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Collection Development

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[Special] Collection[s] Development: Artists' Books in Academic Libraries

Artists' books have been collected by academic libraries in the United States since the inception of the genre, but their distinction as special collections items was not immediate. The determination of their "special" status has been in the interest of preservation—because these items are often unique in multiple senses (e.g., form, material, technique, content and edition), they were physically and categorically removed from the main collections of libraries, and strictures for viewing them were put in place (e.g., appointments, paging, reading rooms and monitoring all mediated by library staff). Because these materials are inherently tactile and intimate, their status within special collections has posed challenges to their accessibility. By examining the nuances and challenges of collection development for artists' books, particularly the mediation of materials and processes of selection, this paper provides suggestions for how outreach and clear policies may improve the efficacy of such collections.

Clarifying what artists' books are, or at least attempting to, is helpful to understand their status as special collections items, why they are collected by academic libraries and the particulars of selection and outreach in libraries. While the category of "artist's book" and the history of the genre has been examined by many authors over the past several decades, it is generally understood that they emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, sparked by the desire felt by some artists for a democratic, disseminable medium.

Fluxus, whose members included people like George Maciunas and La Monte Young, notoriously strove to these ends through their mass-produced, cheap publications that privileged the process of interdisciplinary creation, inspiration, experimentation and collaboration over the resultant product. In the seminal text, *The Century of Artists' Books*, Johanna Drucker argues that there is no clear typological definition of what constitutes an artist's book. Rather, it is a "zone of activity" where different disciplines intersect, allowing for variation and flexibility in qualifying creations and the creative act.[1] To some, the genre is synonymous with artists' publications broadly, blurring the binaries created between artists' books, zines, periodicals and audiovisual content. This stance is held at SAIC, where all artists' publications are considered artists' books, or supplements to artists' books, and they are collected together in the Joan Flasch Collection without distinction.[2]

Academic libraries—especially those within schools that have integral arts programs—collect artists' books to support curricula. Studio courses, especially in book arts and art history courses are logical users of such collections, though they can be utilized interdisciplinarily. For studio courses, artists' books can demonstrate different ways of expressing ideas, using materials and technical experimentation, and inspiring students' own practices and experimentation. However, their status as special collections items impedes interactivity and exploration. As stated by Eva Athansiu:

> Within the current context of rare books and special collections models, artists' books continue to belong to the category of isolated art object, subjected to rarity and fetishism. This

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[1] Johanna Drucker, "The Artist's Book as Idea and Form," in *The Century of Artists' Books*, 2nd ed. (New York: Granary Books, 2004): 2.
[2] Brittan Nannenga (Head of Library Special Collections and Digital Services at the Flaxman Library of SAIC) in conversation with the author, May 2, 2023.

complicated reality manifests itself through the storage of artists' books: most live in non-browsing, non-circulating, advance-request collections.[3]

When materials are not physically open to browsing, the opportunity for discovery is greatly diminished. The restrictions of advance appointments, the confined space of the reading room or designated area, and surveillance by library staff, while not intentionally malicious, create an air of exclusivity and intimidation that can prevent students from feeling welcome or comfortable accessing these collections.

Prioritizing preservation over access and engagement is a considerable problem with special collections, especially for artists' books. A survey prepared by Andrea Chemero et al. from 2000 found that the three predominant methods of protecting these materials include "prohibiting access to original items, restricting circulation to special clientele or building-use only, and housing materials in closed stacks," which, through their research on artists' practices, "is antithetical to artists' intentions."[4] While this survey is decades old, the issue of balancing the desire for preservation and the ability to provide significant access continues. The authors also identified that most of the libraries surveyed had applied the special collections standards to the storage, preservation, promotion, and circulation of artists' books, and this was due to the lack of literature and guidance on managing artists' books and the belief that, before anything, these materials were rare and fragile.[5] As such, artists' books have become entrenched in collection management patterns that prioritize preservation over access and engagement, squandering the inherent, unique qualities of artists' books as tactile and interactive.

