

Something Old and Something New: Building a Special Collection of Artists' Books

Anna Korus, Library Manager, Centre for the Arts and Communication.

Roxy Garstad, Collection Assessment Librarian, City Centre Campus.

MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

Summary

This poster will examine how library staff at a Canadian university built a special collection of artists' books in a very short time, with a limited budget, in order to support the Fine Art and Design Studies programs. The collection was built from newly-discovered forgotten files, from a careful examination of the existing library holdings, from purchases through used-book suppliers, and from supplementation with new books.

Introduction



Who are we?

MacEwan University offers more than 65 programs, consisting of undergraduate degrees, certificates, diplomas, and degree-transfer programming. The Faculty of Fine Arts and Communications is dedicated to the visual and performing arts, offering diploma programs in Fine Art, Design Studies, Arts and Cultural Management, Theatre Arts and Production, along with the Bachelor of Communication Studies and the Bachelor of Music in Jazz and Contemporary Popular Music programs.

Why collect artists' books in the digital age?

To bring awareness to the artist's book genre and the importance of a book, for *"the death of the book is resisted and denied at least as much as it is forecast"* (Pearson, 2012, p.12).

Our objectives

- To collect non-conventional books *"distinguished by the fact that they sit provocatively at the juncture where art, documentation, and literature all come together"* (Phillpot, as cited in Burkhart, 2006, p. 248).
- To have a collection that is:
 - Broad in scope, while adhering to the definition of an artist's book.
 - Representative of history.
 - Consisting of a wide range of examples, different types of narrative, and different formats.
 - International in scope, including unlimited and limited editions.
- To make acquisitions as quickly as possible, in the 2014 budget year.
- To purchase inexpensive items.

Literature Review

Key elements in collecting artists' books include:

- Tying the collection to the curriculum (Kulp, 2005).
- Including a variety of formats in the collection (Wilson, 2002).
- Restricting access to the collection (Bury, 2007; Chemero, Seigel, & Wilson, 2000).
- Creating information-rich catalogue records (Farman, 2007; Kulp, 2005).
- Including artists' books in a collection development policy (Bury, 2007; Wilson, 2002).

Methods

Budget: Estimate: \$2000-3000. Actual: \$7000.

Two key factors allowed library staff to purchase artists' books in a timely manner, with few restrictions:

- Internal.* The budgeting process changed at MacEwan from that of program-based allocations to a consolidated, centralized collections budget. This proved to be a favourable environment for experimental collecting. Without the restrictions of program-based allocations, library staff were free to collect any items that were individually worth less than \$400.

Program based allocations → Consolidated centralized collections budget

- External.* During the collecting period, the higher price of oil in commodity-rich Alberta put no major restrictions on the library's budgeting process.

