

What Role do Artists' Books Play in Art Libraries?

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The priorities of art libraries inherently align with the objectives of their respective institution, whether that be an art library serving the needs of a University's art curriculum or an art library accommodating the research needs of a museum. In general, libraries these days engage in more than housing books and providing information to their constituents. Increasingly, libraries are stepping out of their traditional roles and making space for conversations and engagement with the wider community. In doing so, an effective art library should have collections which reinforce this approach and at the same time support institutional needs. For this reason, introducing or maintaining artists' books in an art library's collection can be valuable. Due to their interactive and conceptual nature, contemporary artists' books have the potential to be used in creating thought-provoking conversations, which in turn present opportunities for the library to expand and build services around them. In the past decades, a rise in production of artists' books through independent publishing has cemented their relevancy. Their presence in art libraries are unavoidable for those who want to keep their collections up to date. As a result, evaluating their role in an art library is crucial to understanding their value.

Before examining the role artist's books play as part of an art library's collection, a look into their history and evolution throughout the past few centuries can help distinguish their transformation in the world of books and contemporary arts. In general, artists throughout the world have utilized the book medium as a form of expression for centuries. Most recently, the development of artists' books in the 20th century was influenced by advancements in technology and methods which allowed them to be created with greater ease. Their evolution

is distinguished by the several methods artists have manipulated the book format, especially in innovative ways. For example, the earliest work recognized in relation to artists' books is the work of artist William Blake (1757-1827), whose method of illuminated printing allowed him to take control of both image and text without requiring the services of a letterpress, a process, which would have been required at the time. (Drucker, 2004) The resulting authority over his artistic output is a quality reminiscent of today's artists' books because artists typically possess full control over the entire design of the end product. Subsequently, the introduction of the *livre d'artiste*, an illustrated book, in the early 1900's is suggested to be one of the earliest productions which combined "the work of a visual artist and the book format" (Palacios, n.d.). In 1900, the *livre d'artiste* was made popular by Ambroise Vollard, who was one of the first to publish a book in this manner when he commissioned artist Pierre Bonnard to combine his illustrations with the text of poems by Paul Verlaine. (*Livre d'artiste*, n.d.) Vollard went on to create additional *livre d'artistes* with notable artists and influenced other creators into the 1930s. The exquisitely made *livre d'artiste* is said to be a forerunner to artists' books because of their use of spotlighting both visual imagery with written work, however the books themselves "stop just at the threshold of the conceptual space in which artists books operate today" (Drucker, 2004, p.3). Exploration into the evolution of artists' books would not be complete without mentioning the avant-garde movements of the 20th century, which saw various artists use the book medium as a means of expressing their thoughts and ideas. This included artists from movements such as Russian Futurism, Expressionism, Surrealism, and Dadaism, with their use of readily and cheap material, they invite comparison to a proportion of artists' books created cheaply today for ease of distribution. Ultimately, contemporary artists' books began

to flourish in the 1960s with notable works by Ed Ruscha and Dieter Roth. Today, they are characterized by their predominant support of the democratic multiple, eclectic formats, diverse use of methods, conceptual themes, and where the “book is a work of art in itself” (Kulp, 2005, p.5). Because artists’ books come in various styles, what is most special about their object-ness is their ability to both tell a story and make people question their substance both visually and through text form, unlike traditional monographs in a library.

By outlining the evolution of artists working with the book format in recent history, we can observe the framework in which artists’ books developed. This is significant for establishing their relevance in contemporary arts and strengthens their valuable role in a modern art library. In respect to this observation, artists’ books by nature transform everything that is expected of a book medium, but this also lends to their effectiveness as not only a unique object but also a great tool for teaching. For instance, content found in artist’s books widely provide a range of conceptual subject matter which is of foremost value in an academic and museum environment. Ideally, the collection development of artists’ books should include stimulating material which can lead to conversations and engagement with the public, students, librarians, and faculty members. In support of education, take for example, Franklin & Marshall College, where through the partnering of a librarian and professor, a collection of artists’ books was curated containing examples of creative structure in books to inspire the travel-journal projects of students in an intermediate French language course. This collaboration led to further participation by the library through the involvement of a guest lecture on artists’ books, individual technical consultations, group critiques and an exhibition of the students’ journals. (Kulp, 2015) Essentially, the integration of artists’ books led to both student-library & faculty-

library relationships, which are imperative to the continuous growth and outreach of the library. In a similar way, the library found further opportunity to showcase artists' books when the librarian once again partnered up with a professor's liberal arts class and guest lectured on the photographic content in artists' books by utilizing photo-based artist publications to support the lecture. Considering these two examples, we can start to comprehend how artists' books can support teaching, education, and creating relationships outside the library simply due to their innate characteristics. Kulp (2015, p. 101) suggests the integration of artists' books into an academic curriculum can help "teach critical thinking, encourage discovery of interdisciplinary connections, and prompt consideration of relationships between text and image and form."

