How Libraries Collect and Handle Artists’ Books

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Artists’ books can take many forms, among them a traditional codex, a stack of playing cards, a flip book, a tunnel book, and a scroll. Such forms push the boundaries of traditional reading while maintaining the intimate relationship that a book fosters between object and reader. These unusual books may find homes in the collections of fine arts libraries, challenging standard methodologies of organization and care.

As part of an Indiana University fine arts librarianship course a survey was submitted to ARLIS-L in February 1999 regarding the collection, cataloging, and preservation of artists’ books. In addition, dealers and publishers were interviewed to determine the state of the art. Despite problems, advocates stress the intimacy and sensory value of the artists’ book in all its varied formats.

Collection Building

Artists’ books seem to form a small, though not insignificant part of many art libraries’ collections. The average collection size was 1,096 items. The majority of titles was acquired from specialized book distributors (93%) and from individual artists (74%). A smaller number was purchased from general art book distributors (41%) or acquired through donations and trading duplicates (15%) and donations from faculty and students (7%).

Not surprisingly, artists’ books were also a relatively small part of the acquisition budget in surveyed libraries. On average only 3.2% of respondents’ budgets were spent on artists’ books. This number does not reflect those exceptional libraries with significant gift monies allotted for the purchase of artists’ books, such as the Kohler Art Library at the University of Wisconsin.

The most popular selection criteria were cost and artists’ reputation (both 70%). Also important were personal preference and faculty recommendation (both 63%), followed by word of mouth and review sources (both 52%) and artist’s affiliation with institution (48%). A common (19%) write-in response was curricular value but this perhaps is similar to faculty recommendation. Faculty presumably recommend for purchase the artists’ books that would be valuable teaching tools.

A very small minority of respondents make digital artists’ books available in their collection. Three of twenty-seven libraries (11%) replied ‘yes,’ that they do include digital artists’ books in their collection. Digital collection sizes are very small, ranging from six to thirty CD-ROM and bookmarked URL titles.

Management and Care

Artists’ books are most often thought of and treated as unique art objects requiring special strategies for their care and handling. There is a multitude of problems associated with them, not the least of which is that artists’ books often stray drastically from regular book form. Literature on the treatment of these collections is scarce and it seems that libraries have no standards that directly address the treatment of artists’ books. The ARLIS-L survey was designed to find out how libraries are managing these collections, and in the process to point out standard practices and areas where improvements are possible.

The results of the survey show that librarians are employing methods of storage, preservation, promotion, and circulation developed for special collections materials (twenty-seven of twenty-seven respondents= 100%). Rare and fragile items are often stored as special collections due to their increased need for preservation and conservation. In his book Rare-Book Librarianship, Roderick Cave suggests that the following factors should be considered when housing special collections: environmental control; security; shelving and storage; and exhibition equipment.

The preservation measures undertaken by survey respondents for their rare or special collections may include archival envelopes or boxes for each individual book (twenty-one of twenty-seven =78%) or special temperature and humidity control (seven of twenty-seven =26%). Other measures may be taken: 19% report gloves are used during handling; 7% noted items are shelved by size to reduce the threat of crowding; 7% use enclosed storage cabinets; and 4% consult with museum conservation staff for particular items which merit special attention.
Three of the survey respondents (11%) stated that no special measures were taken for the preservation of their collections of artists’ books even though they claimed special collections status for them.²

Promotion and Display

Promotion of special collections is important, indeed vital, for institutions seeking the financial and political support needed for their survival. Historically, special collections “have played a role in enhancing the prestige of their institutions.”³ Fine arts libraries owning collections of artists’ books have a unique opportunity for promoting their institution via these collections. Active methods of promotion can be undertaken to capitalize on the special resources in many libraries. The use of exhibitions is the predominant method of promotion utilized by respondents (78%). This is thirty per cent higher than the next most utilized method, lectures (48%).

