



artlibraries.net, WorldCat and common initiatives for the future of art bibliography

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77 — Integrating access to art resources – boon or bane? — Art Libraries

Abstract:

The paper summarizes the current state of discussions concerning the future development of the international meta catalogue www.artlibraries.net. After the critical analysis presented two years ago at the IFLA conference in Gothenburg and thanks to discussions undertaken in the context of 'Future of Art Bibliography' initiative as well as by the international artlibraries.net partners (see last year's Art Libraries Journal special issue), there seems to be a real chance to overcome well-known weaknesses of the current artlibraries.net federated search by clustering targets, augmenting the bibliographical scope and the number of participating institutions, improving significantly the response time and the presentation of the results as well as by allowing a seamless transition into the wider universe of information outside the relatively small art history planet. The draft for a renewed artlibraries.net meta catalogue is based on technical proposals coming from OCLC/WorldCat and from the KIT Karlsruhe, creator of the 'Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog'.

Two years ago, at the ALS's Open Session in Gothenburg, the project of creating a new search tool for art libraries holdings worldwide as well as for other resources related to art and art history, called the Future of Art Bibliography initiative (FAB), was already presented by Kathleen Salomon. As she has explained, this initiative, due to the support of the Getty Research Institute and a grant from the Kress Foundation, was at that time closely related to the temporary disappearance of the 'Bibliography of the History of Art (BHA)' in 2009. Although the BHA was resuscitated shortly

afterwards on a new commercial basis by ProQuest as the 'International Bibliography of Art (IBA)' as part of the big ProQuest portfolio of databases, the FAB initiative remained intact. From the beginning, the FAB initiative largely converged with discussions concerning the meta catalogue 'artlibraries.net – Virtual Catalogue for Art History' (www.artlibraries.net).

artlibraries.net – Virtual Catalogue for Art History (www.artlibraries.net), formerly the VKK, is an international specialized meta catalogue allowing the integrated retrieval of bibliographic records and other objects of distinctive art historical databases. Currently, artlibraries.net gives access to more than 12 million records, including a high percentage of records for articles in periodicals, conference papers, festschriften, exhibition catalogues and exhibition books, etc., and an increasing percentage of records for archival and photographic materials as well as for online resources. artlibraries.net is not only a meta catalogue, but also an international working community of more than 100 art libraries from currently 14 countries worldwide.

Already at the time of the IFLA conference in Gothenburg, it had become quite clear that artlibraries.net, based on the technique of the 'Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog (KVK) is in some way a victim of its success in the international art libraries community and urgently needs to be improved and renewed. Still in 2010, at the memorable joint artlibraries.net and FAB meeting at the Gulbenkian Foundation in Lisbon, I had the opportunity to explain the functional desiderata concerning artlibraries.net in a paper titled "Meta catalogues and search engines : artlibraries.net and the state of the art". This paper is part of the proceedings of the Lisbon conference published in Art Libraries Journal 36.2011, 3 (Special issue: The future of art bibliography). As has been stated repeatedly, our federated search meta catalogue is suffering among others from the fact that only a part of the results is immediately shown, that the hitlists produced for the targets furnishing positive results can not be aggregated and that the reaction time is quite annoying, not the mention time-outs.

But, as I already said in this paper and also in the preceding paper given at the IFLA conference in Gothenburg (“The realities of subject indexing in art libraries”, published online on the IFLA ALS website: <http://www.ifla.org/en/publications/papers-on-art-library-topics>), the problems are far from being on a solely technical level. “[...] cataloging and subject indexing of such important materials as articles and reviews (print or online), auction catalogues and gallery catalogues (print or online), doctoral dissertations (print or online), electronic resources in general is not really carried out by the [art] libraries, and therefore these materials are not sufficiently accessible through artlibraries.net.”