In a comparable manner, artists' books are also functional in the support of institutional programming. For instance, they can be instrumental in playing a part in curated exhibitions, whether that be in relation to a role in a museum exhibition or alternatively even a rotating exhibition put on by the academic art library itself to create awareness of their collections. To demonstrate the former, the Seattle Art Museum Library selected the artists' book *Biosphere* by Ginger Burrell along with a few others to take part of an exhibition with themes on the Anthropocene and the climate crisis. (*An Artists' Book Exhibition Goes Virtual*, n.d.) The use of artists' books in this case, demonstrates how they do not only cater to art programs, but their diverse content matter works just as well with museum exhibitions in connection to contemporary issues. At the same time, partaking in exhibitions helps bring awareness to collections, and further attract patrons to the services provided by art libraries. This dual effectiveness is arguably the best attribute of artists' books. Subsequently, in respect to creative

strategies for outreach, the implementation of artists' books is conducive for developing public lectures or workshops. Specifically, Callaway (2017, p.37) points out these types of books "easily lend themselves to educational programs for all ages". In particular, artist books can be used in events which are programmed around the book as a form. Such was the case with a family art workshop designed for a younger audience by the Museum of Modern Art, which centered around the exploration of their artists' book collection, education on book formats, materials, and subjects, and instruction on creating a mixed media book for the participants. (Family Art Workshops, n.d.) This kind of programming targets community building which is crucial for fostering a connection between the public and the institution. The possibilities are endless for programming centered around artists' books and can present alternative choices for the path libraries want to follow.

Fundamentally, artists' books collected by art libraries are not without potential challenges. As one can imagine, artists' books are notoriously difficult to catalog because of their inherent construction in different formats and materials, not to mention the scope of genre's they accommodate. Chemero et al. (2000, p.23) explains "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." Therefore, librarians in possession of artists' books are challenged to accurately construct catalogue records to facilitate the retrieval and access of these books. This is essential for patron access and is key to the success of artists' books in both the art library and in the burgeoning digital landscape. Consequently, artists' books also face the challenge of gaining institutional support for collection development and most necessary the acquiring of funding or

budget space. Understandably smaller art libraries may not be able to incorporate the rather more expensive versions of artists' books and make do with the democratically made editions. (Chemero et al., 2000) Just as importantly, once in circulation the balance of preservation and conservation efforts surrounding artists' books is imperative for a form of expression, which unlike an artwork, is meant to be interacted with and inspected. Despite being objects prominent in the contemporary art market for their hybrid nature between book and art form, acceptance of the value of artists' books may hinder their future in art libraries. Therefore, continual awareness about their relevance and worth in different scenarios should be an objective of any art library which seeks to collect them and use them for the roles previously described.

In Still *"Choosing our Futures"* by Neal (2015), the author reflects on the future of academic libraries, and towards the end of his observations inquires, "Can we respond to the "human" objectives of our users, that is success, productivity, progress, relationships, experiences, and in impact?" Keeping that in mind, I would propose artists' books in art libraries are the instruments which can satisfy the "human" objectives of the user. Ultimately, a library that adds artists' books to their collection does so in order to further institutional needs which fundamentally are user needs, because the library first and foremost serves the user. From their use as educational tools, artists' books help foster interrelationships between student users, staff, faculty, and the wider public. This is essential for libraries stepping out of their traditional roles in creating more substantial relationships, apart from the exchange of information. Furthermore, programming designed around artists' books, creates experiences for users and offers librarians the opportunity to showcase their skills and knowledge. Lastly, for libraries to

create an impact on users, artists' books can be utilized for their conceptual and diverse subject matter in discussing issues important to the community and forge a space for libraries in the grander community. Taking all things into consideration, artists' books should be collected in art libraries, for the multifaceted roles they offer and for the sake of users and institutional objectives.

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