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[3] Eva Athansiu, "Belonging: Artists' Books and Readers in the Library," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 34, no. 2 (September 1, 2015): 330–38.

[4] Andrea Chemero, et al., "How Libraries Collect and Handle Artists' Books," *Art Documentation: Bulletin of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 23.

[5] Ibid., 22.

Neither the artists' intentions nor the students' needs are adequately addressed through this. While libraries have made efforts to adjust their policies and programs to strike a balance between preservation and engagement, artists' books generally remain inaccessible.

Athansiu mentioned some of the ways in which library staff have been supporting reader access, including in-person outreach through "public exhibitions, tours, class visits, one-on-one consultations, and integrating collections into course programming."[6] Creating browsable reading rooms and selecting materials for circulation, as Pratt and SAIC have both done with their circulating zine collections, can be helpful. In the context of academic libraries, instruction sessions are crucial. They are also able to be provided in libraries that are not prepared to alter their restrictive procedures. Instruction sessions present the opportunity for students to learn about and engage with materials in a hands-on manner, all the while being guided by and in conversation with a member of the library's staff who is intimately familiar with the collection. Preparing interactive sessions can help students feel more comfortable accessing the collection, especially in the mediated space of the designated reading room/area. Facilitating active learning with clear learning outcomes is optimal.[7]

Discussing the presence of artists' publications, specifically zines, in the context of academic libraries, Deborah Ultan has argued that:

> Lifting the alternative small-press media arts out of the underground context from which they originally disseminate and into the academic environment supports immersive, exploratory study. Research in the arts and humanities that is laboratory-like, instead of passive and reliant

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[6] Athansiu, "Belonging," 336.

[7] Sarah DeWaay, "Using Learning Outcomes to Create Activities for Artists' Books Instruction," *Art Documentation: Bulletin of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2018): 90–103.

on typical bibliographic hierarchy, can be effectively awakening and transformative for researchers, especially student researchers.[8]

Interactive use of these materials can awaken researchers by activating the experiential potential of the materials themselves. The unique qualities of artists' books as tactile materials can support research in a way that other books cannot—by encouraging their use for active instruction opportunities and other forms of outreach, this can help connect students to the collections to better facilitate research, creative inspiration, and exploration.

Virtual offerings, like digital collections and online exhibitions, come with their own problems, such as the need for "detailed metadata, user-friendly interfaces, high-quality images,... intuitive browsing functions,... reader skills in digital and information literacy, and access to the Internet."[9] Copyright presents another obstacle.[10] So does the environmental impact of data-heavy images and videos comprising digital collections, exhibitions, and guides. Even with these problems, it is clear that virtual offerings support engagement and discoverability by allowing for visually stimulating browsing. Many schools with collections of artists' books have produced public, virtually browsable digital collections and illustrative research guides, including but not limited to SAIC, MICA, Otis College, and Reed College. These guides help overcome the obstacle of physical mediation, informing the campus community (and beyond) what is present in the collection to help interested users glean what materials they would like to view when making appointments. They can also open the collection to other users, such as local people without campus affiliation or people unable to travel to these

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[8] Deborah Ultan, "Counterculture Publications for Engaged Learning," in *Freedom of the Presses: Artists' Books in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. by Marshall Weber (Brooklyn: Brooklyn, Inc., 2018): 183.
[9] Athansiu, "Belonging," 337
[10] Alexandra Purcell, "Artists' Books, Digital Exhibitions, and the Copyright Issues That Surround Them," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 34, no. 2 (September 1, 2015): 321–29.

collections to view certain items on-site. Discovery is also opened for people without deep knowledge about artists' books since they can browse the collection visually rather than relying on the textual descriptions of the main catalogs that primarily relay publishing information, which may or may not include binding types or thematic content due to the lack of nationally standardized cataloging procedures and guidelines.

