

Collecting 'the now'

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Is it, should it be, the responsibility of an art librarian to document and collect 'the now'? There are obvious pros and cons of this – the inevitable value-judgments, the expensive errors of unnecessary acquisition or omission, the labour involved, deviation from the institutional mission, etc. The author explores a personal journey through the acquisition of artists' books and multiples, defending a role for the art librarian in the interstices of curatorship and the art world as it actually happens.

Reviewing recently the exhibition, *Materializing 'Six years': Lucy R. Lippard and the emergence of conceptual art* at the Brooklyn Museum (September 14 2012 – February 3 2013), I was struck by the amount of materials borrowed from libraries and archives. It was almost as if the institutional curatorial world was slow to grasp what conceptual art was and that the documentation, which was both the origin and trace of the work, was worth collecting.¹ A little coda exhibition outside the Brooklyn Museum Library (as well as its loans to the exhibition) reinforces this point. Of course, Lippard's *Six years* is a bibliography of sorts and one would expect a predominance of printed matter in such an exhibition, but that does not undermine the case that libraries, like Brooklyn Museum Library or Chelsea School of Art, were collecting the evidence of conceptual art in the printed form at the time, and that some of these now have the status of artworks, whilst curatorial departments of museums and galleries seemed to have missed them for whatever reasons. There is a tradition for this urge to document the contemporary: in the 1950s and 1960s staff of the Frick Art Reference Library, otherwise known for its holdings of pre-Second World War materials on art in the 'Western tradition' were collecting contemporary

documentation of gallery exhibitions in New York: if there was no catalogue, they would effectively make a surrogate from the price list, invitation card and reviews.

Even if no other institution is collecting these types of materials, is it the responsibility of a library to collect them? I make a difference between collecting them at all and collecting them later. This is an important distinction to make. Many libraries and archives collect what I call 'pre-formed' collections. An example would be the football fanzines that the British Library acquired from a collector in the late 1990s on the initiative of Tom French, then Head of Modern British Collections. These would not have come to the British Library easily through Legal

Deposit and I suspect that, even if they did, they would not have been retained at the time. The value of this approach is that somebody else – a dealer or collector – does the laborious and very specialized work of collecting. It could also be argued that the passing of time also allows for some critical distance so that the 'value' of a movement, artwork or artist can be established. The philosopher R. G. Collingwood (1889–1943) in his posthumously

Cover of Lucy Lippard's *Six years* (1973).

Six Years: The dematerialization of the art object from 1966 to 1972: a cross-reference book of information on some esthetic boundaries: consisting of a bibliography into which are inserted a fragmented text, art works, documents, interviews, and symposia, arranged chronologically and focused on so-called conceptual or information or idea art with mentions of such vaguely designated areas as minimal, anti-form, systems, earth, or process art, occurring now in the Americas, Europe, England, Australia, and Asia (with occasional political overtones), edited and annotated by Lucy R. Lippard.

published *The idea of history* (1945) paraphrased the historical errors listed by Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), including what has been called ‘the error of proximity’ where the contemporary witness may not know what he/she is witnessing or its significance, just as soldiers on a battlefield may not know what is happening – in the ‘fog of war’.²

But there are also downsides to this retrospective collection: you are reliant on the activities of others (who might themselves be subject to the ‘error of proximity’) and their views of what is or is not significant; and perhaps, worse of all, the materials may by then have developed into a marketable commodity putting up the price considerably – and some of the material might have been free at the time anyway. I remember a colleague querying whether £50 was a justifiable expenditure on a copy of *Mud hand prints* (1984) by Richard Long, published by Coracle Press in an edition of 100: in retrospect this was quite a bargain financially but also in the use I made of it in exhibitions and in the artists’ books seminar that I ran at Chelsea for over ten years. Above all there is the question: what did the collector miss?

Should the art librarian collect contemporary documentation at all? This will depend on the mission of the library or institution. You could argue that the librarian of a national library or a national art library should be doing precisely that, but maybe not the librarian of an art school, where you might be accused

of diverting book funds away from supporting the students and staff. My defence at Chelsea was a) the materials were either very cheap or free b) they documented artists and events that students and staff were interested in c) I assumed future users would be interested in handling the real objects and that the library would not be able to afford them in ten or twenty years time. Obviously, I may have made mistakes of omission and commission, but my acquisitions for the special collections of Chelsea School of Art/Chelsea College of Art & Design have stood the test of time, not least in their exhibition histories and their use in the related programme of Donald Smith’s ChelseaSpace.³ They themselves have become again part of art history.

