Artlibraries.net: an update

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Artlibraries.net (slide 1), or ALN, is a large and growing international association of art libraries whose main purpose is to furnish access through their online catalogs to the world’s art and art historical literature and related materials. Based until now on the federated search technology of the well-known Karlsruhe Virtual Catalog, or KVK, but defined by its specialized subject, artlibraries.net is in essence a search engine or portal that permits users to search simultaneously in the databases of many different libraries and other online resources. Before discussing recent developments, it will help to provide a bit of background information on ALN for those of you who may be unfamiliar with it.

Since its founding in 1999, artlibraries.net has undergone steady growth and major transformations as it evolved from a small national association into the far-flung international and transcontinental group it is today. It began its life in Germany, as the Virtual Catalog for Art History (or VKK in its German acronym), with the support of the German Research Foundation. Its early partners were exclusively from that country, though it included the important union catalog representing the holdings of the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte in Munich, the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence, and the Biblioteca Herziana in Rome. It was perhaps this consortium’s deep connections with Italy that fostered a broader transnational view and encouraged the expansion of the VKK outside of Germany to include other art libraries and consortia throughout Europe. In any case, within a few years of its founding libraries or consortia in Amsterdam, Paris, Zurich, and Florence had joined the VKK. By 2004, the year of its first international general
assembly, the association spanned five European countries and included some forty-four distinct libraries.

That same meeting established the simple guidelines that continue to define its organization and mode of operation. The association of art libraries has a light and informal structure, low membership fees now of only a few hundred euros, and highly democratic procedures. A small group of rotating volunteers forms a working committee to vet applicants and review technical issues, with every proposal for change and new entries subject to a majority vote by all the partners. Plenary meetings with representatives from most of the member libraries or systems take place every two years, so far in different cities in Europe, while the committee meets at least once annually.

During this early phase of its development, the VKK’s focus and identity were explicitly Eurocentric, both in its membership goals and in the restriction of its content to post-classical European art, which it aimed to cover comprehensively. It was becoming more and more apparent, however, that such defining features could not be sustained for long. It was increasingly difficult to justify a narrow definition of the “European” art tradition, itself an artificial construct, that ignored the myriad cross-cultural and global influences and dialogs that had always helped to shape it, and it was even more illogical to foster a peculiarly European focus when it came to modern and contemporary art. It also seemed increasingly counter-productive to exclude significant art libraries elsewhere, even those with collections that might help fill gaps in the VKK’s then profile coverage of “European” art, simply because they lacked a European address.
Growing awareness of these contradictions led to a critical turning point in the association in 2006, at its bi-annual general assembly in Berlin. After a lively discussion, the assembly agreed to open up membership to non-European institutions, represented at that particular moment by the proposed entrance of the Getty Research Library. Symbolic of this new perspective and transcontinental turn, the same assembly of the VKK also voted to adopt a new name that would be more representative and comprehensible around the globe.

The newly dubbed artlibraries.net, or ALN, has continued to grow steadily since then. It now includes around forty partners: libraries or consortia representing eighty-eight distinct libraries overall that are located in fourteen countries, mainly in Europe but with important members also in North America and Australia (slide 2). As this slide shows, artlibraries.net now includes many of the most distinguished art libraries in the world, though there is still much room for growth. Its portal provides access to more than twelve million bibliographic records, in addition to the digital collections of Google Books and The Hathi Trust.

Given its broad scope and important roster of members, artlibraries.net clearly holds great promise as a fundamental bibliographic tool for research in art and art history. Its value is enhanced by the fact that many of its member libraries catalog not only books and periodicals, but they also systematically index or catalog articles in journals and collected works, artists’ books, pamphlets and other “grey” literature, and art auction catalogs. Increasingly our library catalogs also contain records of archival collections relevant to art history and art, furnish images and
other visual documentation, and give access to the rapidly expanding universe of relevant digital content.

