

# **Special Enough for Special Collections: A Case for Contemporary Artists' Books in Special Collections**

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## **Abstract**

Artists' books produced as democratic multiples are ideologically intended for placement within open stacks—freely accessible and findable by the patron through purpose or serendipity. The decision of where within libraries artists' books should live must consider the use value and implications of placing contemporary artists' books, particularly democratic multiples—whose form and cost might not otherwise warrant their inclusion—in Special Collections. Placing an item in Special Collections places some restrictions on access, which prompts the question: does placing a democratic multiple artist book in Special Collections contradict its intended use? The question is one that prevents many librarians from doing just that. This paper argues that Special Collections provides the necessary context for understanding artists' books, allowing democratic multiples to better serve their creators, institutions, and patrons in this space.

Contemporary artists' books live in a precarious state within libraries. A debate over access through placement in open stacks or Special Collections forces librarians to make a determination on the cultural value of artists' books. Many contemporary artists' books are constructed with unconventional materials or formats, and are susceptible to excessive wear or misplacement if shelved in open stacks within libraries. But many librarians stand by this placement following the rationale that artists' books are intended to be read and handled regularly by a wide audience. Democratic multiples are artists' books that are generally commercially produced in small editions. Artists' books produced as democratic multiples are ideologically intended for placement within open stacks—freely accessible and findable by the patron through purpose or serendipity. One of the greatest issues facing artists' books owned by libraries is that they require a substantial amount of context to be fully understood. Researchers who find them by chance may not find them useful without additional context. Shelved in open stacks, artists' books are placed among other books of similar subjects, though not necessarily other artists' books. Alternatively, housing artists' books in library Special Collections creates a barrier to their access, requiring the intervention of a librarian as opposed to allowing for the possibility of serendipitous discovery.

The decision of where within libraries artists' books should live must consider the use value and implications of placing contemporary artists' books, particularly democratic multiples—whose form and cost might not otherwise warrant their inclusion—in Special Collections. Placing an item in Special Collections places some restrictions on access, which prompts the question: does placing a democratic multiple artist book in Special Collections contradict its intended use? The question is one that prevents many librarians from doing just that. This paper argues that Special Collections provides the necessary

context for understanding artists' books, allowing democratic multiples to better serve their creators, institutions, and patrons in this space.

The idea that artists' books should be accessible to a wide audience is central to a democratic multiple's purpose. This intention has been a main justification for the placement of artists' books in open stacks within libraries, in order to better facilitate their availability to a greater number of people. The reality however, is that artists' books are most relevant within a much smaller cultural milieu. Writing at the time he was Director of Decker Library, Maryland Institute College of Art, Tony White's paper "From Democratic Multiple to Artist Publishing: The (R)evolutionary Artist's Book" explores the ways in which the idealistic ambitions behind democratic multiples have influenced a concern for preserving their intended use. In his argument White exposes the quandary in determining open stacks as the best location within libraries to serve a democratic purpose. He writes:

"to a wide audience" presupposes that ... democratic multiples were interesting enough that the general public would enjoy and purchase them. ... many (and perhaps most) artists' books were too esoteric for anyone other than a specialized collector, curator, librarian, or occasional curious member of the public to understand or enjoy.<sup>1</sup>

White points out as well that institutionalization of democratic multiples, through incorporation into library collections, has created an aura around them, writing, "[t]o this day, the democratic multiple continues to be idealized by each successive generation of contemporary artists interested in the populist ideal embodied in (and institutionalized by) this subset of artists' books."<sup>2</sup> Through the act of collecting, libraries add value and a sense of importance to democratic multiples, which in turn necessitates the need for additional care of these items within the collection. The "successive generation of contemporary

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<sup>1</sup> Tony White, "From Democratic Multiple to Artist Publishing: The (R)Evolutionary Artist's Book," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 31, no. 1 (May 1, 2012): 48.

<sup>2</sup> White, 47.

artists interested in the populist ideal” as White terms it, is the population of people for whom these items are most important, and do not necessarily constitute a “wide audience.” Because artists’ books require a knowledge of their production and cultural significance, placing them in open stacks to facilitate serendipitous discovery does not necessarily result in greater use. The population for whom artists’ books are important are likely to know what they are looking for; a wider audience falling upon an artists’ book by chance won’t necessarily know the value of what they are looking at.

For the audience actively searching for artists’ books, library catalogs have proved ineffective for browsing or discovery. Some institutions with artists’ books collections have attempted to provide context for their collections through online catalogs, providing access to various facets of artists’ books such as materials, binding, or production method.<sup>3</sup> As a justification for efforts in the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) library to create a book art genre heading index to provide better discovery of the library’s artists’ book collection, Mary Anne Dyer and Yuki Hibben write,

Lacking genre information in the bibliographic record, users were generally limited to searching for known artists or titles. This resulted in unproductive searches for the majority of faculty and students ... Finding artists’ books that met the needs of users and instruction sessions was highly reliant on staff knowledge of the collection.<sup>4</sup>

The problems with providing access to artists’ books experienced at the VCU library are representative of the issues faced by most libraries with artists’ book collections. Lacking a method or vocabulary for adequately describing artists’ books within a library’s catalog, the

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<sup>3</sup> Examples include Otis College of Art and Design Artists’ Book Collection, the Joan Flasch Artists’ Book Collection at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Artists’ Books at the University of Oregon Libraries, as described in Mary Anne Dyer and Yuki Hibben, “Developing a Book Art Genre Headings Index,” *Art Documentation: Bulletin of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 57–66.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Anne Dyer and Yuki Hibben, “Developing a Book Art Genre Headings Index,” *Art Documentation: Bulletin of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 59.

knowledge of librarians becomes the main resource for locating artists' book resources.

