

ONCE UPON A SHELF: COLLECTING AND
CATALOGUING ARTISTS' BOOKS

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With art in book form at affordable prices, people who visit artists' books fairs and shops inevitably purchase a few books. At what point does an individual's gathering of artists' books become a collection? Is it the numbers that matter: beyond say 50 or 100 books is it a collection even though the owner does not think of it as such? Or perhaps it is about the consciousness of having. Maybe one can acquire without collecting, until one day realisation brings awareness, a consideration that the gathering has become something more than just that. Does the now collector continue the willy-nilly, here and there purchasing, or does the consciousness bring further consideration, perhaps responsibility? Does the collector concentrate on the collection's strengths or "fill gaps"? It can be argued that some public collections began in a similar way with artists' books entering the collection without libraries recognising them as such. Tate Library and Boston Museum of Art Library¹ began acquiring artists' books around the 1970s when artists' books sneaked into these libraries. Artists sent their art in book form to the institutions and as they were books they were sent to the library. They were added to the general stock until libraries recognised them as artists' books and they were gathered into special collections². Most collections of artists' books are held by libraries, the majority as part of museums or universities. Many libraries have collecting policies: sometimes this is a stated, overt policy while, for others, collecting follows the interests of the library or academic staff. Either can be exploited or re-interpreted to change collecting direction or emphasis.

Once a collection, either private or public, grows beyond a certain size a listing is required both to know what is in the collection and its location. Cataloguing suggests an imposing of order upon a collection: a capture of knowledge about the contents of the collection, and also a sorting of that knowledge enabling access to the collection. In libraries there are rules to follow. In Spring 2013 new cataloguing rules were

implemented by the British Library and the Library of Congress. *RDA: resource description and access* (the title underlining the purpose of the rules) takes a hierarchical conceptual model as its basis, but the elements of description are fundamentally the same as existing bibliographic records. I do not propose to write a bibliographic cataloguing manual³ here but to explore a few aspects. While many artists' books will contain a title page and/or colophon, the usual carriers of bibliographic information, others pose more of a challenge. Artists do not always make it easy for cataloguers. While I do not wish to influence the way that artists make books I would plea for artists to provide some information on their work.

So what information would help a cataloguer create a full catalogue record? On the item itself, the artist's name would really help! This may seem obvious but a number of books do not bear a name or only have an illegible signature or initials. Title and year of publication might also be considered essential. There does not have to be a dramatic title page, messing up the flow of the work if that is not wanted or appropriate. In *The pink paper* Mark Pawson places the bibliographic details along the stitching of the stab binding. Beyond artist's name, title and publication date, information can be provided elsewhere. Containers (such as slipcases, portfolios or envelopes), accompanying sheets or websites can carry further information.

A very basic bibliographic record would contain title and statement of responsibility, place of publication, publisher and date of publication. Ideally a catalogue record would contain a lot more: including pagination, notes and searchable headings. I will return to discuss some of these later.

Difficulties that artists throw up are many fold. Artists change their names, not just through marriage, but adding or removing elements and are perhaps more prone to adopting new personas, working under pseudonyms or working as a named group than perhaps your average

science writer. Titles can provide a number of difficulties. Firstly, their absence. Cataloguers can take the title from elsewhere if available (for example, artist's or bookseller's websites) but may have to provide a title themselves; however, this may not reflect the artist's thinking. In contrast, artists often follow through tracks of thought making several books on the way, giving them the same or similar titles: for example, Simon Cutts has published 2 works entitled *Poinsettia* and Julie Johnstone has published 2 books titled *Meditation* and further works titled *Meditation (1)* and *Meditation (2)*. Artists can also be inconsistent in the titles they assign to their work. One book, which shall remain nameless, has a title on the title page, a different title on the colophon and is referred to by a further title on the artist's website. Artists include symbols in their titles that do not appear on a traditional keyboard. Sometimes these can be entered using symbol tables or codes but usually cannot be searched via the normal library searches and therefore need to be translated into search terms. The heart-shaped leaf cut-out in the title of a work by Ceri Patmore can be translated as *We [love] nature* or *We [heart] nature*. As the symbol could also be interpreted as a leaf, another added title could be (the less meaningful, but covering all possibilities) *We [leaf] nature*. This is fine where the symbol has a shared understanding. Problems arise if the symbol is less well known. Colin Sackett uses ☒ as the title of one of his books. Most library catalogues have omitted the symbol⁴ and refer to the book as *Made with respect and reference to the work and ideas of Conlon Nancarrow* or *[Nancarrow] : made with respect and reference to the work and ideas of Conlon Nancarrow*, which the artist describes as "what is the only text in the book, which is really a sort of caption, and 'explanation' on the inside back cover"⁵. Although this symbol can now be entered by cataloguers there is not a straightforward meaningful translation for it⁶. Paul van Dijk's book of black and white photographs of tracks, paths and roads curving to the left is known by the artist's name but I would argue that the title is actually the arrow curving to the left on the front cover. Books can also become known by titles other than the one given on their title page. Probably the most

famous example of this is the work commonly known as *The Xerox book*, whose title is actually *Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Robert Morris, Lawrence Weiner*. Then there are the difficulties that can be thrown up by multiple title pages, design layout (including overprinting) or altered books.

