Collection Development Policies for Artists' Books

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Writing or revising a collection development policy can be a daunting task, but the benefits of having written collection guidelines outweigh the complications of not having a policy in place. Collection development policies address the scope of an existing collection and clarify the future direction the collection should take.

Embedded within the collection development policy may be references to special collections or holdings. For instance, when art libraries begin to collect artists' books, librarians will have to consider how to define their collecting policies for such material. Do libraries need a separate collection development policy for artists' books? Perhaps, depending on circumstances. Many libraries simply mention artists' books within their general policy. Others draft separate policies to be included as an appendix or subsection of the main collection policy. These separate policies will not have the length or depth of description that a full collection policy has but will include specific issues related to artists' books. Deciding what level of coverage artists' books will be given in a collection policy likely will be determined by the intensity and importance of collecting in the area.

At Michigan State University's Fine Arts Library, the need for a separate artists' books collection policy emerged from the decision to increase holdings in that area of the collection. Although both the Fine Arts Library and the Main Library's Special Collections unit each held a few artists' books, neither department actively collected such material. After the decision was made by both units to acquire more artists' books cooperatively, the need for collecting parameters became clear. As a joint venture, defined roles for each unit were crucial. The creation of a separate artists' books collection policy, which could be appended to either or both units' main policy statements, appeared to be the most logical course of action.

Building The Foundation

In order to develop an artists' books collection policy, three strategies were pursued. The first was to assemble a list of critical issues related to the collection of artists' books (housing, sources, selection responsibility, etc.) The second was to examine existing literature on standard collection development policies for elements which were applicable to an artists' books policy. Finally, examples of policies at other institutions were solicited through a message on ARLIS-L. No institutions supplied policies that stood alone from their main collection development statement, but a small number provided the sections of their policies or appendices that dealt with artists' books. Only two respondent institutions had formal guidelines for the collection of artists' books.2

In a standard collection policy, basic topics are: history of the collection, including strengths and weaknesses; purpose or mission; audience; general selection guidelines, covering issues such as subject depth, formats, language, geographical scope, and time periods; selection responsibility; gifts; and collection intensity (often using the RLG Conspectus model). Although certain elements of a traditional policy were considered for inclusion, it was apparent that, due to their unique nature, the collection practices for artists' books would require additional, unique criteria.

Collection policies in general vary widely in their content and scope, and artists' books policies also vary depending on the length, format (placement in the body of the main policy or as an appendix), and institutional practice. However, based on the policy developed at MSU, the following categories are suggested: history of the collection (including strengths), program description or purpose of the collection, selection guidelines, and sources for acquisition (including gifts). Additional categories could be access, bibliographic control, or supplementary materials.

Definition And Purpose

The MSU policy is divided into three sections. The first is an introduction to the MSU artists' books policy in which the definition of an artist's book is included, along with the history of the collection, its strengths, and the purpose (i.e. curricular research/collecting needs.) The definition is given to help outline the parameters of what items will be collected, as well as a reference for other librarians and administrators who might not be familiar with artists' books. Listing the collection's strengths not only highlights important works but also may dictate the direction future collecting will take. The inclusion of purpose is self-evident: it is important to justify a reason for having an artists' books collection, no matter whether it is educational or archival in nature.

Procedural Guidelines

The second section of the MSU document covers factors influencing acquisition, specifically, selection guidelines. As with selection guidelines in a standard policy, the criteria listed in this category help define what goes into the collection. The most common consideration in the policies received through solicitation on ARLIS-L is the artist. It appears that many artists' books
collections are intended to highlight the work of local or regional artists, or artists with a particular reputation. The gender or vicinity of the artist may also play a factor. At MSU, the collection contains numerous works by women artists. In order to build on this existing strength, works by women artists will be given special consideration.

Other selection guidelines include artistic quality/physical appearance of the item, number in the edition, structure or technique, price, and reputation of the press or publisher. Choosing items by artistic quality or appearance may result in acquiring items based on personal taste, but it may help exclude items that are poor in construction or concept, or present unusual preservation or access issues. The edition number may help define the item in question as an artist's book or a book object. Some libraries do not acquire unique, "one-of-a-kind" items but concentrate instead on books made in a limited edition. An item's structure or construction is a significant consideration at MSU, since it is important to acquire an assortment of formats and construction techniques in order to build a well-rounded collection, particularly for purposes of instruction. Students should have the opportunity to see a variety of artists' books formats (codex, accordion fold, scroll). Formats that might be excluded from the collection (broadside, virtual artists' books, etc.) also deserve mention.