We already knew that bibliographies as BHA/IBA or ARTbibliographies Modern (ABM) are indexing, and even in a rather deep manner, materials, especially certain types of articles, which are not to be found in any of our library catalogues. We have to acknowledge that the new International Bibliography of Art (IBA) is benefitting enormously from being embedded in a much larger database context comprising a whole series of other databases which are not specific to art history: interdisciplinary bibliographies, bibliographies concerning other subject areas and collections of digitized resources. Especially the ProQuest collections of digitized historical periodicals and newspapers with their access to the full text make available a bunch of materials which has supposedly been beyond the horizon of art historians for too long. On the other hand, the bibliographies do not seem to be able to replace the library catalogs. The library holdings and catalogs are even an essential basis for the commercial bibliographies. And library catalogs, compared to bibliographies, have the big advantage to be ‘closer’ to the user, at least as long as physical holdings are prevailing, simply because of the fact that is here where the shelf numbers are to be found. So, for the moment, it seems out of question to leave the field simply to the commercial bibliographies, even if this may appear as an interesting solution to research institute directors eager to reduce infrastructure costs for the benefit of their research departments. On the contrary, community projects like artlibraries.net and related initiatives like FAB appear almost as a professional duty in order to assure reliable, long-term, community specific information retrieval.

Not surprisingly, when we were reflecting on the best technical solution for the future, we came to the conclusion that up-to-date search engine technique would be most suitable to 'reconstruct' the artlibraries.net building on a new scale and even more to realize an ideal all-encompassing art bibliography in the broadest sense, a unique 'discovery' tool for art historians. Search engine technique would be able to give access to commercial databases, where applicable, at the same time as to open access resources like library catalogues. It would be incomparably fast. It would allow sophisticated faceting and ranking. As we all know, search engine technique is currently a big business hype in librarianship and institutional library catalogs are increasingly supplemented by institutionally defined access to search engine products as Ex Libris Primo, often sold together with licenses for huge bibliographic and full-text databases. Recently, a Primo based search engine for art history resources was even inaugurated by the Sächsische Landesbibliothek – Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek (Saxon State and University Library) Dresden within the portal arthistoricum.net as a possible alternative to our good old artlibraries.net (see: <http://www.arthistoricum.net/en/search/>). So far, this search engine encompasses a rather restricted number of, mainly German, data sources. Indeed, constructing and sustaining an ambitious specialized search engine is apparently a big financial, organizational and technical challenge. We already became aware of this when Joe Shubitowski, Head Library Information Systems at the Getty Research Institute and member of the FAB task force, sharing no effort, presented a Solr/Lucene based search engine prototype for art resources at the artlibraries.net/FAB conference in Lisbon 2010 (see: Joseph Shubitowski and Bruce Washburn: Imagining the future of art bibliography: using prototypes to evaluate technical approaches. – In: Art Libraries Journal 36.2011, 3, pp.40-45). After unsuccessful attempts to get the funding necessary to continue working on this prototype, the FAB task force and the artlibraries.net committee concluded: As the artlibraries.net project is based on a rather informal co-operation, so far not involving a real institutional and financial basis, and as it has so far not been possible to secure third-party financing for such a search engine, pursuing this solution seemed not practicable for the near future, especially because of the enormous organizational efforts and, on the other hand, without being able to guarantee that all present artlibraries.net partner institutions could participate in such a solution.

If a future world art libraries catalogue should surpass largely the existing solution, it is certainly recommended to remain realistic and not to abandon artlibraries.net's current pragmatic, democratic and low-cost approach. Temporarily, these criteria seemed also to be fulfilled by federated search software of a younger generation than the KVK technique. The artlibraries.net committee and the FAB task force had indeed the opportunity to examine Deep Web technology's Explorit system, and Deep Web had even realized an artlibraries.net prototype. Compared to the current KVK technique, the main difference was that the Deep Web solution is producing just one unified hit list whereas we currently show individual result lists for each target. Therefore, the Deep Web prototype had a search engine 'look and feel' and gave the impression to react faster than the KVK technique. But this was due to the fact that it was apparently conceived above all to produce quickly some results from the fastest targets. Compared with the existing artlibraries.net model, the variety and richness of the participating institutions' holdings did not seem to be represented adequately by the Deep Web pilot. The test queries done by the artlibraries.net committee seem to confirm that results from certain targets would be displayed most of the time on the first search screens whereas other targets would hardly ever be visible at this stage. This fact has been judged by the artlibraries.net committee as a serious problem and a contradiction to the artlibraries.net policy rooted in the plurality and multiplicity of the partners, since the full visibility of all the participating targets' contributions is one of the principle goals of the project. The artlibraries.net committee finally decided not to recommend to pursue this proposal, given that closer analysis has shown that implementing the Deep Web solution instead of the current KVK technique would not be a way to obtain a really fundamental improvement of the artlibraries.net project and that the considerable financial and organizational effort requested could after all not be justified.