While publication details can be sketchy, often the publisher is the artist themselves. Dates of publication can be essential in differentiating between works, for example Julie Johnstone's *Meditation* mentioned above. Detailed imprint and manufacture information can also be interesting, providing fuller history of artist publishers or printers; for example *Twelve works* by Richard Long was published by Coracle Press for Anthony d'Offay and *Horizon to horizon* by Hamish Fulton was published by Coracle Press for Orchard Gallery. Further, *Poems for my shorthand typist* by Stuart Mills was published by Coracle, but printed by Colin Sackett. Similarly Ian Hamilton Finlay's *Swatchway* states that it was "Made by Colin Sackett". Information like this can provide evidence of associations between artists and publishers across the art world.

Notes are an essential element of the bibliographic record for artists' books. Notes allow the cataloguer to state information not allowed for in the rest of the bibliographic record, for example about edition size, accompanying material, earlier editions and other versions, further information about the statement of responsibility, and about the library's copy including its condition and edition number. Now that a record is no longer tied to the size of a card catalogue, notes can and should be expansive. Ideally notes should be neutral in tone. This has perhaps resulted in a concentration on physical description. However, artists can give enrichment to the catalogue record by providing information on the thinking behind the work as well as on materials and techniques involved in making the work. This information can be in the form of an artist's statement that can be provided with the work or on the artist's website.

In addition to the bibliographic details the catalogue could carry further information. This might include images of the work, either a few photographs or full digitization of the book. While this would allow an impression of the work, nothing would replace seeing, holding and experiencing the work itself.

In an ideal world a catalogue record would link to further resources. “Link” is a difficult word here. Link through the provision of the information itself or link through the provision of clickable links transporting the reader to other resources? The latter allows for access to much greater information but can also be unstable. The National Art Library developed a standalone database of 150 artists’ books selected from their holdings as part of their admirable webpages⁷ about artists’ books on the Victoria and Albert Museum website. Links from records in the main library catalogue led through to the relevant entry in the database where entries included informative textual descriptions or contextualisations and images or videos. Following a major website upgrade the page has become difficult to find without the URL⁸ and is compromised. Some images do not appear and the headings for the artists’ names do not display (a significant drawback!). Further, the links from the catalogue records go to the database’s home page rather than to the entry for the book. This has been the position for several years but there are plans to reformat the content, allowing it to be searched independently and also through the Museum’s Search the Collections interface. For all libraries maintenance of this type of linking would require on-going commitment and support, and hence resources.

A matter for discussion is also what further information a catalogue record should carry. Should a catalogue record reference critical discussion of the work. For example, there are multiple writings on Ed Ruscha’s *Twenty-six gasoline stations*. Should the record attempt to capture some of those? Whose? How far would fashion or curatorial taste play a part? Artists’ books are often acquired directly from the

artist early in their public life. Do libraries have the scope or desire to monitor the literature and add further references later?

Artists' books are often held in special collections, with readers having to apply for access by use of the catalogue. Hence artists' book catalogue records need to be full, with detailed information through the bibliographic description, extensive notes and headings for individuals and corporate bodies associated with the artist's book, including artists, publishers, printers and writers. As with any endeavour, the devil is in the detail. The more information entered in to the record, the more the reader can get out. Ideally artists' books should be catalogued by someone knowledgeable about artists' books, who understands the genre. How far libraries can support additional content is a matter of commitment and funding.

Responsibility for catalogue records lies with libraries but artists can help libraries by providing information. Records can be shared through databases such as COPAC or WorldCat allowing that information to be available beyond the purchasing library. Hence, as well as providing access to the book, the catalogue record is another opportunity to broadcast the artist's work and thinking.

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- 1 Deirdre E. Lawrence, "Artists' books at the Brooklyn Museum of Art", in *Artists' book yearbook 2001-2002*, ed. by Sarah Bodman (Bristol: Centre for Fine Print Research, 2001)
 - 2 At Tate Library (and I suspect elsewhere) this has resulted in early acquisitions bearing ink stamps and spine labels.
 - 3 For cataloguing guidelines according to AACR2 see: Maria White, Patrick Perratt and Liz Lawes, *Artists' books : a cataloguers' manual* (London : ARLIS/UK & Ireland, 2006)
 - 4 Possibly because the book was published in 1998, and presumably purchased and a record created soon afterwards, when library management systems and symbols tables were less advanced than they are now.
 - 5 Email from Colin Sackett to the author 27 April 2015.
 - 6 ₤ is a character used to denote an unspecified currency.
 - 7 <http://www.vam.ac.uk/page/a/artists-books/>
 - 8 <http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/album/15001>



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