Artlibraries.net and the Future of Art Bibliography (FAB) project : a résumé

by Jan Simane

When in June 2011 the steering committee of artlibraries.net held its annual meeting in Zurich, together with five members of the Future of Art Bibliography initiative, the tow-days-program ended with a visit to the library Stiftung Werner Oechslin in Einsiedeln, near Zurich. Everyone who has ever visited this remarkable institution has been taught, preferably by Werner Oechslin himself, how the structure of the building, created by Mario Botta, mirrors the complex cosmos of the book collection and vice versa. Every room's size and form, every furniture detail has been developed to demonstrate the order and the metamorphosis of the human spirit which has its expression in the 50.000 source books, focused on architectural theory, mathematics and philosophy. This essential part of human knowledge is presented as a unit, epitomized in the closeness of the book collection on the one hand and in the house around it on the other. In the way how knowledge and cognition are seeking to define a universal order spiritually the architecture around does so materially. Thus the characteristic complexity and integration of the mental treasure becomes perceptible. At the end of our visit tour through the library we talked with Werner Oechslin about the topics of our meeting. The background of the FAB initiative has been explained as well as the current developments in the artlibraries.net project. Moreover, as so often happens, the economic situation in libraries and in the institutional scholarship in general, together with all the consequent difficulties have been lamented. In this respect, Werner Oechslin, the humanistic scholar, recalled the original meaning of the word 'economy', which roots in the Greek 'oiconomia', a composite word based on 'oikos' (= house) and 'nomos ' (= rule). For Aristotle *oikonomikḗ* had a rather political than economical meaning, in the way that a well-organized and well-managed household – which was the literal sense of *oikonomikḗ* – was the constituent nucleus of the polis, so of the social entirety. In a metaphorical sense the condition of the single element, which in our context could be a single library, is decisive for the universal condition or in other terms: if you are thinking in comprehensive or global categories, do start with your own house. However, today we are used to speak of economy in the sense of market, enterprise and the endeavour to achieve the highest profit, what Aristotle called 'chrematistike', the art of money acquisition.

Why do I tell you all this here? Well, when I started to work on this presentation it became quickly evident that the story of artlibraries.net and the FAB initiative as well have a lot to do with economy in both Aristotelian respects. Already the very beginnings of artlibraries.net, founded as the German Virtual Catalogue of Art History in 1999, were strongly determined by economical reflections. Based on the light federated search architecture and the CGI-script protocol of the well-established Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog the first version of our Virtual Catalogue of Art History unified virtually the catalogue entries of the art historical holdings of two German university libraries and the young *kubikat*-consortium. In this time it was the most efficient way, and the most economic as well, to integrate a substantial number of physically distributed bibliographic records in one search process and to create a discipline specific access to the

related literature. The political and historical background was the lack of a central national art library in Germany and the idea to offset this fact in form of a distributed and coordinated acquisition of art literature in seven outstanding German art libraries. The online catalogues of these libraries have been unified virtually under the roof of the Virtueller Katalog Kunstgeschichte in the following years, together with a couple of other catalogues which seemed to serve as a useful complement to the discipline specific profile of the core group. However, with this – so to speak – innocent approach of unifying a small number of locally dispersed but conceptually related catalogues discussions on the definition of goals and the policy of gaining further partners started in the group of the par-

ticipants. This was the fact in 2003 when two different positions hardened, aggregation versus selection. The advocates of aggregation were interested in connecting as many as possible German art library catalogues and making the Virtual Catalogue a gateway to their holdings. The rather sophisticated and vitally convincing concept was the other party's idea of a virtual bibliography, grounded on the holdings of selected and subsidiary-related art libraries, without any national restriction of course. Thus, the first international partners like the Florentine IRIS consortium came into play. In the next years this path has been followed with an unexpected success, even in an intercontinental dimension, and at the end this unique network of more than 90 art libraries – many of them are represented here in the room – has been spun. But it was not my intention to tell you the story of artlibraries.net which most of you are well acquainted with. I would rather like to make some remarks on the phenomenon itself instead of listing the achieved stages of a still on-going process.