Instead, and this is above all what the present paper wants to communicate, we finally came back to a proposal made by OCLC, represented by Jim Michalko, Vice President of OCLC Research, already at the FAB supplemental meeting in June 2010 in Los Angeles, and presented as another prototype at the meeting in Lisbon 2010 (see article by Shubitowski and Wasburn cited above): aggregating discipline-based information, in this case information pertinent to art history, in the OCLC environment. OCLC's WorldCat Search API enables in fact a specialized community

to design and administrate a specialized union catalogue interface based on data provided by OCLC but also to provide access to additional pertinent databases.

The prototype developed by OCLC for the art libraries community, called 'Art Libraries Discovery Experiment' (accessible at: <http://experimental.worldcat.org/aldp/>) covers of course only a part of the existing artlibraries.net targets and therefore may not be regarded as an immediate alternative to artlibraries.net. On the other hand, it adds 'automatically' outstanding additional art libraries, mainly in North America, which for some reason are not part of the artlibraries.net network but participants of OCLC/WorldCat, for instance the Art Institute of Chicago or the National Gallery of Art Library. Therefore, the question will be crucial if and how it would be possible to integrate also holdings from non-OCLC members. Otherwise, the WorldCat solution presents some assets which constitute real advantages compared to other possible solutions: We are dealing here with a real database, i.e. the WorldCat database viewed through special filters, not with a federated search tool (but also not with a search engine). This explains the very fast availability and completeness of the results, but also the very interesting possibility to extend the search query to the world outside art libraries, i.e. to the entire WorldCat and to special materials provided by OCLC/WorldCat. Because we are dealing with a real database the results are more complete: no partial short title lists, no fragmentary title information, but complete data. The number of target systems involved has no importance for the retrieval process, whereas it is evident that the current artlibraries.net with its federated search techniques has more or less reached its limits in size.

Books, articles, sales catalogues and digitized texts are presented in separate hit lists on the same screen. What is most interesting is the fact that the records produced by the art libraries API are intertwined with the whole WorldCat world: Thus it is possible to search for holdings anywhere and to link seamlessly the art libraries planet to the rest of the library and information universe. Furthermore, 'Art Libraries Discovery Experience' benefits from the additional data pools available through WorldCat (online resources, article databases, special databases like SCIPPO, digital collections etc.). Not every resource may be accessible for every user everywhere but at least the basic bibliographic information is made available. Thanks to the fact that the bibliographic records shown are part of the entire functional and semantic WorldCat universe, it is possible to continue a hyperlink search in the wider WorldCat

context or to provide relevant subject terms which are automatically drawn from literature catalogued elsewhere in WorldCat.

The OCLC 'Art Libraries Discovery Experiment' may prove to be a very promising alternative to the existing artlibraries.net and a way to confer to the artlibraries.net project finally the visibility and the acceptance it deserves on an international scale. All the technical, financial and organizational questions involved will be discussed and hopefully answered at the next artlibraries.net/FAB conference in Paris on September 27-29, 2012, in Paris. Until then, the volunteers involved are working together with OCLC and with Uwe Dierolf from the KIT Karlsruhe on the prototype and on short-term, perhaps transitory, solutions to improve our international meta-catalogue: A WorldCat target is being added experimentally to the artlibraries.net targets. It comprises the art libraries currently participating in WorldCat, some of them already part of artlibraries.net as individuals, others not. This may lead to eliminate from artlibraries.net all individual targets already covered by WorldCat and to maintain as individual targets only those which cannot be accessed via WorldCat. Organizationally speaking, this would mean to reduce significantly the current number of targets. And fewer targets means, technically speaking, improved reaction time. Financially speaking, the solution could strongly reduce the general maintenance costs, for the WorldCat target would be counted by the KIT Karlsruhe as one target, no matter how many library holdings it may cover. Already this 'hybrid' solution, which we owe to Uwe Dierolf, may be regarded as a significant improvement to artlibraries.net, in expectance of the 'big' solution based on WorldCat.

Thus, perhaps unexpectantly, the initiative begun in 2010 at the moment of BHA's failure as an institutional co-operation could soon come to a very reasonable conclusion, providing the art history community worldwide for the first time with a specialized bibliographical tool directed linked with the individual holdings of our art libraries and allowing a seamless transition to the larger information universe.