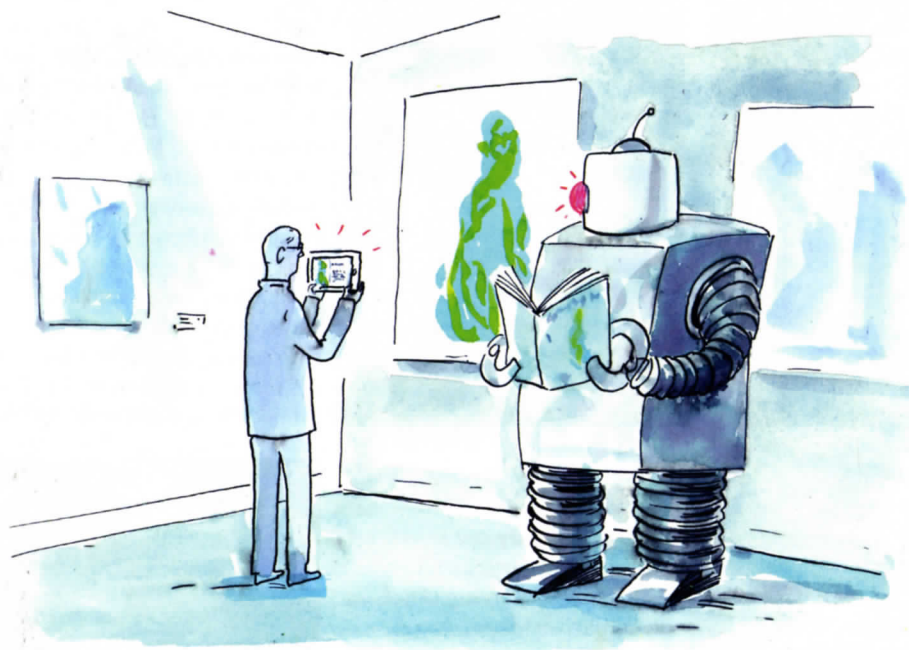


Forum

Have traditional museum and exhibition catalogues had their day?



Launched in October 2009, the Getty Foundation's Online Scholarly Catalog Initiative (OSCI) is partnered with eight other US museums, its mission to help institutions make the transition from print publishing to multimedia, web-based publications. Although the aim is a worthy one – to dramatically increase access to collections, and for free – is this at the expense of the traditional printed catalogue? Do museum catalogues still have a role to play in our multimedia age, or have they had their day?

YES
NIK HONEYSETT

As the lessons of OSCI come to bear, institutions should consider print and digital to be a marriage rather than a divorce. Unfortunately, this is a rocky marriage; it's hard to see who the breadwinner is and increasingly we see 'print' transitioning to trophy-wife status: costly and only trotted out for special occasions.

The odds are against the long-term survival of print, and traditional museum and exhibition catalogues are no exception; it is less a question of if but when, and to what degree. The nature of scholarly research is changing, and so is consumer expectation – anything you can get in the analogue world, you can get in the digital world.

Digital scholarly publishing is an irreversible trend. It's not something we can try out for a while, decide we don't like and then return to print publishing. We are entering a world of choice, and museums will be tasked with providing choices. Consumers are picky and scholars are no different; they will want access to academic research as part of a museum's online collection, appended to individual works, either published online or as a downloadable app or ebook. Although print on demand has reduced costs for museums and can be used to deliver both backlist and low-volume runs, it means it is the consumers, rather than the producers, who decide whether books are printed or not. And a question mark remains

over their willingness to pay for the luxury of a printed book given that, currently, the expectation is that an online version should be free – irrespective of the fact that, done well, it often costs more to produce.

Digital transition requires new thinking. Skeuomorphism is not an option – applying traditional museum and exhibition catalogue principles in a digital world will not work. Indeed, the digital world offers opportunities for further research and discovery on an unprecedented scale. It is a place of information access not discrete product; collaboration and joint ownership not singular endeavour; real-time peer review and exposure of the process and thinking that goes into research and publication.

Increasingly, the first entrée into the research process is the web, if only to locate a book through WorldCat or Google Scholar – the latter promising hyperlinks that will lead directly to extracts from the book. This is no mean feat – Google's book-scanning project has been mired in litigation since 2005, but last November, the lawsuit brought by the Authors Guild against the internet giant was finally dismissed. While the Authors Guild will undoubtedly appeal, Judge Denny Chin went further and elegantly captured why the transition to digital is inevitable: 'It has given scholars the ability, for the first time, to conduct full-text searches of tens of millions of books.' Digital provides access on an unprecedented scale, and offers speed – weeks researching in a library translates to minutes searching on Google. Museums take note: if you don't make your content available online, someone else will.

