Art book indexes reviewed

Catherine Sassen

Catherine Sassen, drawing on reviews published in *CAA.Reviews*, discusses index characteristics considered important by reviewers of art books.

Introduction

Do indexes matter to reviewers of art books? Various reviewers quoted in the 'Indexes reviewed' column of *The Indexer* have argued that a good index is a valued part of an art book. For example, in her review of *What makes a masterpiece*, Judith Flanders (2011) noted that the index 'turns what might otherwise have been only a gift book into something far more useful.' Reviewers also have noted that a poor index will impede the reader's access to information. For example, in a review of *Faber and Faber: eighty years of book cover design*, Jeremy Lamb (2009) called the index 'absurd' because it 'makes it almost impossible to work out who are the artists responsible unless one is already familiar with their work.'

Reviewers also have made disparaging remarks about art books without indexes. For example, in a review of *The dictionary of 20th century British book illustrators*, Janine Barchas (1996) wrote that the absence of an index 'makes interdisciplinary work with the Dictionary difficult, reducing the book's value as an academic reference tool for visual and literary scholars alike.' Similarly, in a review of *Encyclopedia of architectural terms*, Alan Rogers (1993) stated, 'half the value of the book is lost' because it lacks an index.

Literature review

Few researchers have studied evaluative comments on indexes in book reviews. Lipetz (1989: 117) analyzed reviews of nonfiction books in the *New York Times Book Review* for ten months and found only three that mentioned indexing. Lavell (1990: 60) studied 66 book reviews from *Archaeological Journal* and found only eight mentions of indexing. McFadden (1993: 4–5) examined 206 reviews appearing in *Choice* in 1988 and 1989. He found that 57 reviews mentioned indexing, and that 40 of those reviews included mostly brief evaluative remarks. Dartnell (2007: 186) analyzed 326 reviews in 11 scientific journals. She found that 54 reviews included comments on indexing, but only 34 of those comments were evaluative. Sassen (2010: 26–9) studied reference book reviews appearing in *Booklist*, *Choice*, *Library Journal* and *RUSQ* in 2009, and found that only 28.66 percent of the reviews included evaluative remarks on indexes.

There has been some limited research looking at book reviewers' comments on indexes in particular disciplines. Wyman (1999) studied comments about medical indexes that appeared in book review excerpts in the 'Indexes reviewed' section of *The Indexer*. Sassen (2012) analyzed evaluative

remarks by book reviewers of biographies, drawing on reviews excerpted in the 'Reviewed elsewhere' column of *Biography*. Sassen (2013) also studied remarks by reviewers of history books, drawing on reviews published in *Reviews in History*.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to analyze reviewers' comments on indexes in art books. The researcher examined book reviews from the College Art Association's *CAA.Reviews* for this purpose. The College Art Association (CAA) originated in 1911 with the purpose 'to promote art interests in all divisions of American colleges and universities' (CAA, 2014a).

CAA.Reviews began publication in 1998. Its scope includes 'critical reviews of books, exhibitions, and projects in all areas and periods of art history and visual studies' (CAA, 2014b). The researcher chose the *CAA.Reviews* electronic journal for this content analysis project because it publishes lengthy reviews, some of which mention indexes. Reviews from 1998 through 2013 were searched for comments on indexes.

Limitations

This content analysis is based on reviews appearing in the *CAA.Reviews* electronic journal during a limited time. It does not constitute an exhaustive study of art book reviews from all journals and newspapers. Another limitation concerns constraints faced by the indexers whose work was critiqued by the book reviewers. No information is available about index length requirements, time restrictions, instructions from editors, or any other conditions affecting the creation of the indexes that were reviewed.

Results

Evaluative comments on indexes

The researcher identified 138 reviews including 157 comments on indexes. The number of comments was greater than the number of reviews because some reviews included more than one comment. Of the 157 comments, 30 mentioned the presence of an index, 18 mentioned the absence of an index, and 109 were evaluative. A breakdown of the evaluative comments is presented in Table 1 and Figure 1.

Comprehensiveness

Forty-seven comments concerned index comprehensiveness. Of these comments 17 were positive and 22 negative,

Table I Evaluative comments about indexes

	Reflecting author's scope	Negative	Positive	Total
Comprehensiveness	8	22	17	47
Usefulness		3	35	38
Appropriate no. of indexes		9	1	10
Value judgment		1	6	7
Accuracy		4		4
Organization		1	1	2
Design			1	1
Total evaluative comments	8	40	61	109

with some reviewers mentioning specific entries or types of entries omitted. For example:

Ashgate: *Re-reading Leonardo: the ‘Treatise on Painting’ across Europe, 1550–1900*, ed. by Claire Farago (2009, 652 pp). Rev. by Ellen Prokop, *CAA.Reviews*, 3 Aug. 2011.

A thorough index allows the reader to navigate the volume easily.

Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press: *Ike Taiga and Tokuyama Gyokuran: Japanese masters of the brush* by Felice Fischer and Kyoko Kinoshita (2007, 504 pp). Rev. by Mara Miller, *CAA.Reviews*, 4 Aug. 2008.