Its growing international stature, its impressive membership of specialized research libraries, and its potential utility as a resource for art research meant that when the demise of the Bibliography of the History of Art sent shock waves through the art historical community, artlibraries.net was well positioned to assume a significant role in the discussion that ensued and continues about the future of art bibliography. From the very beginning a close dialogue and fruitful working relationship have existed between the ALN group and colleagues from the Future of Art Bibliography initiative. Representatives of the ALN working committee have attended the various FAB meetings. A joint meeting of the two groups was held in conjunction with ALN’s general assembly in Lisbon in 2010. Recent ALN committee meetings in Zurich in June 2011 and Munich in January of this year also were greatly enhanced by the presence of our – if I may – fabulous colleagues from FAB. The ongoing conversation has been enlightening and highly productive.

If artlibraries.net, however, is to become a truly effective and widely utilized force in the world of art bibliography and related initiatives, there is by now a broad consensus within (and without) the association that substantial changes will be needed above all in its current platform for search and discovery, which may imply or necessitate some adjustments in its organization and structure as well. The federated search capabilities of the Karlsruhe Virtual Catalog present serious and potentially discouraging limitations for users now accustomed to more sophisticated and streamlined discovery systems. Searching in the artlibraries.net
portal is frankly an awkward process that produces results that are difficult to understand and impossible to manipulate or refine (slide 3). Results, displayed as limited lists of titles with a maximum ceiling of fifty, are grouped according to the individual “target” systems that produced a positive hit. These appear ranked according to their response time, and with the growing number of members the number of frustrating time-outs has also grown. Within each system’s results, titles display in no uniform or often even discernible order, with no further possibilities for refining or expanding the search. In order to see more information on displayed titles, or see titles that have not been shown because the number of hits has superseded the display ceiling, the user must leave the ALN interface by clicking on the linked title or “more matches” and move into the search environment of the host system (slide 4). It is not, in other words, a very welcoming invitation to easily explore and discover new resources. Disappointing statistics on the use of the artlibraries.net portal, moreover, show a heavy concentration of aficionados above all in Germany, and somewhat in France, but only a smattering of contacts from the rest of the world. They confirm not only that we have more work to do to make the international art and art historical community aware of ALN but that we also must make searching and locating resources through the ALN portal easier and more rewarding.

This is obvious to all of us connected with artlibraries.net, but how to get from here to another more effective discovery system has posed a thorny challenge, especially as there is a strong desire to maintain the light, economical, and unstructured network of member institutions, many very small, that has up to now
been one of its hallmark features. The association has been actively exploring alternatives for at least two years. As reported recently in the Art Libraries Journal, at the 2010 Lisbon meeting Joe Shubitowski of the Getty Research Institute and Bruce Washburn of OCLC presented two prototypes of possible discovery systems for art research that could be appropriate avenues for ALN, and the working committee has recently assessed other options as well.

I’m happy to report here that, as a result of the work carried out especially at our last meeting in January, and thanks in particular to our Getty colleagues Kathleen Salomon and Joe Shubitowski, an extremely promising discussion has begun with OCLC about cooperating to develop a new discovery environment for artlibraries.net that would build on the experimental Lisbon prototype and utilize the Worldcat Search API (slide 5). There is already a substantial overlap between the membership of ALN, on the one hand, and art libraries that contribute their records to OCLC, on the other. But many of even the most important European institutions in ALN do not currently participate in OCLC and, vice versa, many significant art libraries contribute to OCLC that are not yet part of the artlibraries.net confederation. We want to explore how the libraries currently outside the overlapping ALN/OCLC alignment can be brought into a possibly more organic and beneficial relationship. The cooperation that seems to be evolving between OCLC and ALN to build a new discovery environment for art research holds out exciting possibilities for forging more fruitful connections among art libraries around the world than currently exist, perhaps not only for bibliographic purposes but for other collaborative ventures as well.
Much remains to be worked out over the coming months as the encouraging discussion just begun between ALN and OCLC moves forward. The next general assembly of ALN is scheduled for late September, and our hope is that sufficient progress on this front will have been made by the end of the summer so that the association's members will have full opportunity there to discuss and take a position on this auspicious new initiative. Should it bear fruit, this new cooperative venture promises to further advance the evolution of artlibraries.net, as well as the future of art bibliography.*

*More information on artlibraries.net and a list of related publications may be found at [http://artlibraries.net/allg_infos_en.php](http://artlibraries.net/allg_infos_en.php).