NEW INITIATIVES TO SOLVE OLD PROBLEMS: COLLECTING EXHIBITION CATALOGUES AT THE NATIONAL ART LIBRARY

by Christine Love Rodgers

Exhibition catalogues are a key resource for art and design research, but smaller and more ephemeral catalogues are difficult for art librarians to collect. In the late 1980s and early 1990s a period of interest in the UK in the problems of collecting and cataloguing exhibition catalogues sparked off research into fresh approaches to the problem. In line with the resulting recommendations the National Art Library, at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, has developed two key initiatives. These are the Exhibition Catalogues Programme and a joint project with the British Library to increase access to smaller exhibition catalogues. Both are showing clear benefits for national access to published exhibition documentation.

Why collect exhibition catalogues?

This article focuses on smaller exhibition catalogues (those of less than 60 pages) and the various ephemeral publications associated with exhibitions, because of the particular problems associated with collecting this type of material. More substantial exhibition publications are usually easily available through book suppliers and publication exchange agreements with museums and galleries. However, smaller exhibition catalogues are elusive to collect, and are often only distributed by the gallery itself.

These publications have long been acknowledged as an important primary resource for art and design research, especially for young and emerging artists and group shows. Often these catalogues are the only source for statements or interviews with the artists and they may provide an invaluable personal commentary on the artist’s art, life and influences. They may also be the only records of the work of young artists who subsequently leave the art world.

Exhibition catalogue headaches

In the United Kingdom, the problems associated with collecting exhibition catalogues were one of the first concerns of the newly formed art libraries society, AR LIS, in 1969. Small catalogues produced by commercial galleries to tempt prospective customers were identified as particular problems for librarians. Krzysztof Cieszkowski pointed out in 1981: “Art librarians collecting exhibition catalogues from commercial galleries are in the position of requesting crumbs from a table laid for somebody else.”

The 3rd European Conference of the IFLA Section of Art Libraries held in Florence in 1988 debated the problem of exhibition catalogues, and prompted research initiatives into possible solutions. In England one such proposal was the use of a local approach to collecting, with a national network of participating libraries whose staff would liaise with local galleries to collect their publications. This was investigated in a British Library (BL) research project undertaken in 1989 by Gaye Smith and Lotta Jackson, but their conclusion was that such a local network for collecting exhibition catalogues was not sustainable.

The problems that they identified included insufficient numbers of collectors in certain geographical areas and a poor overall performance from existing collectors. Pressures on staff resources meant that these collectors could not be relied upon to continue any voluntary collecting efforts in the long term. Smith and Jackson recommended the appointment of a National Co-ordinator to liaise directly with museums and galleries and to produce a regularly updated bibliographic service listing art exhibition catalogues, making this information available to the art library community. As the collectors participating in the BL project mainly made use of telephone and mail to liaise with galleries, rather than personal visits, local links would be less important than...
national, unified co-ordination. It was also recommended that a national collecting policy be established and that acquisition be improved and co-ordinated by the BL, the National Art Library (NAL) at the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Tate Gallery Library.

**National coverage of exhibition documentation**

In 1989 Beth Houghton and Gillian Varley highlighted the problem that the BL itself does not receive its full quota of exhibition publications. Many producers of exhibition catalogues fail to deposit them since galleries are unaware of, or are unwilling to support, the legal deposit system, and claiming for these publications is a complicated lengthy process. The BL is unlikely to be able to expend much effort in chasing exhibition publications, particularly as its "currency with coverage" policy, introduced in 1987, has led to cutbacks in collecting "grey literature", a class into which exhibition catalogues fall.

All this makes collecting exhibition catalogues time-consuming and thus expensive, and even when the catalogues finally arrive in the library their bibliographic description can prove puzzling for the catalogue. Some of these cataloguing problems will be addressed through the imminent publication by ARLIS/UK & Ireland of Art exhibition documentation in libraries: cataloguing guidelines, which is the result of extensive work by its Cataloguing and Classification Committee. This manual will have an impact on attempts to ensure effective coverage of exhibition publications, as variation in cataloguing practice between the BL and the Library of Congress has resulted in difficulties for those attempting to identify a location for a particular catalogue or in determining whether the item described in a catalogue record is one and the same as the item in hand. However, the interest in providing more comprehensive access to exhibition literature by improving collecting procedures has also had significant results.