Given the immensity of the accomplishments, any criticism is mere cavil. Still, a subject index would have been extremely

Yale University Press: *Contemporary cultures of display* by Emma Barker (1999, 272 pp). Rev. by Evelyn C. Hankins, *CAA.Reviews*, 4 April 2000.

One notable absence is a satisfying discussion of gender; tellingly, the reader looking for gender issues in the index is referred to ‘women.’

Usefulness

Thirty-eight comments concerned the usefulness of indexes. Thirty-five of these comments were positive, mentioning the help that the index provides in locating information scattered throughout the text, or the value that the index provides for teachers or researchers. Three comments were negative, indicating difficulties experienced by reviewers when using the index. For example:

Cambridge University Press: *Art and piety in the female religious communities of Renaissance Italy: iconography, space, and the religious woman’s perspective* by Anabel Thomas (2003, 430 pp). Rev. by Sandra Weddle, *CAA.Reviews*, 7 Nov. 2004.

In addition to the many case studies offered in the body of the text, the volume includes an extensive bibliography and a detailed index, both of which will serve as useful reference tools for scholars who will certainly be compelled to build upon the foundation provided by this important book.

Japan Society: *Transmitting the forms of divinity: early Buddhist art from Korea and Japan* by Hiromitsu Washizuka, Youngbok Park, and Woo-bang Kang (2003, 384 pp). Rev. by Cynthea J. Bogel, *CAA.Reviews*, 7 Sept. 2004.

Other pensive figures presumed to be the Maitreya bodhisattva are represented in the catalogue (cat. nos. 17, 39, and 52), although locating them is difficult because the index, which has numerous oversights, cross-references Maitreya in every language but does not include a Maitreya entry.

Figure I Evaluative comments about indexes

Appropriate number of indexes included

Ten comments concerned the appropriate number of indexes in the book, and mentioned specific types of indexes that appeared or should have appeared. For example:

Metropolitan Museum of Art: *American sculpture in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: a catalogue of works by artists born before 1865*, vol. 1, by Thayer Tolles (1998, 480 pp). Rev. by David B. Dearing, *CAA.Reviews*, 14 May 2000.

One of my few quibbles with the catalogue in this regard is the lack of an index of patrons and former owners. Such an index is a feature of the Metropolitan's three-volume catalogue of its American paintings, and a similar one here would be very useful.

Yale University Press and Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art: *Richard Parkes Bonington: the complete paintings*, by Patrick Noon (2008, 472 pp). Rev. by Julie Codell, *CAA.Reviews*, 23 Feb. 2010.

Noon also provides vital indexes of owners, sales, engravers, and titles at the end of the catalogue.

Value judgment

Seven comments expressed value judgments on indexes. For example:

University of Washington Press: *Chikubushima: deploying the sacred arts in Momoyama Japan* by Andrew M. Watsky (2004, 368 pp). Rev. by Bruce A. Coats, *CAA.Reviews*, 24 Aug. 2004.

Subtitles and paragraph headings help guide the reader, and the index is excellent, with Japanese kanji provided for names and special terminology.

Harry N. Abrams: *Chinese art and culture* by Robert L. Thorp and Richard Ellis Vinograd (2000, 440 pp). Rev. by Elizabeth Brotherton, *CAA.Reviews*, 1 April 2002.

The book's glossary and index are inadequate, and ideally should be revised for the second edition.

Accuracy

Four comments mentioned errors in indexes, noting that they will distract readers and limit the usefulness of the books. For example:

Yale University Press: *The infinite line: re-making art after Modernism*, by Briony Fer (2004, 224 pp). Rev. by Aleca Le Blanc, *CAA.Reviews*, 16 May 2006.

Despite the handsomeness of the volume, however, occasionally awkward word choice and sentence structure, along with numerous errors and omissions in the footnotes, figure numbers, and index, distract the reader.

Brill: *Tools, weapons and ornaments: Germanic material culture in pre-Carolingian Central Europe 400–750*

by Herbert Schutz (2001, 464 pp). Rev. by Geneva Kornbluth, *CAA.Reviews*, 16 Oct. 2003.

The index is sometimes inaccurate and omits entries of potential interest, limiting the book's utility for the browser.

Organization

Two comments mentioned the organization of indexes.

Cambridge University Press: *Bronzino: Renaissance painter as poet* by Deborah Parker (2000, 233 pp). Rev. by Gabrielle Langdon, *CAA.Reviews*, 13 Oct. 2003.

The two appendices include a well-organized index to the first lines of Bronzino's lyric works as recorded in Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Magliabecchiana II.IX.10, coded to categorize this corpus into sonnets, madrigals, and free verse, with their metrical forms. Folio numbers are provided; Domenico Moreni's idiosyncratic editions of 1822 and 1823 – the first to reveal Bronzino's lyric works – are correlated, and dedicatees and addressees are identified where appropriate.

Yale University Press: *Rubens and England* by Fiona Donovan (2004, 256 pp). Rev. by Anne W. Lowenthal, *CAA.Reviews*, 27 June 2005.

Some page numbers in the index are out of sequence.

Design

One comment mentioned index design.

