

ARCHIVES

Digital v Paper

As the cuts bite into art education and the managerial class draws lines through courses and departments in pursuit of balancing the books, it is the apparently smaller cost-cutting decisions that have the greatest impact on the day-to-day experience of studying and teaching fine art. Economic belt-tightening finds an ally in the digitisation of resources: instead of being given paper hand-outs, students are asked to download course material and pay for their own printing. Lectures and technical instruction are provided by video clip. Space-hungry shelves of magazine back issues are thrown in the skip while students and staff are asked to search for PDFs instead.

All academics today will be familiar with facilities such as JSTOR (the name is a contraction of 'journal storage') which allow instant online access to full-page PDFs of journal articles going back decades. The migration from paper to digital archives has been going on for many years and it is truly amazing and wonderful to have this vast array of material at your fingertips when you are searching for something specific. A 2011 study by the Research Information Network showed that, in the sciences at least, increased online access correlates with higher levels of referencing in published research. JSTOR reflects wider cultural trends of digitisation and the transformation of reality into dematerialised, virtually stored 'knowledge'. But it has a negative side too, especially in the case of education in the visual and creative arts where a qualitative mode of reading is required rather than simple information gathering. In fact I would say that electronic journal storage is actively bad for art education. Here are six reasons why:

1. The look and feel of a magazine matters. It should go without saying that design, layout and print quality are important when it comes to art and design journals. These are simulated in an impoverished form when reading a PDF on screen, at a different scale, at a meagre resolution. Other tangible qualities such as the weight and finish of the paper stock and the type of binding are missing altogether. Yet these are the very things that make up a particular design aesthetic. Most people would recognise the importance of physical design when it comes to a highly stylised publication like *The Face*. But in a discipline that deals with material aesthetics it is equally important to have access to the 'auratic' sense of an era more generally.

2. Databases hold only partial content. Most databases make only articles, reviews and editorial content available. Peripheral material such as advertisements are not archived. Yet often the most interesting marginal trends in style and content appear raw in adverts long before they filter through to the main magazine. The way that databases offer access to individual articles removed from their context also strips away a whole load of information about relationships within the magazine. It is difficult – sometimes impossible – to get an idea of the overall content of an issue.
3. Searching, not finding. As with any computerised search, you tend to only find what you are looking for when using a database. This might be fine when looking for specific scientific data, but often merely affirms preconceptions and fails to throw up items that might challenge or expand your knowledge. The happy accident, by which we stumble across something vital in an otherwise unrelated article, is lost, and it is impossible to browse through looking for items that might catch your eye. How can you search for what you don't yet know you are looking for?
4. Art students don't read. I don't think I'm being totally old fashioned in believing that it is far easier and quicker to pick up a magazine from a shelf and flick through the pages than to click through a directory of PDFs. Magazines on display are constantly available to passing students, their covers working hard to grab attention and demanding to be picked up, whereas a link to a database search engine buried inside a library website is much tougher to find. It is hard enough anyway to get art students to read, why make it any harder?
5. Stability. Many archivists are still unsure about the long-term stability of electronic storage. Whereas a file of magazines on a shelf is an educational asset that will last for many decades, when you outsource your data storage, not only are you subject to the provision changing or becoming increasingly expensive, you are also no longer in control of access to that data. Some titles might suddenly disappear from the list as licences expire. And then what?
6. Style over content. As librarians are forced to choose which titles are 'worth' keeping on the shelves, and which should be switched to online access, they will invariably privilege those that make greater use of colour, gloss and spectacle in their layouts. Assuming that text is text whether on the page or on the screen, text-heavy black-and-white magazines are

sidelined in a painfully literal victory of style over content.

Raising issues about digital journal subscriptions at a time when jobs and whole departments are on the line might seem like rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic. But the effect of current austerity measures on art education is measured in finite changes to the way things are done. In this instance, the economic climate coincides with technological advances to make a shift in resource provision appear to be the 'natural answer' to pressing concerns. But switching to digitised journal access, for all its convenience in some ways, throws the baby out with the bathwater. There is a reduction and simplification of primary source material into commodified knowledge. Nuance, detail and a host of aesthetic qualities are lost. Surely this has got to matter, and not only within the arts.

Sifting through papers in my studio, I come across a 1974 issue of *Studio International* magazine. I am drawn to a review of Michael Craig-Martin's exhibition at Rowan Gallery by Caryn Faure Walker, the first showing of his *Oak Tree* piece which has since earned the status of seminal work. The reviewer didn't like it. The emptiness of the gallery was admired, but the text judged to be philosophically naive and full of basic errors. As an artefact, the magazine speaks volumes, with heavy matt paper stock used for lengthier articles in a front section, and pages of black-and-white advertisements making charming use of Letraset. It reeks of the mid 1970s. I put the 39-year-old paper to my nose and inhale. ■

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