The interrelations as well as the differences between bibliographies and library catalogues have been recognized and analysed already many decades ago. The similar nature of bibliographic records in catalogues, first and foremost of specialized libraries, and in systematic and analytic bibliographies is obvious, and library catalogues have always been used as source for bibliographies, so for the BHA which we will talk about later on. In modern times, when entries in electronic library catalogues begun to mutate into complex information clusters, fed by additional sources like table of contents, abstracts, book covers and the like, the situation changed radically. In more and more cases the information accumulated in such a record can be remarkably richer and can integrate diverse information qualities than entries in bibliographies normally do. Of course, this is not necessarily an advantage. The proponents of the traditional bibliography format would certainly emphasise that the outstanding sign of quality of bibliographies is their reliability, grounded on uniform rules and standards as well as on intellectual

control, demands which 'clustered' catalogue records not always fulfil. However, the artlibraries.net initiative with all its consciousness of integrating data that has been expected to be used for pure bibliographic services was far away from competing with the existing and well established bibliographies for art history. It was just the opposite, when we had many, unfortunately abortive discussions with the editors of the BHA around 2008 to convince them to join the artlibraries.net project and to become one of the targets in the meta search environment. A similar attempt, by the way, has been made, also without success, with JSTOR with the goal to integrate their metadata, not the full texts of course, referring to art journals. The group of volunteers who are developing such ideas and advances in the steering committee of artlibraries.net is, on the one hand, fully aware of the process by which the traditional distinction between catalogues, bibliographies and so far unknown new and important bibliographic sources has become blurred and, on the other hand, of how promising an amalgamation of these sources could be, in particular, because the synergetic potentialities of a collectively operated network have been within one's reach. The vision of a new, hitherto not existing bibliographic tool for the benefit of the discipline was born. But an insurmountable obstacle impeded its realization: the economy, to come back to the beginning. Both institutions mentioned, the BHA and JSTOR, were not willing to change their business policy and the artlibraries.net group was not able to invest neither in additional running charges nor in new technical developments since the cooperation does not have any institutional and financial background. Despite all the consequent problems and restrictions one has to acknowledge that under these circumstances the result is not so bad. Currently, there are about 12 Million records in the virtual data pool of artlibraries.net – with many overlaps of course – including hundreds of thousands of journal articles, reviews, auction catalogues and special collections. As mentioned

before library catalogues, more than ever in such a concentration, may accomplish similar services like traditional bibliographies, in our case with a very low investment and free of any charge for the users. But it certainly would be bold to assert that with artlibraries.net on this level a real alternative to bibliographies has been found. In two presentations in Gothenburg and in Lisbon, both in 2010, Rüdiger Hoyer has shown in detail what the realities of artlibraries.net are, how obstructive varying cataloguing rules can be for an unerring search, in particular when subject indexing is concerned, not to mention problems of multilingualism etc. And the more targets have been connected to the meta-search system the more obvious has become the weakness of the underlying technology, which under such circumstances can be rather slow and which can confuse the users with its many and inconsistently arranged hit lists. Looking back on the Aristotelian definition of *oikonomiké* the artlibraries.net house seems not to be well managed and in the modern comprehension of economy even less.

In the last years the members of the committee have discussed these topics repeatedly, particularly against the background of the disappointing user statistics. But at the end of 2009, when the Getty Research Institute announced the cessation of the production and the editorship of the 'International Bibliography of Art', better known under its old name 'Bibliography of the History

of Art'(BHA), the reflections on artlibraries.net's identity have been intensified remarkably. It is not necessary to recapitulate all the details of the so called crisis which has been transferred even to the whole discipline as we can see. Important is to mention which changes have been provoked as an outcome of the related discussions. One of them – which in my eyes could be the most important – was the resoluteness to cooperate in this crucial moment not only on an international, but even intercontinental level. Of course, the old BHA was also based on an intercontinental cooperation, due to the historical background that the *Répertoire d'art et d'archéologie*, published in France, and the *International repertory of the literature of art*, published by the College Art Association of America, merged to one bibliography, the BHA, in 1990. But in 2010, when the Future of Art Bibliography initiative started, the situation was different. The financial crisis of 2009 was only the trigger which revealed the substantial lack of an appropriate, future-proofed concept for a bibliography in the era of data communication, electronic and open access publishing, the birth of new information sources, mass aggregation of heterogeneous and linked data, digitization of historical material etc. etc. In view of all these alternations and innovations it was and is obvious, that a future-oriented bibliography needs a completely new format and a broad co-operating network when expectations and requirements of modern scholarship have to be satisfied. Although these conclusions seem to cry for revolutionary changes and corresponding actions one has to confess that in the FAB group the first reactions to these requirements remained rather modest. The analysis of the situation as described above and as expressed in a very concise manner in one of Joe Shubitowsky's slides in the Lisbon Conference in 2010, as well as the related challenges, brought quickly to light that we probably would fail to find the 'big' solution, a sort of super hybrid search environment, fast and comprehensive, nice and easy, when faced with reality. In other words: this model apparently lacked interior and exterior economy. Anyway, this sober statement did not lead to resignation in the FAB working group. The many thoughts, ideas and proposals had first to be ordered. This happened primarily at our meeting in Zurich in June 2011, kindly hosted by artlibraries.net partner 'Swiss Institute for Art Research', when various scenarios have been discussed and the priority of ascertaining a budget for a related project have been highlighted. Looking at the notes from this meeting the following key points should be emphasized:

