

How Do Artists Use Libraries?

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The art school experience is not predicated on a prescribed body of knowledge to learn and then apply. Rather, art school presupposes a world of imaginative and intellectual approaches. Students discover these approaches through sources. These sources include contact with artists, academics, discussions with fellow students and attending talks and presentations by other students. It also involves being introduced to print and online library resources that will expand their journey of discovery. Yet studio art students do not always see how books and journals relate to their creative development as artists, often using the library only when writing assignments. Emerging contemporary artists at art school need to be engaged with current critical analyses of contemporary art practice and to develop a larger theoretical framework in which to discuss their work.

Most students tend to gravitate towards the simple Google search. Google creates a mirage of efficient discovery, but leads predominantly to freely available sources, gallery and artist websites, blogs and Tumblr. Art journals and books, exhibition catalogues and philosophy texts, which form the core of academic and professional writing about contemporary visual arts, are mostly hidden from students on our library shelves and behind paywalls. The unintended consequences of this shift in searching behaviour from the library catalogue to Google is that students have changed the sources that they use, from the published source to the web page, and this means their discovery and investigation of new art is less contextual and interpretative. They are more likely to discover a Tumblr account than an exhibition catalogue. Or they discover art through artists' websites, without the contextual information that they would get from an exhibition catalogue such as how important that artist's contribution is or whether they are a major figure, or whether it is a preliminary work. This is problematic for the art school experience which is about developing a critical language with which to frame and discuss their own and other artists' works.¹ Decontextualised sources are the antithesis of an art school education.

Many academics notice that their students are citing less credible information and engaging less with ideas found in art journals. Publishing in visual arts is still dominated by print and a lack of engagement with print materials in the library, particularly print journals, is a significant concern. Oliver Watts, the lecturer for the first year critical studies course at Sydney College of the Arts (SCA), reported to us that he saw a clear association between students who were active library users and academic performance, and argued that those students who regularly read journals wrote better, and with more developed ideas.

So the problem for students is both the decontextualisation of information sources and a lack of engagement with printed material. The library (of course!) can solve both problems.

Information in libraries is organised in a way that doesn't privilege one source over another and your pathway is not determined for you. But the library is not chaos: there are underlying structures and systems that support discovery of print materials, and art students often find

¹ The idea of studio art students needing to develop a 'critical language' comes from Garcia, Larissa, and Jessica Labatte. "Threshold Concepts as Metaphors for the Creative Process: Adapting the Framework for Information Literacy to Studio Art Classes." *Art Documentation* 34, no. 2 (2015): 235-48.

these baffling and intimidating. For example, a search for information on an Australian artist requires searching a range of subject databases, because Australian art journals are not well indexed in international art databases. Often online holdings are patchy for art journals so the student often only gets a title and journal details, sometimes an abstract, and then have to use the library catalogue to track down the library's print subscriptions to find the journal. Once the student is at the library shelf they have to understand how volumes and issues work, and we have probably all had some knowledge of the sometimes Kafkaesque experience it is to locate a page range in an art journal. When you reflect on it, libraries are asking students to perform a number of highly confusing technical steps to locate a single article. It's no wonder that many of them give up and turn to Google.

In the past the SCA Library taught an entire semester-long course on how to do research. Students had to pass the course in order to graduate. This approach gave students excellent experience in using the library, but was onerous in time commitment, staff resources and administration. In order to become more sustainable the program was reduced to a one-hour lecture to first year students as part of their Critical Studies unit. While more efficient, the "how to use the library" approach did not increase the level or, it seemed, the depth, of student use of the library and its resources. It did not demonstrate to students how books and art journals related to their art practice. Emphasising step-by-step processes had the unintended consequence of obscuring the conceptual.

Maybe what students were lacking was an emphasis on the library as a conceptual and physical space that provides interdisciplinary sources that will inspire and inform their development at art school. What was needed was an appreciation of the material sources themselves. Why would you teach people how to use something, when they don't know why (or when) they would need to use it? But how could we give students the hands-on practice of using the library in a lecture theatre setting?

We created a lecture which helped students to reflect on research and writing as an integral part of their creative process not as an adjunct to it, which allowed for a tactile engagement with library materials, and got them thinking about how those materials related to their own practice.

We consciously addressed students as artists, not as art students. This choice was a purposeful one. Studio art students are already artists. We wanted them to see themselves as part of a continuum of educational and practical development that extends beyond their degree.

The next step was to embed the concept of the artist's relationship with the library at the heart of the session. This was done by focusing on sources of inspiration in the library, with an emphasis on both the variety of sources available (theoretical texts, exhibition catalogues, art journals, reference material), and on the library itself as a physical space that needs to be navigated. Lastly we showed the library as a conceptual environment where artists can discover, use and reorganise their sources.