While the model of a book art genre heading at VCU library is an innovative idea, the additional staff time and specialized knowledge required to set up and maintain a project of this scope is not a realistic solution to providing better discoverability of artists' books across the board.

The reliance on librarians' knowledge of artists' books to facilitate access as described by Dyer and Hibben illustrates the contextual barriers built into the discovery of artists' books in libraries. With these barriers already in place, what difference does it make to patrons whether artists' books are located in open stacks or Special Collections? In the case of artists' books, it would seem that a location within Special Collections provides greater access through a knowledgeable mediator.

Librarians must also weigh the benefit to their own operations of housing artists' books in Special Collections. In her insightful paper "Artists' Books Collection Development: Considerations for New Selectors and Collections," D. Courtenay McLeland points out that shelving artists' books within open stacks may in fact pose a risk to the physical condition of these items. She writes: "[i]n addition to the possible deterioration of the work itself, one must consider any potential impact on items shelved next to an oddly sized artists' book or one made with unstable materials."<sup>5</sup> Seth Siegelaub's *Xerox Book*, for example, was originally produced with a simple white paper cover, leading to major structural failures in many of the copies housed in libraries. The library at Chelsea College of Art & Design, University of the Arts London was fortunate to have two copies of this important early artist book. Both copies had been rebound with library-constructed hard covers as a preventive

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<sup>5</sup> D. Courtenay McClelland, "Artists' Books Collection Development: Considerations for New Selectors and Collections," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, & Cultural Heritage* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 86.

measure to protect them from damage due to stacks use.<sup>6</sup> This intervention, though making the books in a certain sense more usable, obscured the specific form of the art objects. With two copies in its collection, the library at Chelsea College of Art & Design was able to undertake a conservation project on one, bringing it back to a form that more closely resembled the original binding. This process presented ideological issues, both in terms of erasing the evidence of the object's use, as well as its removal from the library's regular circulating collection to be placed in Special Collections.<sup>7</sup> Gustavo Grandal Montero, the librarian overseeing the conservation of Siegelau's *Xerox Book*, expressed his concern that, "having been removed from the main library collection into a special collection, now it would be treated as a precious, almost auratic object."<sup>8</sup> Aside from concerns over access when artists' books are moved from open stacks to Special Collections, the idea that items placed in Special Collections become almost too precious for use, is one that must be countered.

In our current moment, when mass produced books and digitization have become integral components of our libraries, demonstrating the value of print resources and the cost of maintaining Special Collections for researchers is vital. Eva Athanasiu's paper "Belonging: Artists' Books and Readers in the Library" investigates the challenges that emerge from placing artists' books in Special Collections, limiting access and therefore also limiting value to researchers who might be overwhelmed at the prospect of negotiating such a space. Athanasiu writes that, "GLAMs [Galleries, Archives, Museums and Libraries] continually negotiate the fine balance between preserving and engaging, a particularly

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<sup>6</sup> Gustavo Grandal Montero, Ana Paula Hirata Tanaka, and Erica Foden-Lenahan, "Defending the Aesthetic: The Conservation of an Artists' Book," *Art Libraries Journal* 38, no. 1 (January 2013): 33.

<sup>7</sup> Grandal Montero, Hirata Tanaka, and Foden-Lenahan, 34.

<sup>8</sup> Grandal Montero, Hirata Tanaka, and Foden-Lenahan, 34.

challenging project in the face of dwindling resources.”<sup>9</sup> Athanasiu is rightly concerned with the difficulty of navigating the needs of researchers while also working to preserve valuable objects within Special Collections in an environment that requires proof of value. Her assertion that a lack of engagement through barriers to access must couple concerns over preservation, however, proliferates the idea that Special Collections is a sacred space, where what Grandal Montero’s “auratic objects” are housed. If we are to combat the idea that Special Collections are sacred, inaccessible spaces, incorporating items that are more accessible and allowing them to be handled more freely, as democratic multiples are intended to be, has the potential to create a space that is less intimidating to encounter. As Dyer and Hibben have indicated, librarian intervention is often necessary for retrieval of artists’ books, and by placing them in Special Collections this already relied-upon mode of access can act as an engagement activity, serving as an entry point to increased use of Special Collections while also allowing for their better preservation.

In a response to themes discussed at the 2012 Rare Book and Manuscript Section (RBMS) preconference, John Overholt advocates for the demystification of Special Collections. Overholt argues that,

Research in primary sources is a habit that must be cultivated, all the more so in an era of convenient alternatives. ... Special collections is often an intimidating place, with elaborate rules and extra hurdles to access. That makes it crucial to reach out and demystify special collections, to convey the message: “Please touch. This is here for you. You are special enough for special collections.”<sup>10</sup>

Cultivating Special Collections that are more accessible through the incorporation of items that can be touched and experienced without fear of destroying something sacred is a crucial step in advocating for the value of Special Collections among, as Overholt calls it,

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<sup>9</sup> Eva Athanasiu, “Belonging: Artists’ Books and Readers in the Library,” *Art Documentation: Bulletin of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 34, no. 2 (September 2015): 330–31.

<sup>10</sup> Overholt, 19.

“convenient alternatives.” Democratic multiple artists’ books epitomize the kind of materials that can serve a great purpose within Special Collections. Through their intended and practical use as items meant to be handled, they are ideal introductory objects for Special Collections neophytes. Democratic multiples deserve a place in Special Collections not only as token engagement items, but because of the monetary, cultural and research value they represent. Contemporary artists’ books can thus become valuable not only in themselves, or as part of an artists’ book collection, but as tools for cultivating engaged Special Collections users.



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