Exhibitions give rise to frequent opportunities for damage to materials to occur. Problems include constant exposure to more extreme lighting than in storage areas, faulty handling practices, extreme fluctuations in temperature and humidity due to traveling, and/or poorly designed exhibition cases. Traditional exhibitions are thus not the optimal means by which to promote a collection consisting of fragile materials such as artists’ books. Strict preservation policies need to be implemented and other alternatives for promotion need to be explored. Making the collections more accessible through illustrated catalogs and coordinating public lectures with guest speakers or book artists are alternatives to exhibitions that would increase the overall visibility of the fine arts library as a center for research and as a supporter of book arts.

Protecting The Collection

A library’s circulation policies for special collection materials are restricted to promote preservation and conservation. While circulation tallies are often important in justifying the existence of a collection to administration, preserving a collection and allowing unfettered access to it are mutually exclusive policies. The literature suggests that three criteria need to be taken into consideration when implementing rules for the circulation of special collections.

1. Circulation can be restricted to special clientele or for use in the building only.
2. The collection can be housed in closed stacks.
3. Users can be prohibited from the use of the original.⁴

The first two of these options are common methodologies in libraries; 100% allow only in-house circulation and 100% store materials in locked locations. Unfortunately, limiting access to these books through exhibitions or in-house circulation is quite often contrary to the artists’ intentions. Artists’ books have often been described as a truly democratic art form,⁵ a description which emphasizes their production as multiples capable of being reproduced cheaply and distributed to a wide audience.

Expanding Access

New technology could be used to improve access to artists’ books. An automated Web exhibition or visual catalog could take the place of the original as an alternative to restricted access. Through promotion of rare and special items within the library collection via a Web page, a digital surrogate can increase access without compromising preservation concerns.

The argument for image-based access to artists’ books is supported by the fact that they are art objects as much as books, deserving more than just a catalog entry. An automated image catalog would also greatly enhance the ability to browse or search for particular artists’ books.

Several respondents noted that their visual searching aids, which are mostly notebooks with photographs and descriptions, do indeed enhance the patrons’ abilities to search. Since visual aids are in use by some of the surveyed libraries, the benefits of being able to search for a piece of art by visual means is intuitively perceived by some as superior to relying on words alone. Creating catalogs using images of artists’ books would be a major way of increasing access to and promoting the use of these collections while at the same time aiding in their preservation.

Expanded Description

Five libraries included in the survey mentioned some sort of in-house finding aid to assist users in locating or researching artists’ books. These finding aids varied widely in format, from a list kept in a notebook to an automated catalog specifically designed for artists’ books. Laurie Whitehill Chong of the Rhode Island School of Design Library notes: “We do have two in-house-produced finding aids for greater access to our artists’ books. One is a set of notebooks kept at Reference with photocopied images from each book, a copy of the shelf-list card and a detailed checklist of visual characteristics for almost every book in the collection. We also have a digital file of scanned color images from each book in our collection...”⁶

Stand-alone departmental catalogs or paper supplements provide additional means of access to and promotion of an institution’s artists’ books collection as well as augmenting a simple cataloging record.

Much of the literature on cataloging art materials points to the limitations of trying to manipulate the description of visually-oriented materials into a mold more appropriate for standard books and related documents. The ARLIS-L survey attempted to determine the use of AACR2 and LCSH as cataloging standards versus other alternatives. Specifically, the question asked was, “Do you catalog your artists’ books according to AACR2/LCSH standards? Yes/No, if no, please briefly describe your cataloging method.” Out of twenty-seven libraries which completed surveys, only two libraries did not catalog according to these standards.⁷

Existing somewhere between an art object and a regular book, artists’ books present unique challenges to the cataloging librarian. Standard cataloging procedures for monographs are sufficiently robust in many areas, but certain aspects, such as an artists’ book’s physical description, are problematic. Most catalogers place a significant emphasis on the use of prose notes within a cataloging record to describe the unique qualities of artists’ books.