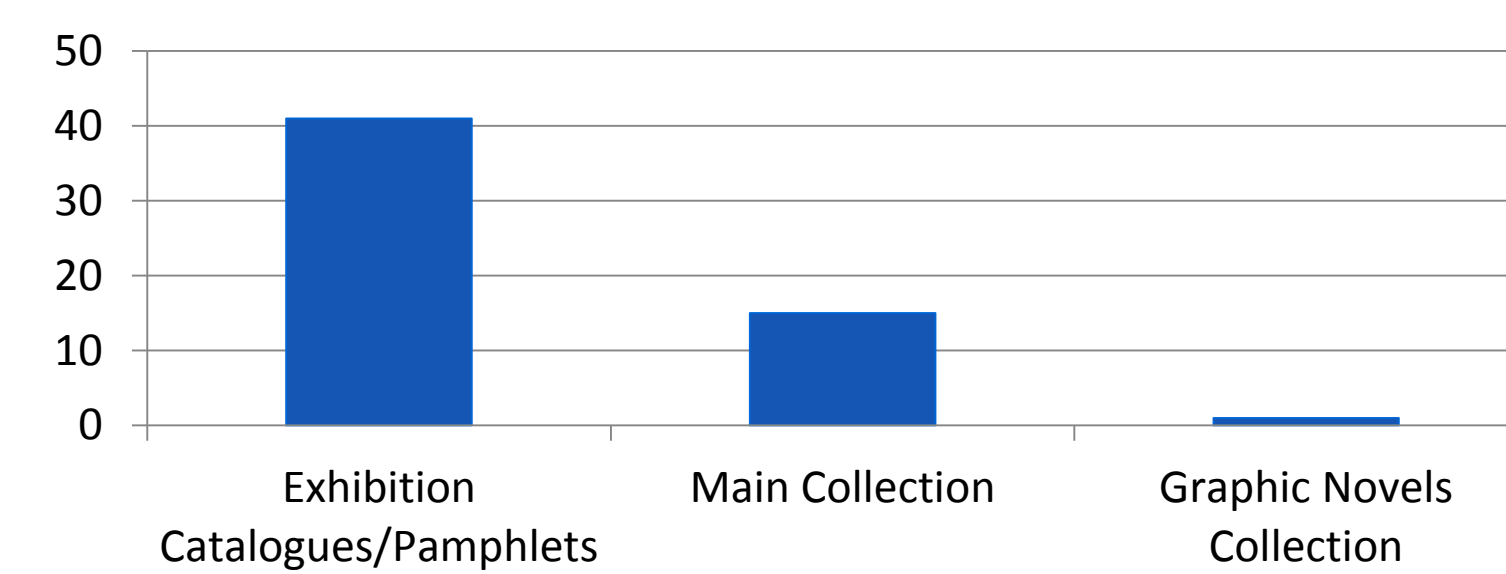
Site visits

Two artists' books collections in Alberta were examined:

- Paul D. Fleck Library & Archives, The Banff Centre
- Bruce Peel Special Collections Library, University of Alberta

Collection assessment

A careful assessment of the existing collection at MacEwan University was undertaken. The following collections were surveyed, with the graph indicating the number of items found within each collection:



All of these titles were reassigned to the artists' books collection.

Selection

The Library Liaison to the Fine Art and Design Studies programs:

- Examined reviews of artists' books, paying close attention to reputation, location, and affiliation.
- Contemplated purchasing a variety of formats, materials, and techniques.
- Considered cost, aesthetic value, and craftsmanship.
- Supplemented with facsimiles.

Acquisitions

Purchases were made from:

- New book vendors: Art Metropole, Printed Matter, Ivory Press, Vamp & Tramp Booksellers, and Granary Books.
- Used books vendors: AbeBooks and Amazon.ca.
- Galleries: 23 Sandy Gallery (Portland, OR) and the National Museum of Women in the Arts (Washington, DC).

Cataloguing and processing

All titles are catalogued and searchable by the subject heading, "artists' books." Most of the titles are not labeled, nor are they barcoded, for preservation and aesthetic purposes.

Results

There are approximately 200 titles in the collection.

Artists represented

Michael Snow, Gilbert and George, Sophie Calle, Janet Cardiff, M. Vaughn-James, Jenny Holzer. Cecily Moon, Barbara Kruger, John Baldessari, Alfredo Jarr, Sol LeWitt, Maurizio Nannucci, Bruce Nauman, Ed Ruscha, Claire Van Vliet, Lawrence Weiner, Emmet William, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Chuck Close, Cathryn Miller, Roman Ondak, Jannis Kounellis, Jeanne Germani, Elsi Vassdal Ellis, Paul Johnson, Tom Phillips, Daniel Spoerri, Buzz Spector, Timothy Ely, Philip Zimmerman, Keith Godard, Bill Burke, Margot Lovejoy, Susan E. King, Janet Zweig, Johanna Drucker, Anish Kapoor, Ron King, Karen Chance, Yoko Ono, Ólafur Eliasson, Vija Celmins, Bea Nettles, Warja Lavater, Dieter Roth and more.....

