The 'crisis' of art bibliography

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The temporary cessation to publication of the leading and most comprehensive bibliography in the arts, the *International bibliography of art* (formerly *Bibliography of the history of art*) in 2009, led to a lively debate on the future of art bibliography. Many scholars, librarians and information specialists were in favour of saving the established model and of ensuring its continuing existence. At the same time there arose the controversial and much-debated question of whether the traditional model of the IBA – grounded in an intellectual analysis of documents (articles from journals, monographs, exhibition catalogues, etc.) and their description with standardised metadata and abstracts – still corresponds to the needs of modern research on the one hand and to the new potentialities and realities of displaying, connecting, exchanging and gaining information in digital data networks on the other. Library catalogues play a decisive role in this consideration: unlike bibliographies, which follow traditional and more or less unvaried standards, they have mutated to a great degree from inflexible registers to dynamic networks. They enrich and connect the bibliographic information with additional data, they invite the user to tag and to review the corresponding literature and they enable complex forms of unforeseeable discovery. Thus the 'crisis' into which art bibliography was plunged when the old IBA ceased publication, at the same time opened up the opportunity to discuss alternative, future-oriented solutions for the appropriate format of bibliographic information supply in the arts today.

Approximately one generation ago, the period in which we are living today was defined as post-modern or post-industrial. Undoubtedly, such general statements obscure the high complexity of the phenomenon, and they are perfectly suited for misunderstandings and misinterpretations. However, the analysis of the new epoch as being post-modern – the term has its origin in the writings of the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard[1] – has been largely accepted. It was Lyotard who observed and described the increasing role of knowledge and information, and who clearly foresaw the diffusion of information technologies into wider society, with the consequent inevitable disintegration of the traditional structures and hierarchies used for the aggregation and transfer of knowledge. The fact that access to knowledge and information becomes increasingly easier for more and more people, in parallel with knowledge and information becoming the dominant factor in all work processes, leads to our society being given another label, namely the information society. And since critics of the post-modernism theory, such as Frank Webster[2] for instance, emphasised the continuity of traditional factors such as the predominance of capitalism even in the changed post-modern society, the well-accepted new significance of information prompted them to define information capitalism as the characteristic feature of the 21st century.

This is not the right place to discuss theories of modern society, but it is undisputed that the

opening and acceleration of access to manifold information, supported by the development of powerful communication networks, became a matter of interest in all spheres of life in addition to being a networking and dynamic strategic element in gaining knowledge, and this in less common forms and so far unknown contexts. At the same time, when information capitalism became the basis for action in the modern information society the production, exchange, display, formatting, use, re-use and abuse of information were placed in the hands of an extremely heterogeneous, uncontrollable and highly complex mass of partners, stakeholders, individuals and institutions, to mention only a few, who by contrast have one decisive characteristic in common: their willingness and ability to communicate globally.

But what does all this have to do with art bibliography? Let us look back to before 2009 when, in our discipline, the world of the supply of bibliographic information was still intact, so to speak. Scholars were served by two different sources: the *Bibliography of the history of art* (BHA) on the one hand and the heterogeneous group of catalogues of art libraries, mainly in Europe and North America, on the other. Generations of scholars were familiar with using the BHA and its precursors RILA (*Répertoire international de la littérature de l'art*) and the RAA (*Répertoire d'art et d'archéologie*), which merged to become the new BHA in 1990. This bibliography claimed to be the most comprehensive in its field, covering the literature of European art from late antiquity to the present day and American art from the European discoveries to the present day. It included traditional fine arts, decorative and applied arts, photography and the so-called new media as well. The most important document types were covered, such as books, periodical articles, conference proceedings, exhibition catalogues and doctoral dissertations. The standard BHA record consisted of three elements: the bibliographic description (based on library cataloguing rules), the abstract and the classification. Production of the BHA was based on a widespread network of experts and institutions. It brought together the Getty Art History Information Program of the J. Paul Getty Trust and the Institut de l'Information Scientifique et Technique of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, and about 60 people and 50 institutions were involved in curating, editing, managing, advising and supporting the production and, first and foremost, in abstracting and classifying the documents. High ranking scholars such as Pierre Rosenberg and John Shearman belonged to the advisory committee, and