Standardization

Standardization is an issue in the cataloging of artists’ books because no standards have been developed specifically for them.⁸ As
a result, most catalogers adhere to AACR2 standards to maintain consistency and use prose notes to indicate the unique qualities present in an artist’s book. Both Timothy Shipe and Simon Ford point to the importance of standards in cataloging artists’ books. Shipe states: “...as libraries become more and more interdependent and as our sharing of resources becomes more and more developed, the importance of shared standards increases. The rules for bibliographic description (AACR2) and the subject thesaurus (the Library of Congress Subject Headings) are the agreed-upon standards that we can no longer do without. I frankly do not see a possibility that academic libraries collecting artists’ books will be able to accept different cataloging standards defined by a group of subject specialists for a relatively narrow range of materials.”

Although current practices are mostly adequate for cataloging artists’ books, it might be helpful to define some sort of vocabulary for the description of these materials despite the difficulties inherent in such a variety of formats and variations.

There seem to be three possibilities for the way in which cataloging artists’ books will proceed. The first is that artists’ books will be cataloged in the same manner as other library materials following AACR2/LCSH standards. The second possibility is that artists’ books may be cataloged in a specialized system tailored to artists’ books only. The third solution may be a combination of the first two. This is already possible, as noted by Shipe, when using the MARC format: “The MARC record structure can accommodate any number of specialized thesauri and local classification systems.” Ford suggests a combination of the first two options but cautions that, “Standards are vital if information is to be shared and it is therefore important that, whatever option is chosen, libraries continue using and developing agreed standards and authorities such as AACR2 and the MARC format for bibliographic description.”

Providing access to art objects via a bibliographic description is not a simple task. Standardization of vocabulary is only one issue facing catalogers who must create records for artists’ books. As digitization becomes more efficient and less costly, however, the merger of cataloging records with images will become a more realistic possibility for libraries. As a result artists’ books collections will no longer be the “hidden treasures” of art libraries.

Perspectives

In addition to published sources and the ARLIS-L survey, distributors, dealers, or advocates have provided us with invaluable learning opportunities. The following are excerpts from interviews with Max Shumann, manager of Printed Matter (an artist’s book distributor in New York City), Edwina Leggett of Califa Books (San Francisco), Joanne Paschall of Nexus Press (Atlanta, Georgia), and Judith Hoffberg of Umbrella, a review source for artists’ books. Interviews were conducted by telephone on several dates in February and March of 1999.

QUESTION: How do you define artists’ books?

Shumann: In the broadest sense artists’ books are experimental publications by artists. It’s a public form of art, distributed to many people and personal at the same time... Artist’s book is definitely a flexible term, describing works open to experimentation.

Paschall: Artists’ books are original works of art which utilize the structure of the book, with the structure of the book serving as an integral element in the expression of its content. Artists books are a democratic medium.

Hoffberg: I’d never define artists’ books in the sense that they are constantly evolving. A definition would make rigid that which is absolutely flexible. An artist’s book is a work of art made by an artist. That’s easy. It has ‘bookness,’ a sequence of ideas, thoughts put together by structure. You must be able to read a book, with hands, eyes, heart ‘bookness.’

QUESTION: What aesthetic elements are essential to artists’ books?

Shumann: Successful artists’ books tend to take into consideration formal aesthetic qualities, sequence, the space of the book, time as a factor, and a social sense, that is, its relation to a broader context. The artist’s book serves as a personal mode of expression, but still must have an awareness, a consciousness of the world around it.

QUESTION: What new directions do you see for artists’ books?

Leggett: Trends in the past fourteen years have included a greater receptivity to a variety of structures. A recent trend in artists’ books has been more experimental form. One example are books coming out of Flying Fish Press, such as tunnel books and their newest book, Bon-bon-mot, a box of little books.

Paschall: There will always be the intimacy of the book. People may use it differently; digital books may become better developed and people seem to use more and more information that comes quickly as sound bites. But there will always be a book for the sustained, pleasurable, sensual experience that only a book can provide. If anything, digital books may make books more famous and more of an art form. For example, audio books haven’t taken books away. I admit to being absolutely obsessed with the book as a structure.