Collecting artists’ books

This area of collecting has perhaps proved to be the most contentious for art librarians in museums where there have been tensions between the library and curatorial departments. It is perhaps not coincidental that the first large art library collections of artists’ books in the UK were at the former Manchester Polytechnic and Chelsea School of Art and not initially at museums. Whilst there is obviously overlap between these collections, each had a different thrust – Manchester had a greater interest in design and thus



Bob & Roberta Smith, *I payed Bob & Roberta Smith £4.99 for this?* (1999)

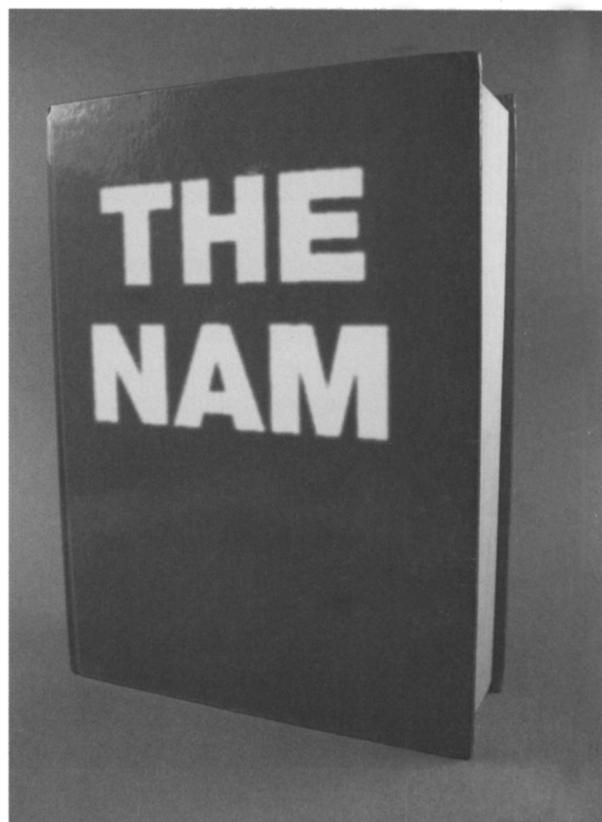
the private press movement(s), whilst Chelsea was interested in the output of contemporary artists and giving art students the opportunity to see the potential of this area in terms of their own work.

When I started at Chelsea in 1978, my predecessor Clive Phillpot, who had been involved with both the British Council (1975) and Arts Council (1976) exhibitions of artists' books had collected around 150 examples of British, European, and American artists' books. It already was a collection of impressive coverage but there were gaps – I don't think Sol LeWitt was represented at all.

A gap-analysis is rather easy to make though the literature on the subject was still relatively underdeveloped at the time. But how should one make the decision to buy one new artist's book rather than another, especially given limited funding? The successful exploitation of the book format – the codex – by an artist became the main driver for the Chelsea collection: why did an artist – like Ed Ruscha or Sol LeWitt – make the decision to make an artist's book rather than a painting, sculpture, print, installation or do a performance? And then there were the artists who had abandoned other media to work as conceptual, land artists etc. and used the book as a way of reaching an audience.

Collecting the now, the librarian or other collector has an advantage. The artist is still alive and can be interviewed, and the decisions about the intention, choice of format, making and distribution can be explored and hopefully documented. I have been reviewing artists' books for *Art Monthly* since 1996, and I have been writing basically the same review: it involves handling the item, understanding why and how it was made and how it adds to our knowledge of the world.⁴ It is a lot easier to do this alongside the creator. It is also a good opportunity to ask the artist for permission to digitize the cover or an opening.

But there are real disadvantages to the 'real presence' of the artist. Making the decision not to buy the item in front of the creator is difficult and some librarians are not prepared to make it and insist the book is left or sent by post or other delivery method. Library school training does not help you with this situation. At Chelsea or the British Library, I never avoided this situation but developed tactics to deal with it. Being confident in the scope of the collection is helpful which gives an impersonal rigor to the decision-making. Being able to suggest other possible collections where the book might be in scope and giving contact information also helps. In one case I even had the temerity to suggest that the content and purpose of the artist's book would work better on the web – it did and I am now a friend of the artist. Yet there remains an ethical question that troubles a



Fionna Banner, *The Nam* (1997).

number of librarians in this situation: should a librarian be making judgements that are ultimately aesthetic?