**Collecting exhibition catalogues at the National Art Library**

Once the necessity for a national approach had been highlighted, the NAL was considered to be a natural candidate to co-ordinate a countrywide strategy to collect exhibition catalogues. The NAL has always collected exhibition catalogues, through normal purchasing procedures and through exchange with larger institutions. The extent of collecting follows the NAL's subject coverage of art, craft and design and related disciplines, with a geographical bias of emphasis on Western Europe and the Indian subcontinent as well as more limited collecting to cover America and Asia. The NAL judges the value of individual exhibition catalogues according to the substance of the text, bibliographical apparatus, illustrations and relevance to NAL collections and to those of its parent institution. Donated exhibition ephemera is also collected for its documentary value for research into artists and the art world in general. However, these methods of collection do not ensure the widest possible coverage of exhibition documentation in the UK. Aware of the limitations of these existing arrangements, the NAL began to look for pro-active methods of collection development which would prevent elusive areas of exhibition documentation slipping through the net and being lost to researchers. Two initiatives were set in motion in the mid-1990s: the Exhibition Catalogues Programme and the British Library Deposit Collection of Exhibition Catalogues.

**The Exhibition Catalogues Programme**

In January 1994, a working party examined the NAL's acquisition of exhibition catalogues, and also investigated collecting practices at the Tate Gallery Library as a comparison. The decision was taken to set up a dedicated collecting programme that would complement the work being done at the Tate. It was planned that the NAL should collect exhibition catalogues to represent the work of as many practitioners as possible from a mixture of commercial and public galleries in the fields of art, design and the decorative arts, with collection activities focused on the UK and Ireland. A full-time member of staff from the Library's acquisitions section would be responsible for the programme, scanning selected publications for galleries and exhibitions and writing to them requesting their catalogues and ephemera. Replies would be monitored and statistics kept so that success could be reviewed at suitable intervals. This was put into practice in mid-1995. By 1999, nearly 3,000 catalogues had been accessioned as a direct result of the programme, with an average of 50 catalogues received per month. This figure does not include the large amounts of ephemera acquired as a result of the programme. The Exhibition Catalogues Programme has proved to be particularly successful in obtaining small catalogues and non-standard exhibition publications. An example of this type of material is a small catalogue produced by Loughborough College of Art and Design of the graduate show from its Multi-Media Textiles course, which has a textile sample from the exhibition attached to the front cover.

Another example is the postcard pack produced to accompany Spectacles: a recent history, an exhibition held at the Crafts Council in 1997.

**Building contacts with galleries**

Galleries selected for the programme are contacted with a letter adapted to contain the name of the gallery's exhibition if known, and a reply sheet listing possible take-up options for the gallery. It is stressed to
the gallery that the NAL does not just collect substantial catalogues, and that ephemeral exhibition material is also of value to the collections. The NAL now has records on the online computer system for more than 600 galleries that contribute or have contributed to the Exhibition Catalogue Programme. This large database of galleries represents all areas of art, craft and design and a large geographical spread, meaning that if a catalogue that we do not hold is requested, we can sometimes use these contacts to obtain it. When a gallery sends material, we take the time to send an acknowledgement, thus helping to maintain the relationship between the gallery and the NAL. The Exhibition Catalogue Programme is a strategic attempt to establish a lasting communication network with art exhibition catalogue producers. This has also led to contacts with artists who have donated collections of their material to the NAL.

Collecting from commercial galleries

The network of contacts set up by the Exhibition Catalogue Programme has had the most positive response from London galleries. Of course, the geographical proximity means that private views can be visited, and personal contacts maintained. However, another factor that works strongly in the NAL’s favour is that the Library is well known and used by gallery owners and curators. Commercial galleries are attracted by the thought of having their catalogues in the NAL, able to be seen by V&A curators. This means that the programme is able to gather a significant amount of material from commercial and small galleries, addressing to some extent the problem noted by Fitzpatrick that “commercial galleries... have little interest in depositing their catalogues with libraries”19. The NAL, as part of an organisation that is both an archive for gallery publications and a potential purchaser of art works, is ideally placed to persuade galleries to donate their catalogues and other documentation.

Exhibition ephemera

Krzysztof Cieszkowski has pointed out that galleries often make a loss on the exhibition catalogues they produce, and that this must be recouped from the exhibition budget20. The lack of direct profit to be made from producing catalogues discourages smaller galleries, who produce leaflets or flyers instead. Consequently, there are only a finite number of catalogue-producing galleries that can be contacted, with the result that one of the main functions of the programme is to collect ephemera. The NAL is able to make ephemeral material available to readers in artists’ information files that can contain private view cards, exhibition handouts, flyers, newspaper reviews and obituaries. These information files are a rapidly expanding resource, with 120 new files produced on average each week.