Princeton Architectural Press: *Skyscraper rivals: The AIG Building and the architecture of Wall Street*, by Daniel M. Abramson (2001, 207 pp). Rev. by Roberta Moudry, *CAA.Reviews*, 15 Jan. 2002.

Footnotes and the index are thorough and cleanly designed.

Absence of index noted

Eighteen reviews noted the absence of indexes, mentioning that this deficiency made the books difficult to use and limited their potential for research. For example:

Reaktion Books: *Sex and the floating world: erotic images in Japan, 1700–1820* by Timon Screech (1999, 319 pp). Rev. by Quitman Eugene Phillips, *CAA.Reviews*, 3 Feb. 2000.

Without an index, even the writing of this review demanded some tedious thumbing to locate items that had gained new importance after further reading and reflection. It is deplorable that indexes have become the author's option at some university presses, and not taking the trouble to produce them suggests either laziness or intellectual arrogance about the importance of one's arguments.

Franz Steiner Verlag: *Peter Cornelius: Fresken und Freskenprojekte*, vol. 1 by Frank Büttner (1980: 374 pp). Rev. By Cordula Grewe, *CAA.Reviews*, 27 Aug. 2001.

Büttner’s combination of elements characteristic of a catalogue raisonné with those of an interpretative study oriented toward intellectual history is not always felicitous. Gaining access to specific information or tracking particular concepts through these dense pages is difficult, which makes the absence of an index regrettable.

Index presence noted

Thirty reviews mentioned the presence of indexes without making any evaluative remarks about them. Some specified the types of indexes included. For example:

Académie Royale de Belgique: *Les fonts baptismaux de Saint-Barthélemy à Liège: Chef-d’oeuvre sans pareil et noeud de controverses* by Pierre Colman and Berthe Lhoist-Colman (2002, 341 pp). Rev. by Harriet M. Sonne de Torrens and Miguel Torrens, *CAA.Reviews*, 23 April 2007.

These eleven works form the main body of the volume and are complemented by a brief portrait (silhouette) of the authors, abundant illustrative material in black and white as well as in color, indexes to the illustrations, persons, and places, and a table of contents.

Table 2 Terms in art indexes mentioned by book reviewers

Terms	Included	Missing	Total
1 Names*			
Artists’ names	6	3	9
Personal names	6	2	8
Family names	1		1
Geographic place names	3	2	5
Proper names	3	2	5
See also names under ‘Provenance’ and ‘Scholarship about art’			
Total	19	9	28
2 Titles of art works (original and/or translated)	8	3	11
3 Descriptive information			
Medium or materials (e.g. marble)	2		2
Style, movement, and/or school (e.g. Impressionist)		1	1
Technique (e.g. Pointillism)	1		1
Time period	1		1
Topical subjects / concepts / themes	7	7	14
Total	11	8	19
4 Provenance			
Collection names	1		1
Exhibition names	1		1
Museum names	3	1	4
Owners’ names (current and former)	4	2	6
Total	9	3	12
5 Scholarship about art			
Authors’ names	2	3	5
Titles of published works	1		1
Total	3	3	6

* Note: Subcategories below are not mutually exclusive because they reflect terms used by book reviewers.

Discussion

What do reviewers look for in art indexes? According to the results of this study, they assess comprehensiveness and usefulness most often. They may also evaluate the types of indexes included, as well as index accuracy, organization, and design.

In 40 comments concerning comprehensiveness or index presence, reviewers named specific types of terms that were included or that they believed should have been included in indexes. Table 2 gives these terms and the number of times they were mentioned by reviewers. The terms mentioned most often were artist names, other proper names, titles of art works, topical subjects, and provenance information.

The terms in Table 2 might be used as a term selection checklist, especially if they were supplemented by adding the term ‘genre’ from Wellisch (1995b). This checklist is not prescriptive because each index will vary, depending on the scope of the book, the time restrictions of the project, the index length limitations and other constraints. The checklist should be used only as a starting point for a discussion between the indexer and the client about term selection. As Coerr (2005) noted, ‘There should be agreement between indexer and client on what is to be and not to be indexed in each different part of an art book.’ Other sources to consult when planning an art indexing project include Rowland and Brenner (1998), Wellisch (1995a), Wellisch (1995b), and Zafran (2008 and 2012).

Each year, it seems, larger and more daunting mountains of text rise from the lush lowlands of visual reproduction, obliging the reader to sit up and take notice. It used to be commonly accepted that the text of a large-format art book was a joke – a harmless effusion of bold type between the title page and the color reproductions – but these days you are likely to find yourself scaling craggy massifs of prose by some well-known scholar or art historian.

Calvin Tomkins (1985)

A good index is essential in enabling readers to find their way through the ‘craggy massifs of prose’ in art books. If the index is comprehensive, useful, and accurate, it will help readers locate information and images with ease.

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Nancy Mulvany

I could not let this issue of *The Indexer* pass without noting the retirement on 30 June of Nancy Mulvany. Her wonderful *Indexing books*, first published in 1994 (second edition Chicago, 2005), was described by the publishers as 'the gold standard for thousands of professional indexers, editors, and authors', a view which many readers of this journal will, on the basis of direct experience, surely endorse.

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