Understandably, not every library offers digital collections—producing and maintaining them is time and resource-intensive. Finding a way to link or share guides, or even discovering a way to share cataloging metadata for items, seems like it could be useful to enhance research opportunities for a wider audience. Something to consider regarding this, though, is the niche collecting areas of each institution. More popular and familiar items may overlap between collections, which can be helpful, but certain items within collections lacking presence in a digital collection may become hidden beneath the deluge of information regarding more widely known publications.

This raises the question about the selection processes for artists' books. While academic libraries are more likely to create and publicize collection development policies for their main collections, information about what guides the development of special collections tends to be more opaque. There may be subsections within broader policies referring to the particularities of collecting for special collections, and it is more rare that they will have their own separate policies. Difficulties arise in selection and evaluation without clear guidance and information available. Policies should attempt to address what, how, why, from where, and from whom items are acquired. One reason for this is that the initial purchasing and life-cycle costs of artists' books are higher than other materials.[11]

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[11] Stephen Bury, "1, 2, 3, 5: Building a Collection of Artists' Books," *Art Libraries Journal* 32, no. 2 (April 2007): 5–9.

Further, special collections often face limited funding and space. Providing clear reasoning as to why these materials are being collected can help ensure that limited resources are being used in optimal ways to support the intentions of the collection.

Sustainability should also be addressed in a collection development policy for artists' books. From my research, it is apparent that de-selection for these items is not widely accepted, let alone practiced, due to their uniqueness. Considering the active and continued collecting practices of these collections, how is it possible to continue acquiring materials without also getting rid of materials, or at least having a clear plan as to how materials will be stored and cared for as the collection unceasingly grows? Addressing this thoughtfully in service of producing a collection development policy will prompt library staff to consider the sustainability of their collecting practices while also encouraging assessment and evaluation of the collection.

Selection for artists' books is very different than purchasing monographs, etc. Not only do these processes go beyond the criteria of subject and format, but the sources for acquiring these materials are very different. Policies can help clarify where and how materials are being sourced.[12] This helps selectors do their job and informs users about the collection, but it also presents an opportunity to evaluate selection processes and sources. Knowing where items are being purchased from and whether it is typical for selectors to interact directly with self-publishing artists can identify weaknesses or biases in how the collection is being built.

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[12] Take, for example, the SAIC's libguide that outlines the myriad sources ("Dealers, Retail Venues, and Vendors," as well as "Artists' Books Fairs") that they will acquire artists' publications from. This list is not exhaustive. https://libraryguides.saic.edu/artistsbooks/dealers.

If selectors are relying on a couple of major vendors for the bulk of their purchases, there will be limitations as to what materials are present in the collection and support only certain publishers. In selecting artists' books, there is an opportunity for collecting materials from people creating books outside the preordained publishing channels, even those that have formed for artists' books. Working directly with artists and smaller publishers and booksellers helps support them and allows their materials to enter into collections. Purchasing from the same prominent vendors, or selecting materials that are seen in mainstream channels, means that the collection and its users will iss out on the diverse, disparate, widespread practice of artist's book creation. Making an effort to purchase from a variety of places and people and allocating time for research and sustained communication with practitioners, including faculty and students, can allow for the growth of a stronger, more interesting collection. Interacting with and purchasing from local artists, publishers, and booksellers can also root the collection in the contextual environment, fostering a greater sense of community.

Outlining information about selection processes and practices in the collection development policy also allows library staff to consider the niche, specialized aspects of their collections. In determining specific collecting areas, can prevent overlap with neighboring institutions to fortify the amount of unique materials available to researchers locally. SAIC has made an effort to collaborate with other local institutions, including other colleges, universities, public libraries, and AIC, to establish communication about the materials being collected. In doing so, the network of various local collections creates a wider pool of artists' books that are available for exploring.

Because special collections are mediated by library staff and restricted to certain demarcated spaces, there should be active, concerted efforts to enhance the discoverability of materials through

outreach, such as active learning instruction sessions and digital guides. Further, outlining processes

and practices regarding selection can prompt library staff to assess and evaluate their development

procedures. Overall, conceiving of a collaborative, thoughtful collection development policy specific to

special collections can help mitigate the challenges and particulars of collecting artists' books.

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