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Artists' Books and the Problem of Digital Preservation

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Abstract: Artists' books have become a popular genre for many institutions collecting art objects and unique books. The attempt to preserve the physical artists' books often competes with the desire to extend user access to these highly tactile works. Partial digitization of artists' books has allowed many institutions to cultivate an online presence for these collections, increasing access without compromising the physical integrity of the objects. However, creation of digital surrogates for artists' books often sacrifices the authenticity and access to the intellectual content of the work. The challenge of digital preservation for artists' books demonstrates the shortcomings of digital reformatting for works that may be intellectual and artistic.

Keywords: Artists' books, art objects and unique books, digitization, preservation strategies for artists' books

Introduction

Artists' books have been an artistic genre since the mid-20th century, but collectors and scholars have often struggled to find a suitable definition that encapsulates all works claiming the "artists' book" classification. Often characterized by their wide variety of formal qualities and their range of intellectual content, artists' books tend to be defined more by their diversity than by their uniting properties. Johanna Drucker writes that the creators of artists' books operate within a "zone of creativity," wherein the artists' book genre can be understood as a sum of its diverse creative products instead of as a set of works that contain specific formal features (Drucker, p. 2). Further, she distinguishes artists' books from other books that include heavy artistic content, claiming that an artists' book "interrogates the conceptual or material form of the book as part of its intention, thematic interests, or production activities" (Drucker, p. 3). Book artists of the 20th and 21st centuries have developed wildly diverse forms that challenge the definition of the book; some artists' books take a traditional codex form, while others take forms such as "a stack of playing cards, a flip book, a tunnel book, [or] a scroll" (Chemero, 22). The conceptual content and the amount of verbal and visual content in these works are not guided by any strict convention and thus vary widely. Artists' books are sometimes created as multiples, that is, editions, and other times are created as one-of-a-kind objects. Some artists' books are born-digital and exist exclusively in digital form. The genre of artists' books continues to expand, finding new ways to represent the book format.

In the past few decades, artists' books have become a popular collecting genre for GLAM institutions.[1] An increasing number of art museums, universities, schools of the arts, and other libraries have accrued notable collections; a few of the most prominent collections reside at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Smithsonian Libraries, University of California, Los Angeles, and the Joan Flasch Artists' Book Collection at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (Hoffberg, 4).

Despite their popularity, artists' books pose a challenge to institutions striving to balance access to and preservation of their holdings. A collection of artists' books often includes items of highly irregular size and shape, and many of the items are delicate, fragile, and rare. Created from any number of materials, including paper of various degrees of acidity, artists' books are prone to physical degradation and to wear from overuse. These items may require specialized handling, shelving, and environmental controls, and are often stored in closed stacks in special collections. As in any special collection, the preservation measures afforded in controlled storage contribute to the safety and the longevity of these materials. However, sequestering these artists' books in closed stacks limits their use and availability to researchers, visitors, and students because of the limited hours of operation that many of the libraries have. Many creators of artists' books intended the books to be handled to allow the user full access to the object; paradoxically, collecting institutions strive to protect these interactive art objects by removing them from interactive contexts. However, many of these libraries and museums create opportunities for

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1 GLAM or GLAMs is the acronym used to refer to galleries, libraries, archives and museums.

visitors to see, touch, and learn about artists' books, including "public exhibitions, tours, class visits, one-on-one consultations, and integrating collections into course programming" (Athanasiu, 337). For example, the Joan Flasch Artists' Book Collection frequently hosts hands-on exhibits that feature its artists' books, allowing viewers to handle and manipulate them (Boehme).

Many institutions have further attempted to resolve the preservation/access issue by developing finding aids and digital galleries for their artists' books. These online resources allow researchers to learn about the works in artists' books collections before visiting the institution or in lieu of visiting the institution. The resources tend to offer brief metadata about the artists' book, including a physical description, and sometimes one or more photographs of the books. Although some of these resources are collection-specific, others have been developed as larger-scale projects (such as Artists' Books DC) that aggregate item records across many institutions, facilitating the discoverability of artists' books in the collecting community at large.