the abstractors were hosted by leading art libraries such as those of the Courtauld Institute in London or the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome. With the help of this infrastructure, around 400,000 documents in more than 40 different languages have been indexed since 1991. The annual production of 2006 and 2007 peaked at around 24,000 records, of which 75% related to journal articles, 15% to monographs and 8% to exhibition catalogues. The strong concentration on articles from periodicals is a characteristic feature of bibliographies in the arts and an outstanding distinction with library catalogues. *Art index* for instance, established around 1930, was defined as a periodical index of 135 journals. In the following decades the level of 506 was recently achieved. Around the same time the *Avery index to architectural periodicals* was founded, with the scope of extensively and also retrospectively indexing the leading architectural journals. Today, the list contains approximately 400 current and over 1000 retrospective periodicals with more than 600,000 related records, and since 1974 articles from almost 300 periodicals have been indexed in the relatively young *ARTbibliographies modern*. All in all, we can conclude that the indexing of periodicals was, and is, the central aim of traditional bibliographies, undoubtedly due to the fact that in most library catalogues these very sources are not covered. In this respect bibliographies are indispensable sources of information. A further advantage of bibliographies is their location-independent availability. As long as the consultation of library catalogues was only possible *in situ* they were never seriously considered as being equivalent to, or even superior to, bibliographies. However, they have a lot in common and both have been related to each other over their long history.

The beginnings of bibliography in general, and art bibliography in particular, date back to the Early Modern period. In 1545, for example, the Swiss naturalist and classical philologist Conrad Gessner published his *Bibliotheca universalis*, a primal model of a comprehensive bibliography of 15,000 book titles, many of them related to art.[3] Some centuries later, in the era of the Enlightenment, a distinction between different types of bibliography became relevant: the enumerative, periodically updated model on the one hand and the analytic, critically commented selection on the other.[4] At the beginning of the last century this important differentiation was expressed in other words, when *systematic* was opposed to *critical* and *enumeration* to *classification* respectively.[5] Naturally there were many overlaps and interpenetrations in this dualism. However, all

variations were based on one important principle: the bibliographer's professionalism and high level of expertise. In short, bibliography was regarded as being a challenging science. The user's expectations were obviously high when in 1935 the British information expert Theodore Besterman demanded that a perfect bibliographer should be distinguished by four important characteristics: passion for the work, profound knowledge of the indexed material, practical experience as a librarian and cataloguer and high sensitivity to method and order.[6] The BHA undoubtedly continued this tradition: in one respect it belonged to the category of enumerative or systematic lists, but at the same time the records, and in particular the abstracts, reveal noticeable expertise and professional competence. Consequently, the provision of information, which is the primary purpose of a bibliography, was paired with high reliability, continuity and uniformity. Bearing in mind the vast group of experts involved in the production of the BHA, it is obvious that the editors aimed to create a bibliographic instrument that covered material in a clearly defined framework and that they put great emphasis on a constant and consolidated formal level of quality.

Let us now move on to consider library catalogues. Since the bibliographic description of document titles follows similar and often the same rules, bibliographies and catalogues belong close together. Library catalogues have served bibliographies as an outstanding source for centuries. The aforementioned Theodore Besterman emphasised that catalogues of specialised libraries and bibliographies have a similar nature, because both follow a constant classification criterion.[7] Under these circumstances the unification of single catalogues must have been an extremely auspicious vision, and indeed it was Besterman who, in 1958, launched his ambitious European Union Catalogue Project.[8] While in his time such unification could only be managed in the form of a clumsy union card catalogue, today the electronic virtual union catalogues or meta OPACs can do this easily. And we all know very well that electronic catalogues now offer much more than in the pre-internet era: additional catalogue enrichment services like tables of contents, abstracts, review recommendations and tags complete the information offered by traditional bibliographic metadata remarkably well. The old static entries on catalogue cards became dynamic cells which can now be completed, updated and connected to complex network environments automatically. A large part of the additional information is derived from heterogeneous sources such as publisher services, open access review

platforms or readers and authors. Thus, unlike traditional bibliographies, modern online catalogues are far from following precisely defined and carefully controlled quality standards and constant formats. But does this necessarily mean that these compiled information clusters are less reliable and of dubious quality?