Price and reputation of the press are mentioned less frequently in the sample policies reviewed, but they can be of assistance in determining what will be collected. By setting a price limit, librarians can work within a budget or justify why an item cannot be acquired for the collection. Since it is common for artists to approach the librarian with an item to sell to the library, reference to the collection policy can be a tactful means of avoiding the pressure to buy an expensive item. Reputation of the press or publisher is important when acquiring items for a traditional book collection, and it is often a useful consideration for artists' books. Libraries may want to acquire items from a local or regional press, or from a press with a good reputation. The MSU policy makes brief mention to sources of acquisition and collection responsibility. Both the Art Librarian and Special Collections Librarian are listed as selectors for artists' books, and a few of the most popular distributors and dealers are mentioned.

**Collection Maintenance**

The final section of the MSU policy covers collection management issues. This section was created in response to the fact that, although the Art Librarian would be heavily involved in the acquisition of artists' books, acquired items would be housed and accessed in the Special Collections unit of the Main Library. In addition, since the Special Collections Librarian was not as familiar with access and preservation issues related to artists' books, this portion of the policy would serve as a reference for Special Collections as well as a defined set of conditions under which the materials would be stored and viewed.

The two primary issues addressed in this portion of the policy were preservation and housing. The following is the draft text dealing with preservation and housing:

Due to the variety of formats and unique nature of each item, the artists' books collection will be housed in Special Collections. This will ensure optimal conditions for the preservation and security of the collection. If the artist does not provide a protective enclosure for his or her work, the Libraries' conservation librarian will be consulted. Special enclosures, ranging from archival envelopes to custom-made boxes, will be necessary to protect the items. Artists' books must not be labeled or marked in any manner, as this would result in an alteration of the artist's work and a reduction in the value of the item.

Also included in this section are the issues of bibliographic control and access, for which Special Collections is responsible. Cataloging is done in the unit, and items must be requested and viewed in the Special Collections reading room. This is mentioned in the policy in order to document that cataloging is under the authority of Special Collections, rather than the Main Library's cataloging and processing units. Patrons find the records for artists' books in the MSU online catalog, MAGIC.

There are some additional categories that could be considered for inclusion in an artists' books policy, although they do not appear in the draft MSU statement. Librarians may want to discuss supplementary materials, gift policies, and descriptions of regional collecting practices.

**Conclusion**

As the interest in artists' books grows and more libraries increase their holdings in the area, the need for a collection policy may emerge. Although the situation at the MSU Libraries is unique, it is intended to demonstrate the process of forming a collection policy for artists' books. Other libraries may find themselves needing a written policy as a means to ensure consistent collecting practices within their institution or if they are to justify increased acquisition of artists' books. It appears that relatively few libraries have created such documents, and there are no set rules for what to include or exclude from an artists' books policy. Artists' books are not only interesting and unique aspects of an art library's collection, they are a modern art genre that supports those studying the book arts, graphic arts, and contemporary art history. Artists' books enhance the art library and deserve to be collected in a thoughtful, consistent and well-organized manner.

**Notes**


2. Six responses were received to a request for information on artists' books policies sent via ARLIS-L. Three of the six responses (the Cleveland Institute of Art, Emory University, and the Clarence
Ward Art Library, Oberlin College) included portions of collection policies in which artists’ books were mentioned. Two of the responses included sets of guidelines for acquiring artists’ books (the Museum of Modern Art and School of the Art Institute of Chicago, John Flaxman Library), and the remaining response was a complete collection development policy, from the Atlanta College of Art Library, that appeared to be a section of a larger policy statement.

3. The initial draft of the MSU collection policy followed the same format and layout as the main collection policy. This proved to be problematic in some areas, and after receiving the few sample policies submitted by other institutions, the need to redraft and simplify the MSU policy became apparent. A streamlined policy that relies less on prose and more on bulleted lists will be the format for the second draft.

4. This aspect of the MSU collection policy was also significant in that the two librarians involved in collecting artists’ books had different opinions about formats to be collected. The Special Collections Librarian favored the more traditional codex format while the Art Librarian wanted to include a wide variety of formats for instruction in studio art classes and to vary the collection. It is anticipated that each individual will purchase items that adhere to the collection policy but are somewhat reflective of their individual preferences.

5. In order to facilitate ease of access to the collection for the Art Librarian, a statement was included in this section of the policy that reads: “Items will be accessed in Special Collections only, unless needed for display in the library or for instruction by the Art Librarian.”