Digital Preservation

Online finding aids and digital galleries facilitate user access to artists' books, but their function is not entirely interchangeable with the digital preservation of these items. Digital preservation has become a common goal or practice in many libraries (Purcell, 322). The definition of digital preservation is complex and multi-faceted. The Association for Library Collections & Technical Services offers the following short definition: "Digital preservation combines policies, strategies and actions that ensure access to digital content over time." These strategies and actions include digitization of analog material, as well as the careful organization and maintenance of digitized and born-digital content. With the exception of preserving born-digital artists' books, digital preservation of artists' books most often refers to their digitization, as well as to the management of the digital files and their associated information.

In 2004, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) endorsed digitization as an effective preservation practice for analog materials (Arthur, 171). Describing digitization as a "reformatting method" and outlining guidelines for the best capture and storage methods, ARL concluded that the production of digital surrogates, such as by scanning or photographing materials and maintaining the files digitally, contributed to the longevity of the materials' content. Digital surrogate images are more easily accessible than other reformatted surrogate images, such as microfilm. The ability to host digital images of artists' books as useful (if partial) representations of the analog works has been demonstrated in many institutions' websites.

Despite the growing prevalence of digitization for preservation, it may not always be an ideal or effective alternative to traditional preservation methods. ARL acknowledged potential challenges to long-term digital preservation concerning the ongoing technological obsolescence of digitized files, but they maintained that with proper maintenance, storage, and file migration, files could survive for long periods and be satisfactory preservation copies. Some libraries have found the digitization and storage of files at consistently high standards to be costly and time-consuming, demanding skills and technology that libraries and their staff may not possess (Herlocker, 70). In some institutions, resources must be allocated either to conservation or to digital preservation; these libraries must choose the preservation method that is the most practicable and achievable for their collection. Without the resources, digitization of artists' books may not always be a realistic goal for all libraries.

Depending on the purpose of digitization, a digital file may not be a satisfactory surrogate for the analog artists' book. Paul Conway described the difference between analog and digital preservation as the prioritization of either form or content, in that "the digital world transforms traditional preservation concepts from protecting the physical integrity of the object to specifying the creation and maintenance of the object whose intellectual integrity is its primary characteristic" (Conway, 68–9). He refers to a distinction between the materiality of the original information object and the intellectual content that digitization extracts from the material container. This is a useful notion regarding text-based information objects, in which the verbal content can be divorced from its original context, reformatted to new media, and still satisfy most users' needs for the document. However, the distinction between physical form and intellectual content becomes problematic when the physical qualities of the work determine its intellectual content. This is particularly applicable to many artists' books. A work of art that relies on the book format in its structural composition is significantly modified if its surrogate does not retain the original structural properties. A series of digital photographs or even video documentation of an artists' book, then, can capture only selected visual attributes of the work, and necessarily excludes many other sensory attributes. Thus, a digital surrogate may never be able to (and seldom does) capture the full intellectual content of the work.

Hence, the encounter with a digital surrogate may differ significantly from the encounter with the physical artists' book. Describing her memories of early interactions with digital books on tablet readers, Julie Mader-Meersman wrote: "I recall someone commenting that it was like trying to eat candy with the wrapper on—there was something sensationally unfulfilling about it. Perhaps this is the reaction many in the book arts—a place full of tactile, sensory, physical media—have had to digital media" (Mader-Meersman, 82). Although she ultimately advocates for the increased digital presence of artists' books, Mader-Meersman describes a common response to the merely visual representation of a multisensory object. In an interview, Judith Hoffberg echoed this reaction to the experience of digitized images, claiming that digital technology has "no smell, no sound, no intimate one-to-one.... Books relate to our body and have a quality of tactility (touch) to them" (Chemero, 25). Viewers cannot physically interact with a digital image of an artists' book in the ways that they could interact with the book itself. Some of these books may be easier to translate to a digital form than others, such as books in a traditional codex form compared to a folded map or a scroll. Nevertheless, even software that allows viewers to "flip" from one digital image to the next, imitating the turning of pages in a codex book, does not convey the tactile experience of this action, nor the flexibility of thumbing through the book in a nonlinear fashion. The experience of this tactile encounter with the material book may vary from one user to another. Two-dimensional photographs of three-dimensional art objects may be sufficient for researchers seeking broad information about the object, but such digitized material may not be an authentic surrogate for the original object.

