Art History and Its Publications in the Electronic Age

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CONNEXIONS
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Executive Summary

Over the past two decades, the expansion of art history graduate programs and the emergence of new fields of inquiry into the visual world have resulted in steady growth in the population of scholars of art and architecture. In the same period, economic pressures on academic publishers have caused thematic shifts and numerical reductions in the publication of the types of monographs that have traditionally nurtured the discipline. Since the 1960s, such monographs, often based on dissertations, have served as the primary criterion for academic tenure and promotion in North America. These field conditions have led to considerable concern in the art historical community about the professional advancement of younger scholars and the long-term vitality of the discipline.

It should be noted, however, that several still-recent developments have given art history new alternatives for rigorous and creative publication and dialogue. The rapidly improving quality of digital images and modes of electronic publication offer expanded publishing opportunities to scholars and potential economic benefits to academic publishers, in print as well as electronic media. The remarkable and continuing growth of museum exhibitions with large audiences and handsomely produced catalogues presents a singular resource for art historians and their publishers. Thus far, these assets have not been exploited to their full potential—not because of an a priori resistance on the part of scholars, but because electronic and museum publication poses several challenges, particularly in the domains of high-quality image (re)production, copyright claims, and academic credentialing.

This report maps these circumstances of scholarly publication in the history of art and architecture and is supported by quantitative analysis of publishing and educational trends. The report makes recommendations of actions that address obstacles to vigorous scholarly communication and mobilize more optimally the special resources and instruments of the discipline, while also benefiting the wide range of fields that involve illustrated publication.

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Primary Recommendations\footnote{14This content is available online at \url{http://cnx.org/content/m13945/1.2/}.}

1. Organize a campaign to break down barriers to access and distribution of images, in all media and at affordable prices, for scholarly research and publication.

2. Launch electronic extensions of the scholarly journals of record (\textit{Art Bulletin} and \textit{Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians}) to take advantage of innovations in digital research and publication, to issue extended versions of articles, and to publish electronic alternatives to the printed scholarly monograph.

3. Form a consortium for the publication of art and architectural history online sponsored by the College Art Association\footnote{15http://www.collegeart.org/} and the Society of Architectural Historians\footnote{16http://www.sah.org/} to leverage resources, seek appropriate partners with image expertise, bundle journals in a subscription package, and eventually host third-party journals in art history and visual culture.

4. Develop the benefits of electronic publication for museum publications so that they may become even more productive sites of scholarly collaboration.
cumbersome, and wish for a more streamlined procedure across institutions owning works of art, photographs of works of art, and copyrights. Part II (Section 2.1) of this report addresses these questions more fully.

Ad 4 (list, item 4, p. 11). Senior scholars consulted throughout the study suggested that university and foundation leaders address the challenges facing art history publication in a systemic manner. They acknowledged that a simple recommitment to the scholarly monograph or increase in subventions will not yield long-term solutions that will sustain the discipline and ensure the professional advancement of their students. Scholars note that a comprehensive approach should allow for the continued publication of the kinds of knowledge the monograph has traditionally produced: the book-length argument as well as the detailed reconstitution of art historical objects of study by archival, archaeological, connoisseurial, and iconographic techniques. There is widespread recognition that not all of this work needs to appear in the traditional form of the university press monograph.

Scholars are generally open to the potential of electronic publishing and of print publications with electronic additions, seeing such dissemination primarily as a way to circumvent the high costs and image-program limitations associated with print publication. While many scholars express reservations about the stability and prestige of the digital medium and about escalation of the image quality and copyright problems, others find that current electronic publications do not leverage sufficiently the dynamic and dialogic potential of the digital space. Further thoughts about these transitional challenges and the special potential of electronic publication for art history are presented in Part III (Section 3.1) of this report.

1.3.2 University Presses

The mission of North American university presses has traditionally been one of furthering scholarship at large, without direct regard for the particular work produced in the universities that bear their name. These universities supported their presses because of the intellectual and scholarly prestige associated with their publications. In the humanities, the presses have long focused on publishing peer-reviewed monographs; over time, the monograph has become the primary criterion for tenure and promotion in North American universities and colleges. University press editors expressed concerns that this development has put academic review decisions too squarely in their court.

