Exhibition Data First! Revealing artist's networks through catalogue information. The FWF-Project Exhibitions of Modern European Painting 1905-1915

Within the few years, before World War I, the appearance, and indeed the very notion of (western) painting changed radically. This history of early 20th century modern European art has often been written as the development of new artistic forms and "-isms". Conversely, little systematic research has been undertaken to show how those forms and "-isms" were presented to and received by the public, and whether and how artists used specific strategies to gain an audience.

Exhibitions proffer a view of an intersection between individuals and institutions, the combined activity of which constitutes a complex cultural fabric of the art world and its spheres of influence. If the well-established actors of art production can be seen as the tip of an iceberg, examining the exhibitions of their time can be considered as dipping below the water line to observe their enormous contextual foundation. Yet, for their complex enormity, exhibitions afford a very structured framework within which the objects and dynamics of the art world can be perceived within these broader regimes and perceptions of value.

The foundation of the "Exhibitions of Modern European Painting 1905-1915" project based at the University of Vienna (funded by the Austrian Science Fund), is premised on building an open-source database of exhibitions including Modern art and artists, which took place in Europe between 1905 and 1915. We are currently transforming circa one thousand original catalogues into a linked open data set, containing around 200'000 catalogue entries, with up to 5'000 artists active in this period. By connecting this information to well established structured vocabularies (Getty-ULAN and -TGN, GND, Wikidata), we hope to obtain new insights into the spatial and generational distribution of exhibitions and artists. This in turn would enable us to analyse the personal and institutional networks of modern painting, the chronology and geography of exhibiting new artistic forms, the propagation of "-isms", the exhibition strategies of artists, and the discourses that accompanied exhibitions of modern art.

The labour-intensive task of digitizing such an extensive corpus of catalogues can only be justified if the resulting research data has the potential to become an enduring value for the discipline by providing a solid base for further analysis beyond the scope of our own project. The following points seem crucial for such an attempt to succeed: The quality controlled capturing from the original sources instead of relying on previous incomplete publications, using open formats for publishing the results (JSON-LD, Schema.org) and aligning the entries with established Uniform Resource Identifiers to support a bidirectional exchange between our dataset and the wealth of information in the Linked Open Data Cloud. In addition, a user-friendly interface for presenting and analysing the data in various ways is essential for individual researchers lacking the infrastructure for building their own research environment to access the results.

This talk demonstrates our methods for creating an art historical metadata set and the value such data has to expand our understanding of historical artistic developments. We will present both the conceptual as well as the practical aspects of our environment for capturing, analysing and publishing the data set and will bring forward the ways in which this data can also begin to progress traditional theoretical debates of (exhibition) space even in its current not yet completed state.