efficiency, which could assist the survival of cultural institutions and benefit the public. WMM, by deaccessioning the films of poor distribution performance and archiving the films of historical significance, can focus on the promotion of the income-generating 20% of the films, which in turn supports them to make available the other 80%, which may never sell well, but are “artistically significant films” and “feminist ‘classics’” (Knight 2006, 15). Survival and serving the public can thus be unified in the strategic deaccessioning.

Bibliography

- American Alliance of Museums (AAM). 1991. "Code of Ethics for Museums." American Alliance of Museums. Adopted 1991, amended 2000. <<http://www.aam-us.org/resources/ethics-standards-and-best-practices/code-of-ethics>>
- American Alliance of Museums (AAM). 2016. "Direct Care of Collections: Ethics, Guidelines and Recommendations." April. <<http://aam-us.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/direct-care-of-collections-ethics-guidelines-and-recommendations-pdf.pdf?sfvrsn=8>>
- Association of Art Museum Directors. 2010. "AAMD Policy on Deaccessioning." June 9, 2010. Amended 10, 2015. <https://aamd.org/sites/default/files/document/AAMD%20Policy%20on%20Deaccessioning%20website_0.pdf>
- Ardis E. Strong. 2016. "Deaccessioning: A Pragmatic Approach. *Journal of Law and Policy*." Vol. 24 Issue 1. 241-289. <<http://brooklynworks.brooklaw.edu/jlp/vol24/iss1/7>>
- Center for Media and Social Impact. 2001. "Debra Zimmerman and Women Make Movies." *Center for Media and Social Impact*. <<http://cmsimpact.org/resource/debra-zimmerman-and-women-make-movies/>>
- Cinenova. 2017. "Cinenova: Distributor of Feminist Film & Video." <<http://www.cinenova.org/>>
- Fallica, Kristen M. 2013. "Sustaining Feminist Film Cultures: An Institutional History of Women Make Movies." PhD Dissertation, University of Pittsburgh.
- Knight, Julia, and Peter Thomas. 2006. "A Fragile Existence: Analysing Women's Film and

Video Distribution in the UK.”

Malaro, Marie C. 1991. “Deaccessioning, The American Perspective”. *Museum Management and Curatorship* 10, 273-279.

Pogrebin, Robin. 2011. “A Chastised Museum Returns to Life.” April 17. *The New York Times*.
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/18/arts/design/national-academy-museum-returns-to-life-after-scolding.html>>

Vecco, Marilena, and Michele Piazzai. 2015. “Deaccessioning of museum collections: What do we know and where do we stand in Europe?” *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 16, no. 2: 221-227.

White, Jennifer L. 1996. “When It’s OK to Sell the Monet: A Trustee-Fiduciary-Duty Framework for Analyzing the Deaccessioning of Art to Meet Museum Operating Expenses”. *Michigan Law Review* Vol. 94, No.4, Feb. 1041-1066.

