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The „Virtueller Katalog Kunstgeschichte“ as a tool for international cooperation

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Abstract:

The "Virtueller Katalog Kunstgeschichte" (VKK) http://www.ubka.uni-karlsruhe.de/vk_kunst.html is a specialized search engine based on the technique of the perhaps better known KVK (Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog).

It is an initiative of a working group of the German art libraries funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG), formerly known as AKB (Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Kunstbibliotheken). The VKK has functioned since September 1999 and is still 'under construction'. Currently, seven important target systems are participating, among them the network Florence-Munich-Rome, the University Library of Heidelberg and the art library of the City of Cologne, renowned for its holdings in contemporary art. All together, the target systems already offer far more than one million bibliographical records (as of April 2002). Recently, the library of the Kunsthaus Zurich in Switzerland has been included. The next international target system will be the union catalogue one of the most distinguished art historical networks, the Florentine IRIS Consortium. The VKK is intended to become a gateway to the OPACs of the most important art libraries and art libraries networks on an international level, and thus a central tool for specialized art historical research. It could even become the nucleus of a 'virtual library'. The workshop presentation will give a precise description of this new instrument, together with an invitation for potential new international partners.

The so-called „Virtueller Katalog Kunstgeschichte“ (VKK or V2K) www.ubka.uni-karlsruhe.de/vk_kunst.html has been accessible since September 1999. The VKK is a specialized meta-search engine for art libraries. Its technical base is identical to that of the probably better known „Karlsruher Virtueller Katalog (KVK)“ www.ubka.uni-karlsruhe.de/kvk.html, a universal search engine having as targets not only the biggest German union catalogues and universal libraries, but also some of the most important international holdings, as for example the Library of Congress, the British Library and the Bibliothèque nationale de France. The KVK, which is hosted and administrated by the university library of Karlsruhe, has been functioning since 1996.

The „Virtueller Katalog Kunstgeschichte“ is one of a number of specialized search engines clustered around the big KVK and chiefly concentrating on thematically defined holdings which are not necessarily part of national or regional union catalogues. Therefore, these specialized „offspring“ of the main search engine are of particular *bibliographical* significance for the public, whereas the KVK, especially favoured by German librarians, excels primarily in tracing holdings information and bibliographical descriptions of specific items. As the KVK, the specialized search engines are technically supported by the University of Karlsruhe. Nevertheless, the design of the interface and the organizational administration are in the hands of the respective specialist institutions. This is also the case for our „Virtueller Katalog Kunstgeschichte“.

The „Virtueller Katalog Kunstgeschichte“ is the result of an initiative by a working group of German art libraries funded by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG). This working group has traditionally been called „AKB“, and it is not to be mistaken for our national art libraries society, the much younger „AKMB“. Although the VKK is still „under construction“, in so far as some important art libraries are not yet participating, it is the pragmatic realization of the working group’s initial conception of a proper union catalogue.

So far, there is no real corporate organizational structure. The creation of the VKK was initially financed by the DFG as a sort of supplementary measure to its initial support for the union catalogue Florence-Munich-Rom (www.kubikat.org). The further development of the VKK has been informally taken charge of from inside the working group, with Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte and the University Library of Heidelberg as acting co-ordinators.

The VKK’s primary aim is to be a gateway to the holdings, and above all to the bibliographic descriptions, offered by the working group’s seven art libraries. These function together as a virtual national art library because they co-ordinate their acquisition policies according to their different specializations. The two German university libraries responsible for art history within the general national acquisition policy of lending libraries (SSG) are similarly steered by the DFG. At the time of making this presentation at the Glasgow conference this goal will almost be achieved, at least in terms of the participating institutions - only the Kunstbibliothek Berlin and the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut in Rome will be lacking. Nonetheless, according to the extent to which the card catalogues are digitally converted or not, some of the most important participants will still be far from having achieved full coverage of their title material.

