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Medien

COMPUTERIZED INFORMATION
PROBLEMS AND PERSPECTIVES FOR THE ART HISTORIAN

Research begins with fact finding and ends with documenting the results. On both ends of this procedure we work either with the object, or with records which hold pertinent visual information. The text is important to us certainly, especially when working from literary sources, or on a theoretical basis. These types of information, alpha-nummerically coded, have long since been accessible to electronic computation. With time, higher degrees of editing and more flexible correlations between discrete elements of data have become possible. We now stand on the verge of optical codification, — technically already possible — which brings our specific hybrid need for both textural and pictorial resources into reach.

What do these applications replace? Usually a myriad of catalogue cards with photographic material either attached or more or less accessible. Indeed, accessibility of information is very much at the crux of research and documentation efforts.

In the realm of international efforts the SN/G (SCUOLA NORMALE/GETTY) Report on Data Processing Projects in Art, a collaboration between the Scuola Normale Superiore (SNS) of Pisa, Italy, and the Getty Art History Information Program (AHIP), is the most ambitious. The SN/G Report surveys 248 Projects. It is a database which contains pertinent information on available databases. The information provided pertains to: 1. subject matter, 2. emphases, 3. geographical scope, 4. chronological scope, 5. names and addresses of the institutions and persons to contact, 6. bibliography, 7. access means (dial-up or online)

The users envisioned are individual researchers, information managers and systems developers (for a description of this new job profil see Elizabeth Orna *Information policies for Museums,* Leeds: MDA, 1987). While the individual researcher may be all of the above, the information managers might be interested in useful resources and information on projects similar to their own and the systems developers would want

information on technical features for the sake of identifying problem areas and possible solutions.

These 248 projects represent an extraordinary range of topics and large geographic distribution; yet availability of the actual information is limited to fewer than 40 (s. Marilyn Schmitt, *„A Database of Databases"*. in *The J. Paul Getty Trust Bulletin* vol. 4, No. 1, Winter 1988, p.6—7) and of those about 25 are limited to dial-up access. Even fewer are carried by the most frequently searched host, DIALOG (Information Services, Oxford).

Another problem is the updating. It is far slower than in book form (which alone amounts to at least two years). For the most frequently used journals such as Art News and Art in America the IAC magazine index and the Wilson Line's Art Index offers the most current information.

Even more discouraging is the lack of controlled vocabulary. It makes the hit-rate more than questionable. The search vocabulary for DIALOG allows searching in RILA (International Repertory of the Literature of Art) and Artbibliographies Modern, but can not be used for the online version of Art Index. Even in sections of RILA and Artbibliographies Modern there are discrepancies in vocabulary compatibility.

Possible reactions to these problems could firstly, be to employ specialized personnel (for example in certain research centres), who would have enough practice in retrieval strategies to ensure a satisfactory measure of success. Secondly, the development of controlled vocabulary. The latter concern is featured prominently in discussions at the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Prato where the Centres for Documentation and Contemporary Art Libraries held a conference in April (29—30 April 1989), as well as at the XXVIIth International Congress of History of Art in Strasbourg (31 August—8 September 1989), where the Visual Resources Association also discussed the thesaurus issue. Quite often the use of key words is also a problem. Free text searching can combat this rigidity to the extent that it can be used like a word index.

All these aspects require collaboration with systems specialists, with institutions, and national organizations. Marilyn Schmitt has formulated it in a very concise manner, she writes: „Without such balanced collaborations, the scholarly world may well find its information restructured and presented in forms that it does not recognize and in which it has had no say." (as cited above, p.6)

The SN/G venture is such a collaboration. It began with the Second International Conference on Automated Processing of Art History Data and Documents, 1984. At the time of this conference the Scuola Normale Superiore published CONSENSUS, Computerization in the History of Art, which included 162 projects in categories of general catalogues, catalogues of museums, of architecture, of sculpture, of paintings, of prints and drawings, of coins, of pottery, of miscellaneous items, thesauri, lexica, documents and resources, iconography, bibliography, biography, photographic archives, the computer as tool, special uses of computer: art history, artifacts and art objects. The conference proceedings were published in two volumes entitled *Automatic Processing of Art History Data and Documents* (ed. Laura Corti, Marilyn Schmitt, September. 24—27, 1984, for most current issue s. SN/G: *Report on Data Processing Projects in Art,* Laura Corti, Deborah Wilde, Umberto Parrini, Marilyn Schmitt, 2 vols.

— vol. 1 Projects, vol. 2 Indexes — Scuola Normale Superiore, Pisa; Getty Art History Information Program, Los Angeles, 1988).

In 1985 (13—16 May) the conference „Computer Technology for Conservators" (the 11th Annual IIC-CG Conference Workshop) was held in Halifax, Canada (Atlantic Regional Group of the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works: Canada Group, 1986). The issues handled have for the individual scholar their relevance. They are concerned with treatment files, condition reporting on location, conservation information management systems, databases of interest to conservators and the Conservation Information Network (CIN), which contains the library database and the conservation materials database and is a cooperative effort of the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI), the Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN), the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI), the International Center for the Study of the Preservation and the Restoration of Cultural Property as well as the Art and Archeology Technical Abstracts (AATA).