The intention is not to prove the superiority of one system over another. It is uncontested that both sources, the traditional bibliography and modern library catalogues, have their advantages and disadvantages and that they need not be seen as competitors but rather as complementary to each other in the process of the acquisition of bibliographic information. However, while bibliographies have persisted in their more or less unvaried, pre-defined format for decades, library catalogues have changed and developed significantly over the last ten years, and there is no end in sight. At the same time, virtual union catalogues or metasearch systems for simultaneous retrieval processes in widely dispersed databases became a reality. *artlibraries.net* is an example that illustrates both the functional principle and the conceptual approach.[9] The greatest benefit of the metasearch engine is its function as a tool for the acquisition of bibliographic data and not as a gateway to single library catalogues. Therefore, the *artlibraries.net* committee attaches great importance to finding new partners who can enrich and enlarge the virtual pool of bibliographic records and sometimes rejects candidates whose catalogues only contain information that has already been covered. Indeed, bibliographic overview generated this way will always remain incomplete since it is derived from the holdings of the participating libraries. But could the BHA, the most comprehensive bibliography in our discipline, lay claim to completeness? Certainly not. The indexing of monographs for instance, making up 25% of the annual entries, has been based on the holdings of the co-operating libraries, and the impressive long list of around 1200 journals, which have been indexed constantly, is missing some important ones. However, the biggest shortcoming of both bibliographies and most library catalogues is their non-consideration of documents and sources that are available beyond the traditional publication conventions: digitally created Open Access journals, full text documents on institutional repositories, digital collections, databases, etc. More and more libraries have been making efforts to complete their catalogues with such sources since their scholarly relevance, or at least the majority of them, has been acknowledged.

But the publishing world has become extremely

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complex and, consequently, the traditional concept of indexing pre-selected sources with pre-defined rules, uniform quality standards and with its claim to relative completeness has definitely reached its limits. Both the editors of bibliographies and librarians are faced with the phenomenon of an increasing, uncontrollable number of formats *and* key players. And so, in this context, we return to the previous remarks on information capitalism in the post-modern period. We are aware of the new dynamism of information, its ability to network in complex environments and the high level of interest in producing, aggregating and distributing information in multiple relationships and for varied reasons. In the meantime, the disintegration of established systems used for the accumulation and transfer of information, prophesied by Lyotard, has become a reality. The route to information has changed from a more or less linear relationship of query and response into a more unforeseeable process of discovery in which the searcher now plays a much more active role than ever before. Under these circumstances two basic elements are required: access to an integrated data pool on the one hand and a highly differentiating tool for selection on the other. Neither bibliographies nor the structure of most current library catalogues fulfil *these requirements properly. But about a year ago,* when discussions on an alleged crisis in art bibliography began, the issue was the cessation of the BHA, or IBA as it was renamed in 2007, and not the structural change that I have described in supplying and acquiring information in the digital world. And when, in June 2010, the provider ProQuest announced that the production of the IBA in its last consolidated form would continue under its aegis from 2011, the crisis seemed to have been overcome.

However, even if the well-established and undoubtedly commendable IBA seems to have been saved, the discrepancy I have illustrated between the traditional format and the current requirements for a comprehensive bibliographical information tool has remained unbridged. It is not the loss of the old bibliography that caused the crisis, but rather the lack of an appropriate, future-proofed solution. And even if a remarkable group of experts have expressed a great number of important observations, proposals and preferences, in this context there is no silver bullet in sight for the moment. But it would be unrealistic to think that this highly complex problem can be resolved with a single magic formula. At most we can approach a solution and be aware of the interaction of several components to which traditional bibliographies and library

catalogues belong as well as new, still to be developed tools for detecting first and foremost unknown sources and unexpected relationships. The papers in this issue of the *Art libraries journal* put forward in-depth discussions on many aspects of the ongoing debate on art bibliography, as well as realities like *artlibraries.net* and NYARC and AGORHA, so we can limit ourselves here to these generalities.

To conclude, we should primarily recognise the constructive effect of the crisis. Global events like the financial crisis of 2009, which played a crucial role in the Getty having ceased to be editor and publisher of the BHA, stimulated a productive, international debate on the future of art bibliography. And global developments like the establishment of the post-modern or information society are evidence of the fact that any future solution must face the realities of modern conventions of information exchange. The traditional method of pre-selecting knowledge and paving the way with uniform quality standards and pre-defined tools for their application is hardly up-to-date. Consequently, we must support post-selection strategies if we intend to develop models for the future. Advocates of the old bibliography concept would most likely argue that this is farewell to quality and reliability. To this I would reply that the question of quality and reliability is the highest challenge in the upcoming process.

References

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