Reviewing and maintaining the programme

While initial contacts with galleries bring results, the most difficult part of the programme can be reviewing and updating. Galleries will send once, but they may not keep on sending. A commitment to donating regularly relies on the goodwill and the memory of the gallery or even the particular member of staff who has answered the first letter. Consequently it is necessary to regularly review the entire list of donating galleries and send out reminder letters to those galleries that have not contributed in the last year, which is a time-consuming process.

Geographical bias

The Exhibition Catalogue Programme has always aimed to have national coverage and has contacted galleries throughout the UK and Ireland. However, although every attempt is made to collect publications of regional art and design exhibitions, geographical distance from the V&A is likely to influence galleries that do not reply to contact letters, making the Programme somewhat “londoncentric”. This is in part due to the nature of the art world in a country where activity is concentrated in the capital. The NAL receives more material about art exhibitions in London both because it is in London and because more art exhibition documentation is produced there.

The British Library Legal Deposit Collection of Exhibition Catalogues

As a result of a co-operative initiative between the NAL and the BL, in May 1996 a pilot project was agreed in which the BL would deposit on loan at the NAL the smaller exhibition catalogues it received through the legal deposit system. The agreement covers catalogues of less than 60 pages published by national and regional museums and galleries (excluding those of the BL, British Museum and V&A), and all catalogues published by smaller galleries acquired by the BL from September 1996 onwards. The arrangement includes some catalogues issued by dealers exhibiting work for sale. The NAL accessions and catalogues the items received monthly, and provides the BL with a printout of the records. Since the beginning of the programme, the NAL has received more than 500 catalogues from the BL, with an average of 20 catalogues arriving each month. Some of these are items that the NAL would otherwise find difficult to obtain, such as catalogues from Irish galleries, which are less likely to respond to Exhibition Catalogue Programme letters, and one-off exhibitions by non-gallery public bodies such as charities. This collection enables the NAL to have a clearer picture of what exhibition documentation is received through legal deposit, and thus to be in a better position to take national collecting and cataloguing policies forward.
Improving national access to exhibition documentation

The ultimate intention is for the co-operative project to provide documentation and access to a combined BL and NAL resource of exhibition catalogues. The full catalogue records for each item created according to AACR2 by the NAL cataloguer provide an improved level of access to the material, compared with the BL's former practice of using a single group level entry under gallery name for all the catalogues produced by smaller galleries. This effectively rendered such catalogues inaccessible on an individual basis. At the Seminar on the Future of the National Bibliography hosted by the British Library in 1997, the NAL/BL shared Cataloguing agreement was discussed as a possible model for the involvement of expert partners in future initiatives to enhance coverage of the national publishing output. It is hoped that this agreement will continue to improve coverage of exhibition documentation, will increase knowledge of the holdings of participating institutions and will generate a growth in the exchange of records.

Access to national collections of exhibition catalogues at the National Art Library

The NAL has responded to the needs of the art community to gain access to exhibition documentation and translated the recommendations of Smith and Jackson’s report into action. Together the NAL and the BL have begun to take steps to tackle the problem of the national availability of exhibition catalogues. The collection deposited at the NAL and the bibliographic resource created means that the art community can begin to reap the benefits of legal deposit for their research. The decision to enable a full time member of NAL staff to dedicate time to a proactive programme of exhibition catalogue collecting has brought Smith and Jackson’s vision of a National Co-ordinator closer to fruition. Using the Exhibition Catalogues Programme the NAL has forged information links with galleries and with other exhibition catalogue producers, to develop an effective collecting framework that is “an attempt at organised communication between catalogue producers and users”.

Of course a new challenge for exhibition documentation collection is presented by the advance of the art gallery world into the on-line environment and the World Wide Web. As e-mail private view invitations and on-line exhibitions become more common, the 21st century will see art librarians grappling with the challenge of archiving this new form of exhibition information. Electronic resources such as ADAM have already begun to document and link Internet resources for art and design. It may be that ADAM will be a model of excellence for providing access to virtual exhibition documentation.

References

3. Fitzpatrick, op. cit., p.117.
8. Ibid., p.75.
9. Ibid., p.75.
10. Ibid., p.75.
11. Ibid., p.75.
15. Ibid., p.37.
23. ADAM, the Art, Design, Architecture & Media Information Gateway, is a project to build a searchable on-line catalogue describing Internet resources such as web sites or electronic mailing lists. URL: http://sdam.ac.uk/adam/

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