Another important international source is the proceedings of The Museum Documentation Association's first annual international conference held in Cambridge, England, 26—29 September, 1987 *(Collections Management for Museums,* 1988). Included were surveys of collection management systems and practices (UK, USA, AUS, NZ, nordic countries), system design (CIN, planning, choice, scope and design), the role of professional groups, procedure and policy developments, training and advisory developments, consultancy support and relevant bibliographic references.

Further international efforts are undertaken by UNESCO at the governmental level and by ICOM at the professional level (s. *Museum Documentation Systems:* Developments and Applications, ed. Richard B. Light, D. Andrew Roberts and Jennifer D. Stewart, MDA: 1986).

I would like to mention some titles that might be helpful for quick reference or an initial familiarization with the subject, they are: 1. *Who is Who:* das Jahrbuch der Online-Szene (Frankfurt a. M.: BTEAM B. Breidenstein, 1989/90, 559 pp.), 2. *Computerfibel für die Geisteswissenschaften:* Einsatzmöglichkeiten des Personal Computers und Beispiele aus der Praxis (München: Beck, 1986, 282 pp.), 3. „The Costs of Building and Maintaining an Art History Database", Anne-Marie Logan, in *Visual Arts* (An International Journal of Documentation, IV/2, Spring 1987).

For more practical application the following are instructive: for Germany, 1. *EDV-gestützte Bestandserschließung in kleinen und mittleren Museen* (Materialien aus dem Institut für Museumskunde, Staatliche Museen Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin Heft 24, von Carlos Saro and Christof Wolters, Berlin 1988), 2. *EDV-gestützte Katalogisierung in großen Museen* (Lutz Heusinger, Marburg: Bildarchiv Foto Marburg, Deutsches Dokumentationszentrum für Kunstgeschichte, 1989), for France: 1. *Principes d'analyse scientifique: objets civils domestiques vocabulaire, inventaire général* (Paris imprimerie Nationale 1984, contains good illustrations and descriptions, appears to be far reaching and thorough).

I regret the brevity with which I mention these sources but those who are interested will at least be aware of them. I would now like to turn to questions that we can profitably discuss.

1. How can we prepare ourselves for this new circumstance? I think by recognizing the different logic and thus way of thinking dictated and percipitated by automated data processes, we will be best equipped for new developments.

2. What are relevant concerns for future usage in our own experience? According to Werner Müller *(Kunstwerk, Kunstgeschichte und Computer,* München: Dt. Kunstverlag, 1987) a growth in experimental forms of empirical art historical research are to be expected.

3. Is there a danger of misguided efforts? I remind you here of Marilyn Schmitt's words in regards to collaboration on the structuring of information for automated retrieval systems. Another problem very often felt is that of reductive tendencies in controlled vocabulary, which lead to impovrishment of the rich verbal expression in our source material. The fact that for our disciplin the most recent is not to be equated with the best, means that databases primarily amassing actual information and not going back into early holdings will not provide a satisfactory pool of information.

Costs are another source of misguided efforts; that is to say that the training of personnel responsible for the compilation should have high priority; these highly trained individuals should be highly paid. More often they have little conception of their data and they only have a vague idea about the users' needs. Rather than investing necessary forethought, the man-hours invested often simply result in a highly formalized mass of information. This is costly because the elaborate search procedures necessary for working with the data is prohibitively expensive. Too often the projects are too ambitious and must later be reduced in size and alternative information sources discontinued, causing accessibility to grow worse than before (there are signs that this situation is changing, which I hope will soon make much said here no longer applicable!).

4. What are the current issues being discussed? Relevant concerns already gaining wide receptivity are word processing applications. The database, however, continues to illicite scepticism. Great progress in free text searching, in relational and hierarchical structuring help make the database more flexible. The database can range from a simple inventory number and object category, to the very sophisticated indexing of primary textural sources. The latter safeguards fragile sources. Such a project is similar to a transcription, its usefulness is directly related to the quality of the transcription.

Controlled vocabulary was an aspect already mentioned; these are grouped into thesauri. In our disciplin the most wide spread is the iconographically oriented thesaurus. There are at least three types of iconographical database thesauri available at present: the descriptive, the thematic and the simple objects listing.

The most excellent descriptive database thesaurus to my knowledge is the *Inventaire Général des Monuments et des Richesses Artistiques de la France.*

The thematic database thesaurus most extensive and used in conjunction with the Marburger Index is an inventory of art in Germany (put together by the Bildarchiv Foto Marburg and available in microfiche form) and the Decimal Index of the Art of the Low Countries (DIAL), ICONCLASS, an iconographic classification system (completed and edited by L. Couprie, with E. Tholen and G. Vellekoop, Amsterdam: North-Holland Publ. Co. 1981). There are 9 divisions with their respective sub-divisions: 1. Religion

and Magic 2. Nature 3. Human Being; Man in General 4. Society, Civilization, Culture 5. Abstract Ideas and Concepts 6. History 7. Bible 8. Literature 9. Classical Mythology and Ancient History.