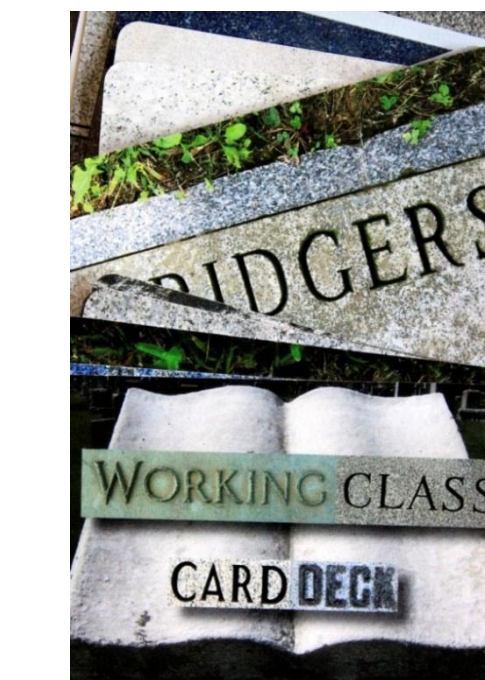
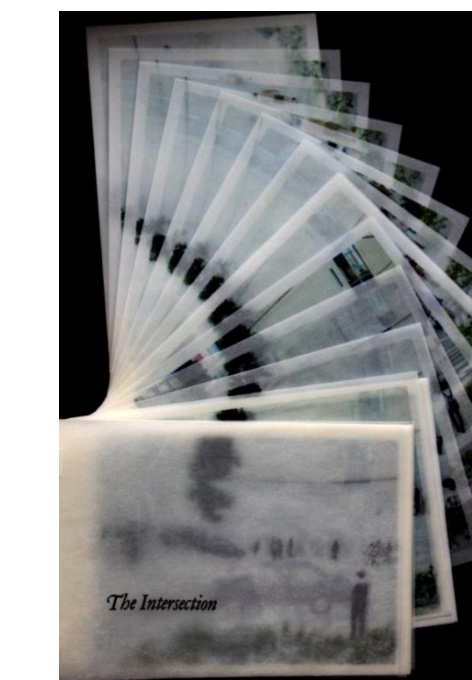
A major focus in selecting titles was to purchase books reviewed by Johanna Drucker. These are artists' books that represent:

democratic multiple
rare and/or auratic object
codex and its variations
visual form
verbal exploration
book as sequence narrative and non-narrative
agent of social change
conceptual space (performance and exhibition)
book as document
and more....

Some notable works include:

- King, Susan E. *Lessons From the South.*
- Nauman, Bruce. *LAAIR.*
- Rucha, Ed. *Twentysix Gasoline Stations.*
- Voss, Jan. *Detour.*
- Zweig, Janet. *Sheherezade.*

There is variety in format



- Ellis, Elsi Vassdal. *There Goes the Neighborhood.*
- Matsunaga, Kyoko. *The Intersection.*
- Nettles, Bea. *Working Class: Card Deck.*

New titles purchased from Amazon.ca

- Celmins, Vija. *The Stars = Al-Nujūm.*
- Kapoor, Anish. *Anish Kapoor.*
- Ólafur Eliasson. *Ólafur Eliasson: Never Tired of Looking at Each Other - Only the Mountain and I.*

Promotion and use of the collection

Patrons access the books by request, appointment, or by visiting the reference/research desk.

- Information literacy sessions have taught students how to find and use the collection, e.g. in a Design Studies class. Students appreciated handling the real items.



- The library actively encourages faculty to integrate artists' books assignments into their course curricula.
- Meetings with faculty, staff, and senior administrators have showcased the collection.
- An exhibition of artists' books has been curated in the library.



Conclusion

Major concerns:

- Space.* The cabinets and book shelves are nearly full.
- Accessibility.* Some books are stored in boxes and not available for physical browsing.
- Growth.* It may be possible to exchange materials with other libraries in the province.

Future work:

- Acquisitions will be made by attending book fairs and galleries.
- A collection policy may be written, or a section on artists' books may be included in the main collection policy.
- Staff will seek entry into the *Canadian Directory of Artists' Books.*

References

- Burkhart, A. L. (2006). "Mongrel nature:" A consideration of artists' books and their implications for art education. *Studies in Art Education*, 47(3), 248-268.
- Bury, S. (2007). 1, 2, 3, 5: Building a collection of artists' books. *Art Libraries Journal*, 32(2), 5-9.
- Chemero, A., Seigel, C., & Wilson, T. (2000). How libraries collect and handle artists' books. *Art Documentation*, 19(1), 22-25.
- Drucker, J. (2004). *The century of artists' books*. New York, NY: Granary Books.
- Farman, N. (2007). Artists' books: Managing the unmanageable. *Library Management*, 29(4/5), 319-326.
- Klima, S. (1998). *Artists' books: A critical survey of the literature*. New York, NY: Granary Books.
- Kulp, L. (2005). Artists' books in libraries: A review of the literature. *Art Documentation*, 24(1), 5-10.
- Pearson, David. (2012). *Books as history: The importance of books beyond their texts*. London, UK: British Library.
- Wilson, T. L. (2002). Collection development policies for artists' books. *Art Documentation*, 21(1), 27-29.