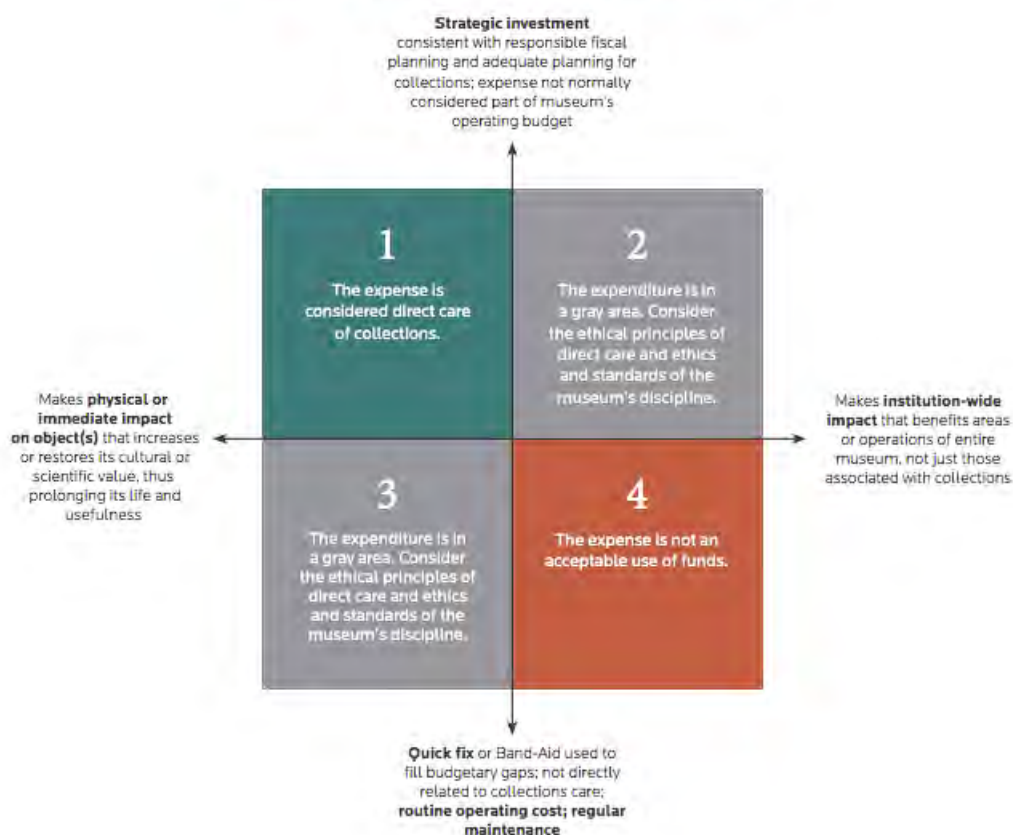
Zaretsky, Donn. 2009. “AAMD Rules Need to be Deaccessioned.” *Art in America Magazine*. Mar. 31. <<http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/aamd-rules-need-to-be-deaccessioned/>>

Zimmerman, Debra, and Patricia White. 2013. “Looking Back and Forward: A Conversation about Women Make Movies.” *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* 28, no. 1 82: 147-155.

Zimmerman, Debra. 2017. In interview over phone with the author (8 May 2017).

Appendix A

Direct Care of Collections Matrix



Resource:

American Alliance of Museums (AAM). 2016. "Direct Care of Collections: Ethics, Guidelines and Recommendations." April. <<http://aam-us.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/direct-care-of-collections-ethics-guidelines-and-recommendations-pdf.pdf?sfvrsn=8>>

Appendix B

Interview with Debra Zimmerman over phone (2017 May 8th)

1. Who decides which films to drop and do board members and staff discuss this issue together?

Staff sit together, discuss, and decide, yes, we should drop these films.

2. Can WMM get money by dropping films?

WMM cannot get money by dropping films.

3. Does WMM drop films because the films have poor distribution performance during the past years, WMM lack storage room for them, or WMM need to let the staff work on more efficient programs?

Yes, WMM drop films because they have poor distribution performance. The catalogue spaces are expensive, and you can also say that we do not have much storage room for the films, since WMM keeps at least two copies or even several copies of each film.

4. Has WMM ever dropped films because they are controversial?

We never drop films that are controversial. The primary reason for dropping films is that the catalogues are so thick—before the advent of internet, our major way of promotion is sending the catalogues—and thick catalogues are very expensive. We could not fit all the titles in the limited spaces, so we had to drop some films that did not sell well.

We dropped films that we could not promote very well, or films that were out of date, such as films about the struggles in central America and the problems of lesbians coming out, which are not relevant today.

5. Some films are archived instead of being dropped off. Why does WMM archive the films?

Some films that we think are of historical significance, we move them to archive. Putting the film into archive means we no longer make copies, and wait for the scholars to come to our office to watch them and do research. We seldom sell the archived films to customers, unless they have very good reasons to buy, because it takes a while to find the materials and make DVDs. About 15% films in the current collection are in our archive.

Interestingly, we sold two copies of *Women of Steel* in 2016, which is about the women workers in the steel industry of the 80s. It is interesting that some films are out of date for a while, and many years later, because they are so old that they attract people's interest again.

We thought about streaming the archived films online, but we have so little time and there is so much work to do with the films that we are actively distributing.

6. How many films have WMM dropped so far? What is the frequency?

We do not drop films regularly, about 3-5 years. The latest large scale of deaccession happens in 2014. Recently, it is free to keep all the titles online because now we have internet to promote the films, and we do not have reasons to drop films anymore.