The third thesaurus is offered by Willoughby Associates, Limited and is an objects oriented listing primarily aimed at museums collections management.

As already mentioned the thesauri are also becoming more important. There are two bibliographic references I would like to refer you to here: 1. Francois Garnier, Ministère de la Culture, *Thesaurus Iconographique: système descriptif des représentations* (Paris: le Léopard d'Or, 1984), 2. Jean Aitchison and Alan Gilchrist, *Thesaurus Construction: a Practical Manual* (London: The Association for Information Management — Aslib — 2. ed. 1987).

In terms of directions in research it would seem to me feasible to expect that the ordering of bibliographic imformation in a given area of art historical interest should provide information about patterns of reception and be useful in historiographical studies; the same information arranged according to the institutions and personnel involved might conceivably offer a list of experts, archives and patterns of diffusion; the listing of specific genres might show certain preferences of artists and patrons in particular periods, specifically in certain styles and schools. Obviously the quantity and quality of the data will be crucial to the validity of the resulting statement. These ideas clearly support Müller's supposition that experimental empirical investigation will be favoured.

The question however remains, just how meaningful such queries may be when they pertain to the art work itself and when they attempt to give explanation for visual analysis. The example Müller sites is instructive. It is a study of the discrepancies in perspective-point systems occurring in Raphael's *'School of Athens'* (begun 1509) which were calculated by the computer. He rightly questions the profitability of this information, when figural group dynamics and significant compositional arrangements are the issue. — The false security empirically won statistics can generate is evident here. The analogy capable with a computer must be based on nummerically codified information which is derived from same kinds of information.

In this respect Professor Marilyn Lavin's research on Italian Fresco cycles would seem a more profitable persuit. Using IBM's Statistics Analysis System, SAS software package, she was able to identify a narrative disposition in Italian monumental painting based on her 4000 records in her database which covers approximately two hundert cycles dating between 432 and 1600 AD. The codification process she untook prior to her compter-aided statistical analysis insured reliable — in the sense of being nummerically logical — results. In addition she has amassed detailed information in exactly repeatable form which can be viewed as a valuable resource for research. (s. „Computers and the Private Scholar", in *Bulletin of the Archives and Documentation Centres for Modern and Contemporary Art* (IAAC/AICA and UNESCO, ed. at the Swiss Institute for Art Research, Zürich, vol. 14/15, nr. 25 & 26, 2/1986 & 1/1987, „Computers and the Future of Art Research: Visions, Problems, Projects", pp. 54—55).

One very significant aspect of Professor Lavin's short piece, it seems to me, is the emphasis made on her learning from the binary structure to deconstruct her descriptive

information to either comply to a yes/no question or a number code classification. This recognition of the need for carefully thought out flow chart plans is crucial to the success of any large undertaking. Small models of a larger project should be carefully worked out before hand. This also means that even individual projects should be gone about in this way, if the positive results of automation are to be achieved. The consultation with systems developers is critical and means you need to formulate your project very precisely. Its normal to find, as Prof. Lavin herself states, that our thoughts and modes of communication are imprecise in these things. (as cited above, footnote 10, p. 54)

In the realm of iconographical studies we are assuredly better equipped, and yet we seem not to use this approach as readily when analysing contemporary art. Where does the computer come in here? Alas, we were generally disappointed by the efforts of information aesthetics. The forces of scientific thought and scientific speculation on our attitudes to nature, however, should be reconsidered. Karl Clausberg in his piece, subtitled „Künstliche Wirklichkeit aus dem Computer" (*Kunstgeschichte — aber wie?: Zehn Themen und Beispiele,* Hg. Fachschaft Kunstgeschichte, München, Berlin, Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1989, S. 259—294), shows us pictorial representations of the micro- and macrocosmos from medieval miniatures, the vision of Hildegard von Bingen in her *Liber Divinorum Operum* (Lucca, Biblioteca Governativa Ms 1942, about 1230), to the *'Mandelbrot-Set'* and beyond to *'Graftals'*, in an attempt to renew this line of investigation. Exercises in pictorial manipulations, from anamorphosis to surrogate-picture-documents and digital-collages, are further analogies he discusses. His hypothesis, that new visual symbols of danger flanked by a tendency to beautify are forming, that something like a digital „mimesis of becoming" (Droysen, as cited, pp. 282—83) is occurring, leads us into a discussion that I can only mention here by way of indicating some further possible directions of investigation.

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Dawn Leach-Rühl

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Ausstellungen

TIZIANO

Venedig, Palazzo Ducale, 1. Juni bis 5. Oktober 1990.

Am 1. Juni wurde im Beisein des italienischen Staatspräsidenten Cossiga, des Senatspräsidenten Spadolini und zahlreicher Ehrengäste die seit langem erwartete Tizian-Ausstellung im Dogenpalast in Venedig eröffnet. Sie war vorher in der National Gallery in Washington zu sehen und kam in enger Zusammenarbeit mit den dortigen Wissenschaftlern zustande. Im Umfang gleicht sie der bisher größten Tizian-Ausstellung, die