QUESTION: What role do art libraries play in collecting artists’ books?

Shumann: Art libraries have been an important early supporter. Different departments of art museums like prints and photography have also been collectors. All libraries (especially public and university libraries) should have artists’ book collections as an interesting branch of history.

Leggett: Art libraries could do more to make new acquisitions known by having constantly changing exhibitions.

Paschall: Art libraries are very important and an appropriate home for collections. There artists’ books are preserved for history, for the public memory. University and college collections are prompted by curriculum. Librarians have been enlightening each other. They’re a little like lemmings. They see one person do something and they follow. Sometimes artists’ books make librarians uncomfortable because of the difficulty in cataloging them and their nonstandard size and format. For example, Ed Rush’s books are known to have been cataloged as ‘real estate.’

QUESTION: What advantages do artists’ books have as a medium for artistic expression? Drawbacks?

Leggett: They encompass every artistic medium...a little like opera.
QUESTION: How would you describe the place of artists’ books in the art world?

Paschall: There are painters who make books, sculptors who make books—artists’ books cross all media. I have to say I am a bit tired of artists’ books as ‘add-ons’: ‘I am a painter and I made this book.’ We are also ready to have new changes made in art curriculum; artists’ books need their own category. Too often artists’ book programs are stuck unto printmaking. It is a strong enough area of activity that it deserves its own focus. Books have such an infinite capability as an important container for information that it makes sense for artists’ books to hold their own.

QUESTION: And finally, what do you think about the status of artists’ books today?

Hoffberg: Now they are made better. Artists understand materials, technology, and structure better. These things are being taught. People should understand bookmaking as a craft and know how to bind before beginning to understand innovation. Artists are developing a better understanding of how a book works. You don’t have to make a pretty book.

There’s an imbalance when you’re working with technology. There’s no smell, no sound, no intimate one-to-one. Artists’ books reach an audience of one, unless it’s an exhibit. People love to look eye-to-eye at a book. Books relate to our body and have a quality of tactility (touch) to them. I’ve come across some wonderful e-books on the net. Delicious salivation. My only regret about them is that I can only turn ‘pages’ with a mouse. I’m not against them at all. A librarian at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago has been collecting really wonderful Web sites... it’s really commendable to do this.

Reading is changing. I read when I feel like cheering myself up. This is becoming a time of multimedia and some people will never read a book. Things like hypertext are playful, enjoyable, and informative, but not aesthetically lasting. The physicality of an artist’s book is important. Something transforms you. There’s a tactility, an “ah-ha” experience. You can do it with multimedia environments. The computer is a translation of place. The book is a performance piece—the senses are involved. There’s a focused sensory titillation, a deep immersion that’s part of a book.

New technology, computers and text, are sometimes playing games with typography and not taking the reader into account. I love texts that play games with each other, but I’m talking about stiff, over-designed typography. There’s a pleasure of sitting down with a book. They’re portable, duplicatable, they die, they’re wonderful. Sort of like a treasure box of wonderful things that came before.

Libraries are becoming more like museums with special collections that are segregated. They are treating artists’ books like rare books, as untouchable by human hands. That is why I won’t do shows under glass, except in special circumstances. Exhibits of artists’ books should be eye-catching, sucking in audiences and making them realize their love of the medium. Artists’ books should be a part of every art library budget.¹

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Notes


2. Preservation measures could be taken on an institution-wide basis in these cases, but it is doubtful they would be as stringent as those needed for one-of-a-kind, rare, or fragile items.


7. One survey did not answer the question.

8. There are some guidelines developed by the ARLIS/UK & Eire Committee on Cataloguing and Classification, 1987-88, titled Descriptive Cataloguing of Artists’ Books. These guidelines were designed “in conjunction with AACR2.” The extent to which the guide is used is unknown.


10. Shipe notes the advantages (and disadvantages) to these first two possibilities, op.cit., 23.

