

Introduction

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My brief remarks will cover the long view. I think that we, the assembled, and especially our speakers and panelists, have the capacity to conjure up a crystal ball into which we may gaze and see the future. But there is some anxiety in all of this, owing to a change that has taken place in one thing we have not yet been able to live without. The codex has been a commanding presence in our civilization ever since it vanquished the roll to become the preferred form of book sometime around the fourth century A. D. It did so, or so the story goes, because it offered a better way reading. Instead of having to painstakingly roll and unroll a book, one could move through the text in the codex simply by flipping a leaf, and move forward and backward in it as well with extraordinary ease. The codex offered nearly effortless, multidirectional access to texts, and multidirectional access, as opposed to the unidirectional access of the scroll, suited the purpose of a religion whose spectacular rise to dominance coincided with that of the codex. Christianity was forged from not one but two sacred texts, the two Testaments, Old and New, whose words had to be

brought constantly into juxtaposition with one another. This process of juxtaposition, or typology, was aided and abetted by the structure of the codex. The codex promoted Christianity and, conversely, Christianity energetically promoted the codex, and there is definitely a lesson of history in this.

Books moved from artisanal to machine made in the fifteenth century, with the rise of printing with movable type. This enabled them to multiply and circulate in the world in a new way. But the form of the codex survived intact. Even though they may be illustrated with photographs rather than painted miniatures, modern printed books have the same essential characteristics of the medieval manuscripts that preceded them: they consist of leaves bound together along one edge and framed by a set of covers. We have grown so accustomed to history as change that the depth of this cultural continuity is difficult to grasp.

And so too the depth of the void that we stand on the edge of now. The end of the hegemony of the codex is in sight. The computer is on the ascendant and in no small part by turning that great virtue of the codex, random access, on its head. Not only random, but animated, associated, personalized. This has occurred in our own

lifetime. In our own lifetime, the site of knowledge has shifted from the codex-based book to a machine. But there is no religion to pin the change on, nor is there any apparent single cause, nor are the implications of the change clear.

When Murtha and I began talking a year ago, we noted

- that many disciplines had already mounted extensive forays into the digital realm;
- that numerous initiatives involving the digital had taken place in art scholarship, in the collecting and dissemination of art research and in art practice;
- that digital had inspired many conferences and publications;
- and finally, that digital was barreling ahead in the commercial world.

But the larger context that I just sketched--this great arc of culture (represented here by these women adrift in the *Myspace* that used to be)--hovered as a kind of framework for our thinking, beckoning us, as if it held out the promise of a larger goal.

Instead of following the discourse of digital as it had developed in any one of its many individual tracks, what we wanted to do, somehow, was to bring all of this together for a day in order to help art history continue to

find itself in the digital world. We wanted to do this by bringing together practitioners and theoreticians from a variety of professional walks of life and points of view, with depth of experience and strong opinions. We wanted to create a context where different and sometimes quite isolated concepts could bump up against and critique one another: direct digital capture, fair use, disruptive technologies, global positioning, metadata, image breeding, iTunes, the e-book, second-stage electronic publication. But there is an important corollary to this. Art history loves the codex-based book, and we also wanted to create a context in which this form could be looked at sympathetically, if also realistically, in order to begin to understand what in it would endure in this changed environment.

The history of the western book in a hundred words or less with which I began did not take into account images, but it is with them that I will end. Unlike many other disciplines in the humanities, but like some in the sciences, art history is predicated on the relationship between text and image. And it is interesting to observe that this relationship too changed as the material form of the book has changed. Rolls could only really incorporate images in the medium of drawing, and so ancient books, when

they have images, tend to have only sketches, brief annotations of figures and scenes, often unframed, as an accompaniment to the text almost in the manner of a footnote. With the codex, a new possibility of image making emerged which was exploited with a vengeance in medieval manuscripts: painting. Book illumination became extraordinarily conceptually sophisticated. Printing in turn opened the possibility for books to incorporate the mechanical means of reproduction of engraving and photography. And digital now allows us to use the time based media of video and film. Needless to say, our conceptualization of the relationship between words and images, of narrative and of time and space has changed with these material changes to the book. Where we go from here is an open question, one of many that I hope we'll have an opportunity to discuss in our forum.