1. The FAB initiative has been defined an 'umbrella' under which several developments should proceed simultaneously, in a modular manner.
2. These developments are in particular:
   a. A portal/registry to digitized source texts for art history
   b. A bibliographic tool
   c. An 'archive' (aggregation tool) for e-publications

3. The demand of interoperability with different types of data and with other projects has been pointed out.
4. The requirements and expectations of the users, the scientific community, have to be identified.
5. Should we aspire to discover and make available everything or should we define standards to be met?
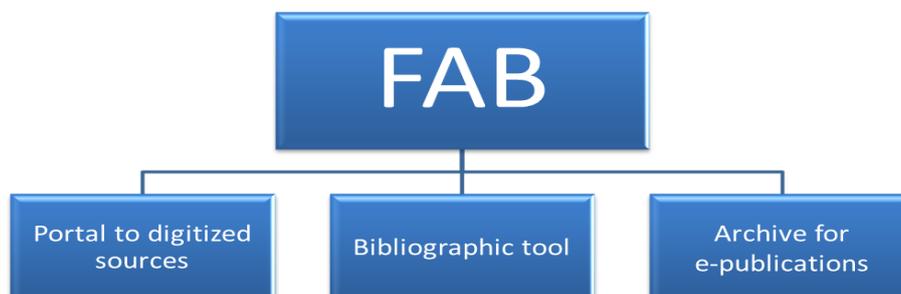
We are far away from having given answers to all these questions. However, as we have seen yesterday the portal to digitized texts is meanwhile reality. And this morning the very recent and highly promising developments concerning the bibliographic tool and its proposed integration into the OCLC/WorldCat architecture will be presented and discussed. Without going to details – this will be done in the next presentations – we, the artlibraries.net group, should be aware that we are playing a central role in this process, that the very beginnings of the Virtual Catalogue for Art History recur to some extent, of course under new conditions and with other goals. In 1999 the search architecture of the Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog offered a very efficient and well manageable solution to create a discipline specific access to selected holdings of a handful of German art libraries. A first shy step towards a virtual bibliography, with all its shortcomings, has been made by associating oneself with a strong and already established infrastructure which offered a big number of new options and solutions developed by others. To build this small network under these conditions was undisputedly an economic decision and it was the initial point of a success story as mentioned before. Currently, the meanwhile wide international artlibraries.net network is reaching a crossroads. On the one hand we can carry on in the same manner like in the last years, with the risk of being noticed only marginally. On the other hand we could try to benefit from new co-operations with already established, strong partners in order to bring forward considerably what has already been achieved. This sounds quite easy and it obscures the long list of difficulties that have to be faced and questions that have to be answered, no doubt. But it seems to be a promising way to acknowledge the artlibraries.net's potentiality of serving as a bibliographic tool and, in the same moment, to create a new, future oriented technical and operative basis in joining an already existing and approved infrastructure, which in this case could be the OCLC/WorldCat environment. And the integration of such a modernized bibliographic instrument into the FAB-framework would be rather simple as well as the interoperability with other sources. Thus, the original FAB vision to create a new virtual bibliography in form of a modular architecture could finally become reality, at least in parts. Although we do not know all the final costs for such a project, there is evidence that it is built on an inherent economy since it seeks to activate as much as possible of already existing functional elements and since the necessary investments in developments like a new search interface for instance seem to be manageable. But I don't want to speak here as advocate of one certain position, and even less I would like to convey the impression that the sketched direction has been hitherto the only alternative to the current state of artlibraries.net. Last year we have analysed in detail the option to switch from the technology of the Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog to a commercial federated search system which would have brought some important improvements, but which at the end did not correspond properly to our functional and political core requirements. This proposal has been launched by committee member Debbie Kempe, with very good reasons, because it was the first practicable approach towards a modern and more user-friendly design of artlibraries.net. And although the committee at the end decided not to persist with this path, Debbie's initiative and the corresponding discussions were powerful signals that the future of artlibraries.net, just in context of the FAB project, would depend very much on the functional infrastructure and rather less on the acquisition of new participating libraries. It is almost redundant to say that all these considerations have been strongly determined by criteria of economy, concerning the own house and the financial possibilities as well.