An often-cited point of contention is the question of authority. In the digital world authority is redefined and expanded to include ease of access and the provision of tools – elitism transformed into democratisation. Online authority is often defined in terms of first-page results for a Google search, a fact that museums need to grasp and act upon.

One of the paradigm shifts for institutions and scholars to come to terms with is the notion of what a publication is. It is no longer

a discrete product with a beginning, middle and end, but a service – infinitely more useful. For the scholar searching tens of millions of publications in a moment, it may be hard to return to traditional ways. (There is some irony in the fact that most scholars would still rather publish a book than ‘settle’ for a digital publication, which contributes to that very body of online material that they benefitted from.) The cachet of having your name on the cover of a book will linger for some time, but the decision about where to publish will be increasingly out of scholars’ hands. Inevitably, perceptions will shift as issues such as online citations, demonstrably higher in the online scientific research community, and image rights, which still represent significant challenges within the openness of the web, are satisfactorily resolved.

The transition to digital museum and exhibition catalogues is happening. Too many forces are at play to disrupt it. Ignore it with the understanding that some dinosaurs evolved feathers and mastered flight, the rest went extinct. How will we know when the transition is complete? I think it will be easier to recognise after it has happened.

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NO

MARK POLIZZOTTI

Clearly, the traditional art or exhibition catalogue – whether the 800-page behemoth or the more streamlined, trade-friendly publication – is facing serious challenges. The market for print books in general continues to shrink, as more brick-and-mortar libraries and bookstores fold. The evolution of new media has profoundly changed the habits of both readers and scholars, who these days are more likely to take to their keyboards than to their bookshelves. Kindles and iPads provide instant access to thousands of titles that can all be carried

in the palm of one hand. And apps allow us to bend and twist content in ways that (sometimes, at least) genuinely enhance our experience of it.

But let’s not count out the printed catalogue quite yet. Even though digital technology provides a thrilling new alternative, there are still things the old workhorse can do better. For one, unlike the quick, informational nature of digital reading, the printed page offers the opportunity for a more ruminative, synthetic absorption of the author’s words and thoughts. The search functionality of the digital catalogue makes it ideal for object-related research. But art is a story, and stories are best told with context, and the time to savour it.

Second, it can provide a more direct connection with the art portrayed. Photographs viewed on screen have brilliance and can be enlarged indefinitely, but they remain (to use Duchamp’s epithet) mainly retinal. Particularly in the case of media such as drawings, photographs or watercolours, the correspondence in print between reality and reproduction is striking, especially when the paper captures some of the original support’s tactile qualities.

Which brings me to the third advantage: the object itself, the sensual pleasure of handling and physically interacting with a well-crafted book. In this regard, it is essential for publishers to value not only the content but also the means of conveying that content, to place the medium on par with the message and create books that bestow aesthetic pleasure in their own right. Otherwise put, the fact that a book is about beautiful art doesn’t necessarily make it a beautiful book.

Moreover, despite the uncertain market, some printed books are doing quite well, thank you. One recent Metropolitan catalogue has sold over a quarter of a million copies to date – an extreme example, to be sure, but many of our other titles have sold in excess of 10,000 copies. Nor have we sacrificed scholarly prestige for commercial success, as witnessed by the fact that two of the last three Barr Award honorees [for museum scholarship]

have been Met publications. It’s not an issue of making money, but rather of bridging the gap between specialist and general readerships – of making sure that printed books remain a relevant, vital feature of the cultural and intellectual landscape, and not taking that relevance for granted.

I don’t wish to sound Pollyannaish. The fact is, all these advantages might not be enough to save the printed book in the long or even middle term. Increasingly, our children are being raised to regard tablets and smartphones as *the* way to absorb written content, and have come to expect that content to interact with them and solicit their opinion; to run, jump, and spin around on the page. It’s not inconceivable that within a generation or two, the book as we know it will become merely a relic of the past, like the illuminated manuscript or the parchment scroll – will itself become, in other words, the kind of artefact that today’s print publications are preserving for posterity.

In order to keep printed books viable, we museum publishers might consider the following. First, let’s never lose sight of the basic question, to be asked before the first key is stroked: who is the audience for this book, and how can the book reach, and speak to, that audience? Second, we need to ensure that the content is worth the reader’s time. Real scholarship, the kind that affords original, provocative insight into its subject, will always be relevant; but too often, scholarship gets confused with a restating of secondary sources. And third, we should strive to publish books that are themselves works of art – objects that offer the same kind of conviction and emotional impact as the art they reproduce. For that to happen, we need to ensure that our books are created with passion and curiosity, and a sense of surprise. The possibilities are as wide open as our imaginations. The one possibility we cannot afford is to be dull. **A**

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