There are times when collection development gives way to the collecting instinct and the desire for completion, so I would have to have the very latest Ian Hamilton Finlay book or proposal. I suppose this does not matter unduly as long as you are conscious that this is what you are doing and how vulnerable this makes you.⁵ My last caveat is that there is a danger of collecting for oneself as against for the institution. Many museums do not allow staff to collect in the areas in scope for their institutions in case there is competition at auction or with dealers. But many libraries do not have this condition of service. In my own case, my own collecting of artists' books resulted in many of my books ending up in the collections of first Chelsea School of Art and then the British Library. But I suppose it is better that way around.

Artists' multiples

On first appearances, why should an art library be collecting artists' multiples? If you define the artist's multiple as a limited edition artwork, separate to the print or sculpture edition, why would an art library start to collect them? But art libraries already contain them: the front coated paper cover of *Art News*, vol.

64, no. 10 (February 1966) is a four-colour offset lithograph of Claes Oldenburg's 'Airflow' box.⁶ There is also overlap with artists' books: Fionna Banner's *The Nam* (1997) is also a multiple. It is insistently an object, weighing in at 2.3 kilograms and was probably part of an exhibition at the Frith Street Gallery, London, in 1997 where a large number of copies were displayed on industrial shelving. Retrospectively, I could argue that collecting artists' multiples was following out some inherent logic in the existing collection.

I am not sure what the first multiple I collected but I think it was Sophie Calle's *L'homme au carnet* (1989), published by Galeries Aubes, Montreal, an edition of 200, an intervention in *Libération* newspapers between 2 August and 28 September 1989 with the additional printing of one US dollar images. So here again is a link with print and publications. My interest in artists' multiples also reflected what was happening in the art world. Since the Whitechapel Art Gallery exhibition *[to infinity]: new multiple art* in 1970, the artist's multiple had almost disappeared from sight, but the Young British Artists (YBA) 'movement' saw a revival with Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas's 'The Shop' (1992) and Sarah Staton's 'Supastore' (1993-98) and 'The Store and More' (1998-9): I was trying to document what was going on the assumption that not only current students and staff but future ones would want to see this phenomenon. A 1998 exhibition that I curated at the then London Institute Gallery, *Multiple choice: artists' multiples in the collection of Chelsea College of Art and Design Library*, was an opportunity to publicize the collection, and with a commission to write a book *Artists' multiples*, published in 2001, from Ashgate, the collection was supported by the research programme of Chelsea. We are into another territory, where the librarian intersects with researcher and curator. And some would maintain we should not go there.

Looking back from New York, and an institution – the Frick Art Reference Library – which prioritizes content over carrier, my Chelsea experiences seem an eccentric episode. But looking back, the library's prestige amongst its students, staff and the art world was extremely high. And it still is.

Here in New York, I am also responsible for the Center for the History of Collecting and recently working on a lecture on the history of the history of collecting for the Hillwood Art Gallery at Long Island University, I came across a quotation by Gerald Reitlinger (who incidentally left an extraordinary collection of Middle Eastern ceramics and Persian miniatures to the Ashmolean, Oxford).⁷ Referring to the exit of old master paintings from the market as they were bought by or given to museums, and

leading potentially to the end of collecting old master paintings at least, he remained optimistic that collecting was part of the human condition: 'To collect nothing at all is to descend below the level of magpies and marmots.'⁸ At least that gives me an excuse.

References

1. Catherine Morris and Victor Bonin, eds., *Materializing 'Six years': Lucy R. Lippard and the emergence of conceptual art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012).
2. R. G. Collingwood, *The idea of history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1945, rev. ed. 1993), 69.
3. CHELSEA space, www.chelseaspace.org/archive-index.html
4. The process of cataloguing an artist's book is very helpful in this, including the mundane tasks of measuring the item, counting the pages. See Maria White... et al., *Artists' books: a cataloguers' manual* (London: ARLIS/UK & Ireland, 2006) and my review, 'Artists' books', *The Art Book*, 14, no. 1 (2007).
5. Stephen Bury, '1, 2, 3, 5: building a collection of artists' books', *Art Libraries Journal*, 32, no. 2 (2007).
6. Stephen Bury, *Artists' multiples, 1935-2000* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 52-3.
7. Center for the History of Collecting, www.frick.org/research/center
8. Gerald Reitlinger, *The economics of taste*, vol. 1 (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1961), 238.

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