It was clear from the outset that it would make sense to include as target systems some other German art libraries that were not participating in the DFG-funded common acquisition policy defined in the early seventies. These would be based on a rather conventional concept of art history as well as on the participating institutions’ traditional specialisms. This is the reason we unanimously accepted the new library of the so-called Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn. It has excellent holdings in the field of exhibition history. More recently, the holdings of the conservation

department of the university of applied sciences in Cologne became a target system, thus contributing more than 30.000 titles on conservation and preservation. As stated on the VKK website, the VKK is meant to take into account the „most important“ and „most interesting“ German art libraries. The VKK aims especially at highly specialized or rare bibliographic data and collections, in order to become a preferred bibliographic tool for researchers, and moreover excluding much of the ‘noise’ typical for universal search engines like the ‘big’ KVK.

Technically speaking, the „Virtueller Katalog Kunstgeschichte“ relies upon a CGI-script which

- formulates a given request, taking into account the specifics of each target system as compared with the field structure of the VKK’s interface,
- sends the appropriate requests simultaneously to all target systems,
- produces a uniform short title list of results or a no results message for each target system, having answered the request in time, i.e. within 60 secs.

Each short title entry produced by the search engine is a link to the target system’s full bibliographic entry. Requesting the full entry means switching over to the respective target catalogue, with the possibility of deriving further benefits from its complete range of features, as for example additional retrieval options or inter-library loan and document delivery.

For each additional target system, the University of Karlsruhe creates an appropriate ‘structural description file’ identifying the fields of the target system’s OPAC interface and the elements of the short title list. The system created by the University Library of Karlsruhe is able to handle almost all kinds of WWW/HTML-based catalogues, excluding OPACs working with Java applets. The technique is not based on Z39.50, as is the case with other international virtual union catalogues. It is imperative that any changes made to a target system’s WWW interface be made known to the University Library of Karlsruhe in order to be integrated into the appropriate description file.

(Cf. http://www.ubka.uni-karlsruhe.de/hylib/kvk_help.html)

Meta search engines like the KVK and our VKK differ from real union catalogues and even from popular search engines like www.google.com in so far as they have no indices and practically no proper ‘intelligence’. Therefore, the VKK is nothing but a gateway whose interface presents a common denominator of omnipresent search fields. For example, when conceiving the VKK website, which is maintained by Maria Effinger in Heidelberg, we decided against the creation of a separate „subject“ field. This was to prevent the creation of false expectations, given that much of the title material has not been subject indexed and that the existing indexing schemes are not really consistent. This does not preclude subject indexing from being retrieved if the target system has a basic index. But the full array of possible sophisticated retrieval options remains with the different target systems. They are not substituted, but rather valorized by the VKK. By the way, I wonder if there is a way to at least integrate authority files, as for example in the Getty OPAC.

Through the recent incorporation of the important museum library of the Kunsthau Zurich, the VKK has become an engine for libraries from German-speaking countries instead of one for German libraries. In fact, the VKK seems to be making its way to become a truly international gateway, although, at the time of writing in April 2002, its website is still exclusively in German. Thanks to the mediation of Jan Simane, library director of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in

Florence, the next international target system will be the union catalogue one of the most distinguished art historical networks. I am speaking of the Florentine IRIS Consortium, comprising the library of the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies (Villa I Tatti), the Biblioteca degli Uffizi, the library of the Fondazione di Studi di Storia dell'Arte Roberto Longhi, the library of the Istituto Nazionale di Studi sul Rinascimento (Palazzo Strozzi), the library of the Netherlandish institute Istituto Universitario Olandese di Storia dell'Arte, and the very specialized conservation library of the Opificio delle Pietre Dure. This IRIS database contains more than 200.000 titles pertaining especially to the artistic and cultural history of Italy, thus supplementing the titles furnished by the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence and the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome as members of the network Florence-Munich-Rome www.kubikat.org. The partners of the VKK will then offer to the public far more than 1,2 million bibliographic descriptions.

It seems to me that, as a logical conclusion of this development, the co-operative structure of the „Virtueller Katalog Kunstgeschichte“ which has grown out of our national infrastructure, should become truly international, or at least European. Being a target system for this search engine does not preclude or weaken in any way the participation in genuine networks or any other form of co-operation outside the VKK which seems desirable to a participating institution (e.g. RLG or the network of the Musées nationaux de France). Here we have an astonishingly simple, but equally efficient tool, not only for better marketing our institutions and their services, but also for implementing and undertaking international co-operation in a truly practicable manner.