Collection Catalogues

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- 1 The recent publication of a series of catalogues all offering comprehensive presentations of different collections, private and public alike, prompts us to keenly consider, not to say question and challenge, the importance, need and timeliness of publishing art catalogues. The extreme rigour presiding over the preparation of these volumes has never, for one moment, been in any doubt, from their resolutely exhaustive nature, made possible by the addition of a CD-Rom, to the printed edition (as in the case of the Museum of Modern Art at Saint-Etienne and the Museum of Fine Arts in Nantes), by way of the provocative and wide-ranging thematic treatment which hallmarks the catalogues for the photographic collection in the Nicéphore Niepce Museum and the Lambert Collection, and not forgetting the exhaustive descriptions of the acquisitions of the Auvergne and Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur Regional Contemporary Art Funds (FRAC), (which include

various interesting essays about what the fact of putting together a contemporary art collection may mean in this day and age). We are nevertheless keen to stress the fact that it is still of interest to wonder why, and for whom, so many specialized art publications are being produced. It is certainly true that, over the past three decades, the catalogue conceived as a theoretical contribution to an exhibition has taken on an extremely important role, and become a not inconsiderable factor in the construction of art history, for it often acts as a test book and research project.

- 2 At the height of their economic might, museums implemented a publishing policy, thus usurping a role hitherto earmarked for specialized publishing houses. It is only now that we are beginning to see a balance in this tug of war, while budgetary cutbacks seem to have forced public institutions and private organizations to forge new partnerships, in order to produce a handful of publications with major budgets.
- 3 It is also true that, with the spread of every manner of exhibition and show, coupled with a conspicuous rise in the number of both public and private institutions whose brief is to safeguard, exhibit and disseminate artworks, catalogue publication has enjoyed unprecedented growth. What, however, might, at first glance, seem to be a pointer of cultural and artistic interest, has very swiftly shown that in many instances the catalogue has turned into a de luxe object used by lots of backers to vaunt their managerial skills. At the same time, such catalogues might serve as currency for clinching exhibition proposals otherwise not easy to come by. What is more, people started to realize that, in the 1980s, it was commonplace for the prestige and recognition of artists and institutions to be gauged in the first place by the impression created by their catalogues, especially in terms of their volume and four-colour printing quality, without much heed usually being paid to their possible critical content. The fact that there are so many art publications often raises new questions: do their promoters question the timeliness or otherwise of bringing out a new book on an artist or a specific topic, which leaves their own exhibition a bit to one side? Do they assess whether the publishing requirements are justified? Or perhaps they are merely publishing catalogues because this is a way of both crediting their work and justifying their financial investment in contemporary art among the political powers-that-be. There is a case for no longer being afraid about deciding if it is necessary or not to systematically draw up a catalogue. And if it is, there is a case for working out what the most suitable type of publication might be for each case in point, over and above accepted conventions, by sidestepping institutional inertia and trying to forget about the status seemingly conferred by bulky, glossy catalogues. All this might help towards lending the same clout to intent and need, alike, and avoiding squandering efforts and resources to no avail, for we are all aware that, in all probability, these catalogues will end up languishing in warehouses and on shelves. Every day—and in an increasingly emphatic way—artworks themselves are seeing a shadow being cast on their role by everything contributing to their distribution: catalogues, press, radio, TV... We are becoming more accustomed to acquiring information from means of communication (wont, otherwise put, to fashioning a totally media-driven opinion based on third party comments) than from actual aesthetic experience. This, moreover, is where the catalogue fully bolsters the importance it has acquired, because, with the huge range of possibilities offered by its numerous pages, it can help to magnify, minimize or impartially reflect the activity it is actually related to.
- 4 In a fairly near future, with the dizzy advances being chalked up by new technologies, and above all with the rapid spread of their use, it is altogether likely that catalogues

designed to describe art collections will lose their *raison d'être*. The Internet in fact offers not only ways and means of on-going updating, as much for works themselves as for new acquisitions, but also clearly defined images and the possibility of presenting works on view together with commentaries that are being continually updated, etc. All of this offers noteworthy advantages for the heritage-related character and documentary rigour peculiar to this type of publication. As a result, if we may hazard a hypothesis or two for the future, it is quite possible that the Internet will become the ideal tool for documenting and disseminating both public and private collections, even though it is not terribly likely that the catalogue—as a tangible vehicle of knowledge that we can actually hold in our hands... and one also capable of offering a certain aesthetic experience—will end up by dying out.