ARL also expressed a concern about the authenticity of digital surrogates. It proposed a series of standards for operating digital technology and updating digital image files, and said that adhering to such standards would "ensure that images are of high quality and provide faithful representations of the original" (quoted in Arthur, 172). Despite adherence to technological standards, the achievement of a faithful representation also depends on one's definition of *authenticity*, which may not be contingent upon original intent. Roeder says that digital surrogates of artworks often imperfectly capture the work as the artist intended, and thus fall short of an authentic representation of the work itself (155). Although this definition of *authenticity* is highly subjective, Roeder states that the original artist could judge whether or not a digital surrogate of her work captures their intentions. He offered an example in which a musician observed significant disparities between different digital recordings of his music, stating that most of them did not represent his work in a way he deemed appropriate (Roeder, 156). The production of a surrogate that represents the intention of the artist may be impossible. However, the pursuit of authenticity in preserving an art object's intellectual content is likely a concern of many institutions dedicated to the stewardship of art objects. The preservation of the intellectual content of an artists' book may not be satisfactorily achieved digitally so digitizing may not always justify its expenses.

Conclusion

The digitization of artists' books may significantly extend user access, allowing viewers to experience some aspects of them that are often inaccessible when the objects are in closed stacks. This is particularly useful to remote viewers who are unable to visit institutions with collections of artists' books, and to users who wish to see artists' books that are too fragile to handle. However, the digital reformatting of artists' books is unlikely to produce an authentic or complete representation of the original work, and the usefulness of the digital surrogate for researchers may be limited. Unlike traditional books in which the text comprises most of its intellectual content, the intellectual and artistic content of an artists' book often resides in its physicality, and in the user's interaction with the object. Thus, the preservation of the intellectual content may not be possible beyond the object. In many cases, the benefits of digitization justify its implementation, but curators of artists' book collections should focus on preserving the originals. Common preservation practices can protect physical collections of artists' books (Herlocker, 68). Proper storage and handling, placing delicate books in protective sleeves or boxes, and maintaining optimal temperature, humidity, and light levels may ensure that these books stay in their best condition. Doro Boehme describes the Joan Flasch Artists' Book Collection as adhering to such preservation standards, adding that staff must continue to oversee hands-on exhibitions to encourage visitors to handle these books properly. Boehme writes that "no item has ever had to be removed from the collection due to (over-)usage," (Boehme, 39) suggesting that their preservation efforts have so far been successful. Additionally, collections must keep physical preservation copies of artists' books whenever possible.

Preserving physical artists' books in analog form protects the unique artistic elements of the works and extends their vitality, allowing them to endure many more exhibitions and one-on-one encounters. However, main-

taining originals can be challenging; artists' books are sometimes composed of ephemeral materials, and may have delicate structures. Thus the argument that digitizing the objects will cut down on use and thus promote preservation, does not necessarily hold true. Because the essence of many of these books usually cannot be captured digitally, users will still want to see the originals. Further, the delicate nature of some artists' books will make them challenging to digitize.

Librarians and curators of artists' book collections should assess the features of artists' books that are most necessary to preserve, and they should use the preservation methods that are most likely to protect these elements, which may be digital, analog, or blended.

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Bionote

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Tyne Lowe received her MLIS from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. She has worked at the Wertz Art and Architecture Library at Miami University and the Newberry Library in Chicago. She is current pursuing an MA degree in art history at Indiana University.