Apart from two articles on online bibliographic databases, this issue of *Art Libraries Journal* devotes itself to sampling the range and diversity of visual resources – which, like bibliographic data, are becoming increasingly accessible via new technology.

Suzanne Quigley's paper shows how in a small college community (but by extension, in wider, and ultimately global, contexts) visual resources, provided initially to support the study of art, can serve other purposes. Tony Coulson casts a wider net, surveying a range of 'picture libraries' which serve 'an infinite variety of purposes and functions'. While he confines himself to still images, Kaycee Hale and Maryhelen Garrett, in drawing our attention to fashion videos, implicitly remind us that artefacts and phenomena which neither Nature nor Man intended should be static are not completely seen unless seen in motion.

Perhaps underlying all our activities in the realm of visual resources is a dream of a universal, comprehensive image databank, not just of works of art (though encompassing all works of art) but including artefacts, natural phenomena, and visible manifestations of every kind, seen from every conceivable angle, still and (as appropriate) in motion, retrospective, up-to-the-minute, and indexed to be thoroughly accessible (and in the minutest detail) to every conceivable quest whether of art historian, artist, designer, picture researcher, or individual of whatever profession or enthusiasm.

Such a databank would be, not a 'museum without walls' but a *universe within walls*. A triumph of human ingenuity, it would *not* be the miracle which Blake invoked in the words 'To see a world in a grain of sand', or Emerson when he wrote 'The world globes itself in a drop of dew'. A collection of mere appearances, of man-made trophies hunted from reality, it would neither focus Being in a microcosm of itself, nor substitute for the actual universe with all its works – to which it would add itself as *another* work. (It is not the purpose of this Editorial to contradict Helene Roberts' valuable reassertion of the reality of visual images, including reproductions, as artefacts in their own right).

What it would be is a tool, a vocabulary, available for use, vulnerable to abuse. Of course, there is a difference between the media's bombarding, besieging, and ambushing us with images, and a passive databank which allows images to be called-up on demand.

But both are products of the same technologies, and the databank surely would be plundered to nourish the insatiable publicity machine – at the expense of the integrity and dignity of images. For images do have an integrity: while images of women in advertising have provoked protest, it may not be stretching ethics too far to ask whether we have the *right* to use an image of a tiger to sell a car.

Are images safe in art libraries? Are the habitués of art libraries safe from images? We art librarians may seem to survive unscathed from our relentless exposure to images,[1] but do not the mechanisms of survival include tendencies to become *blasé*, even irresponsible, in our approach to visual resources? While in general it must be against our principles to withhold visual (as other) information, perhaps we should preserve a capacity for a moment's hesitation (if we cannot voice an illuminating remark) when handing over an image which is in danger of being used without the *seeing* which is its due, and in a way which by-passes genuine creativity. Art and its creation of new realities cannot be sustained by a trade in secondhand appearances on however grand a scale. Second-rate graphic designers and art directors not only steal images, they steal *from* the images they steal. There are profounder reasons for recording local colour and 'ethnic' style (and for encouraging communities to document their own visual traditions on their own terms), than that of providing a hoard of motifs which 'international' fashion styles can draw inspiration from. The 'internationalising' of visual resources has too often meant robbing people of the resources which are uniquely theirs, the unfair exchange of the glass beads of Western media for their life and soul.

Where is this leading us? If no further then perhaps to commend once again the example of the art college librarian who, asked for pictures of cumulus clouds, said 'Look out of the window'.[2] And then to plead on behalf of the art library (and, often, its parent institution) as one of the best possible environments in which visual resources can be located in an imperfect world – especially if the art library sees itself as offering an ongoing workshop in visual literacy. For visual literacy teaches the difference between substance and semblance, between what is and what is not ours to use, that images should be handled with care, but that *visual resources can help us to learn and express who we are.*

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Here, then, is a deeper meaning to the term 'visual resources', and one which prompts the question, is the art library or visual resources collection accessible 'to those who can [use images in] their own lives'?[3] (The challenge of 'Art libraries for the people' will not lie down.) Nothing written here should be taken to imply that images should be locked away, safe from sight in dusty tomes or academic theses, subject at all times to the disciplines of academic research. Visual images are perhaps nowhere more cherished and charged with meaning than in the personal collections, of picture postcards and so forth, displayed on pinboards in many homes and dens,[4] or in the 'inner palaces of art' and 'private imaginary museums' in which we store

> a hodge-podge of half-remembered details, the detritus of aesthetic seizures associated with teachers, trips, traumas, lovers, moments of illumination.[5]

Of course, the *essence* of such personal assemblages of visual resources is that, far from deriving from access to an *unlimited* store of images, they have been gathered along a particular route which only one person is taking as a means of discovering his or her own world, mapping out his or her own destiny; they will certainly include images of works *seen*, places *experienced*, things *chanced upon* or *sought out*; they are likely to include images created *by*, or created or chosen *for*, the individual concerned; among them there may well be images valued as artefacts in their own right, and indeed the pinboard collection *is* itself an artefact the substance and uniqueness of which is not be denied. As such they are icons of particularity, and of limitation as a creative force, a source of identity; yet the conclusion to be drawn is not that restrictions should be imposed or barriers remain. Being human is limitation enough.

Referring to a 'language of images', John Berger stated that

> 'What matters now is who uses that language for what purpose. This touches upon questions of copyright for reproductions, the ownership of art presses and publishers, the total policy of public art galleries and museums. As usually presented, these are narrow professional matters'.[6]

He might have added art libraries and visual resource collections. We, too, are implicated in his observation which follows that 'what is really at stake is much larger'. Visual images can be 'resources' which help give meaning to human lives, or they can be used to strip people of their identity and sever them from reality.

References

1. *See* Fawcett, Trevor. 'Too much to look at, too much to read'. *Art Libraries Journal*, v.12, no.3, 1987, p.5-10.
2. For those who don't know the story, the student replied 'But they're moving!' If my memory can be trusted, the librarian was Leslie Willmot, formerly of Brighton Polytechnic.
3. Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972, p.32. The complete sentence is as follows: 'The real question is: to whom does the meaning of the art of the past properly belong? to those who can apply it to their own lives, or to a cultural hierarchy of relic specialists?'
4. *Ibid.*, p.30, where John Berger reproduces a photograph of just such a collection.
5. Schwartz, Gary. 'Le Musee documentaire: reflections on a database of works mentioned in art treatises and town descriptions before 1800'. *AICARC* v.14/15, no.25/26, 1986/87, p.56-59.
6. Berger, *op. cit.* p.33.