To come to the end: what is now the résumé of the encounter of the two initiatives, the virtual union catalogue of almost 100 art libraries on the one hand and the Future of Art Bibliography 'think tank' so to speak on the other? It may be surprising, but the results and action plans which followed the lively debate on the 'crisis' of art bibliography are not so new as they seem to be. Already in 1946, when Europe fully suffered the destructions of the Second World war, the British library and bibliography specialist Theodore Besterman developed his concept for a European Union Catalogue which was presented to the UNESCO in 1947 in context of the organization's preoccupation of rehabilitation and the restoration of communications. Besterman not only ex-

plained the benefit of the unification of the catalogues of outstanding universal libraries in Europe and North America, but he also emphasized that such a compiled union catalogue gains highest utility when it is embedded into a network of complementary sources like bibliographies and reference works:

"An important point always to be born in mind in connexion with union catalogues is that such catalogues can be really effective only if supplied, or operated in close conjunction, with an adequate equipment of bibliographical and other works of reference. A union catalogue is not a tool which can be adequately used in isolation: a chisel can *be used as screwdriver, but a carpenter possessing both tools can obviously do a better job. The same thing would be true of a union catalogue on its own as against one placed in an existing bibliographical and library framework or in one created for it – though naturally to create such a framework* de novo *would be wasteful unless there were some exceptional reasons for doing so."*

This is the anticipation of our conclusions that the virtual union catalogue of art libraries cannot and does not intend to substitute completely a traditional bibliography. But it will fulfil distinguished services in complementary interaction with other tools, which is exactly the idea of the FAB umbrella. Similar thoughts have been expressed by Michael Rinehart, the former editor in chief of the BHA, already in 1969, long before the BHA has been established, when he described the "ideal bibliography" which in his eyes should be *complete, cumulative* and *exhaustively indexed*. His vision of a computerized "central bibliography" for the arts grounded on a system of compilation of all existing and proven sources and it presupposed a broad international co-operation network. It should be mentioned only in passing that the Paris Conference of 1969 was in parts strongly determined by questions of economy. And in 1982 the same Michael Rinehart, meanwhile editor of the 1973 established Répertoire International de la Littérature de l'Art (RILA), published a survey of art databases and art bibliographies which has to be read as an admonition to cooperate intensively and as an encouragement to broaden the horizon of art bibliographies towards image and object databases on the one hand and to other disciplines on the other.

"I mentioned earlier that of the two objectives seen in Paris in 1969, the use of computer technology had made considerable advance, but the level of co-operation had remained the same."

"Needs and goals: … identification of areas in common among libraries, A&I [Abstracting & Indexing] services, special subject bibliographies, retrospective bibliographies, and visual resources work (including both subject access projects and museum collection management projects)."

However, the words of our predecessors sound familiar to us, although the willingness to co-operate has achieved dramatic progresses. And today we are in the comfortable situation that many hurdles of the former decades concerning data aggregation and data management, communication and access as well as interoperability can be taken easily thanks to the current technologies and available sources. All in all the outcomes of the described process are more than encouraging and the recent perspectives for a substantial improvement of the operative basis of artlibraries.net are highly promising. But we must not lose sight of one important aspect: the acceptance by the users, the scholarly public. Only when the tools and solutions will convince not so much us but rather the scholars and researchers whom we have in mind we will have reached our goal which merits to be called the Future of Art Bibliography.