In recent years, university press monograph publication rates in art history have not quite kept pace with the growth of the professional community of art historians (see Trends (Section 1.4)). Several challenges to presses have made vigorous front lists of traditional, discipline-based monographs in art and architectural history less feasible now than they were a decade ago:

1. Disciplinary diversification and the interdisciplinary turn in higher education have made crossover books a commissioning priority for editors;
2. Steep declines in library sales, due mostly to increases in the costs of science journals, have made traditional print runs of 1000 and higher unrealistic for most books; such print runs are nevertheless maintained because of economies of scale in the printing process, and thus yield costly inventories;
3. Growth in the publication of attractive, full-color, synthesizing art books has reduced the general readership that was an additional source of sales in the past;
4. Production costs have risen because of the increasingly onerous permissions regime and heightened production-value expectations on the part of authors and readers; and
5. University administrations have begun to require that presses be more self-sufficient, and now frequently require revenues to be turned back in part to the parent institution.

Publishers and editors are well aware that current business models for art history publishing need to be revised, and they recognize new possibilities in born-digital publication and print-on-demand distribution. Nonetheless, many are also skeptical about the viability of these new channels of art history publication in the short term.

As universities have begun to restructure their relationships to their presses, either by bringing them into the university library structure or requiring them to operate on a semi-profitable business model, the role of university presses has become less clear. Discussions with publishers and editors suggest that a concerted effort to clarify the functions and operating models of university presses would be timely.

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1.3.3 Libraries

Research libraries play an important role in the scholarly publishing environment in that they represent a significant portion of the market for scholarly monographs. Thus, changes in library funding, organization, or activities can greatly affect the field of scholarly publishing. For this reason the current status and future directions of libraries were also considered in our study.

Although more and more publications are offered in digital form, libraries continue to acquire significant collections in print. Nevertheless, library budgets are increasingly stretched because of the very high cost of scientific journals and the concomitant need to cut back on other purchases—often print monographs. Libraries have to balance the continued acquisition of print materials with the need to acquire ever-growing numbers of electronic resources. Libraries are also devoting significant resources to preservation and long-term access of digital collections, and they are taking an increasingly active role in the management of and advising on copyright and intellectual property issues. And finally, librarians have developed extensive expertise in the areas of discovery and access to digital information resources, and are providing diversified services to scholars and students in searching across multiple databases and publications. A number of publishers consult with librarians concerning the design and functionality of their digital resources so as to make sure that they conform to the ways in which users are accustomed to finding and accessing information.

Libraries seek to acquire digital resources that will serve the needs of a wide range of users. Despite the budgetary constraints that they face, they remain committed to acquiring as many print monographs as possible. They do not wish to purchase resources twice—that is, if they already have them in one form they do not wish to purchase them a second time in another format or bundled with other content. Such policies depress the appetite of libraries for books that are explicitly based on dissertations if, as is usually the case, dissertations are already available in print or electronic forms. Well aware of the declining sales potential of dissertation-based monographs, some standard book distributors deliberately exclude them from their offerings, and editors are cautious to accept such manuscripts.

Libraries generally welcome innovative products that represent new forms of scholarship and presentation, however, and prefer pricing and access models that allow them to make resources easily available to their patrons whether they are working on campus, from home, or in the field. This preference creates a strong potential market for electronic publication in art history.

1.3.4 Museums

Museums are major publishers of art historical scholarship, primarily through the genres of the collection catalogue, the exhibition publication, and the museum-based journal. The most active area of publication is centered on exhibitions, which typically yield catalogues of the kind described under Genres of Scholarly Publication (Section 1.2). Other exhibition publications include books of essays with a summary checklist, special issues of museum journals, and edited volumes or online postings of papers based on exhibition symposia.

A significant development in museum publications over the past decade has been their outsourcing to university presses. The arrangement is mutually beneficial. To the university press, a publication done in partnership with a museum guarantees advance book sales and thus profitability. It also offers the press the superior marketing and visibility that comes with participation in significant exhibitions, and it allows the press to expand its list without significant additional editorial investment. Several museums have research centers attached to them, and the relationship to such museums gives presses privileged access to the authors associated with them. To museums, managing elaborate editorial and book production departments is financially onerous; outsourcing some (though never all) of these functions to presses with expertise in art

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9 This subsection of the report was drafted by Kate Wittlgen.
10 A university press director informed us that some university libraries have instructed book wholesalers to scan the acknowledgments and front matter of books to identify those that originated in dissertations and to exclude them from their book approval plans. Yale University Press, one of the major wholesalers, reportedly estimated that 40 percent of titles are cut from approval plans for this reason.
11 More than fifteen museums in North America now have such research centers associated with them; see the website of the Association of Research Institutes in Art History at http://www.ariah.org/ (<http://www.ariah.org/>)

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