The reflective process seeks to make the unexplainable available. The thinking that is outside conceptualization, nonverbal, uncognized, tacit, and extralinguistic requires sources to better understand it.²

The library is a space with a variety of information sources where the individual must make deliberate choices about what informs or contextualises his or her art. Art research is multidisciplinary, and artists can use a wide range of sources for inspiration, discovery, context, and to develop a larger theoretical framework. Even though the artistic process is beyond words (the “extralinguistic”, to use Daichend’s term), artists need to respond to a variety of ideas, events, and theories. We need words to understand artistic practice.

[SLIDE: Donald Judd’s library]

Many artists have personal collections of books as material inspiration for their art. Covering two floors, sculptor Donald Judd’s library houses 13,000 books in 40 languages and spanning a broad range of subjects. His collection incorporates texts on geography and understanding of the arts, languages and sciences across different cultures.³

Judd is an interesting example because his style of minimalism would seem to resist any kind of extensive glossing, so it might come as something of a surprise to students that he was so interested in art history and his library covered such a wide range of subjects. It is more difficult to see applied art theory in his art than it is with other artists. Books are not just beautiful objects but tools, instigators, rousers, mind-openers and soothers.

[SLIDE: John Waters’ Library]

I was not a book fanatic until I was fifteen and discovered Genet and Burroughs and all these Grove Press books and thought, thank God, I’m not that abnormal. That opened up a whole new world to me. Those were my friends. [...] I read the most devious books all through Catholic High and they let me, just so I’d shut up. I went to NYU for five minutes and got thrown out during the first drugs on campus bust in 1966. If I’d have quit school at sixteen I’d have made one more movie. I never liked school. I think it’s great for some people but I wanted to discover it all on my own. I didn’t want to hear what they wanted me to read. I’ve always had piles of what’s next to read.⁴

There is an internal contradiction at art school for many studio art students relating to the prescription of sources. Many artists struggle with the idea of learning to produce art in an institutional environment. They can be antagonistic towards lists of prescribed readings about what art is and what constitutes important art. But building your own library of sources is a process where you define your own path, be open in your enquiry, and find your own sources of inspiration.

² James Daichendt, *Artist Scholar: Reflections on Writing and Research* (Chicago: Intellect, 2012), 95.

³ Andrew M. Goldstein “Donald Judd’s Library Goes Online” *Blouin Artinfo* May 16, 2010
<http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/34535/donald-judds-library-goes-online>

⁴ “Reading as a Pleasant Deviation: A Guided Tour of John Waters Library” *The Well Dressed Bibliophile*, accessed October 24, 2016, <http://colophon.com/privatelibrary/interviews/waters.html>

The filmmaker John Waters, while eschewing formal education, has created and maintained his own library by collecting books extensively throughout his life. Like Judd, he came up with his own “obsessively arranged” system for organising them.

College: two hundred people reading the same book. An obvious mistake. Two hundred people can read two hundred books.⁵

The library provides an access point into radical and diverse sources that can be discovered through intermediaries (lecturers, writers) but also allows discovery of a world of information that you can make your own.

[SLIDE: Babelplatz memorial]

This photo shows a memorial by Micha Ullman consisting of a glass plate set into the cobbles, giving a view of empty bookcases below. This work commemorates the book burnings which took place in Nazi Germany and Austria during the 1930s. The installation is big enough to hold the total of the estimated 20,000 burned books. Furthermore, a line of Heinrich Heine (1821) is engraved on a plaque inset in the square: (in English: “That was only a prelude; where they burn books, they will in the end also burn people”). Books have always been a mechanism for dissemination of radical and “dangerous” thought.

Young people today live in a world where it’s hard to imagine how people accessed radical information before the internet. It’s easy to think of books as slightly old-fashioned and possibly staid. It could be easy to assume that books are the hallmark of traditional or respectable ideas. This is not the case. Books have always been a place where dangerous ideas have been shared and bookstores and libraries have been centres of radical congregation and dissemination. Governments have used a variety of tools to shut down dissenting ideas in published books, from legal channels (such as obscenity law) or outright burning of books, or infiltration of libraries by government officials.

To relate this to the conference theme: it’s not that studio art students have forgotten about the real. It’s that they don’t know what the real is like any more or how to relate to it. People think of ‘the real’ as the known world, but they often confuse the real with the prosaic, the inert. Our lecture was about surprising them with the real.

Though libraries as physical spaces are highly structured, they provide the perfect environment for artists. Locating print books, journals and other objects within a larger thematic context, embodied by the fact that books on shelves are organised by a classification schema, provides greater opportunities for deeper searching and discovery into artists and art movements. Library shelves provide discovery by serendipity. Serendipity is “finding out things without searching for them”. It is unexpected discovery. It is also not a random event: there is an underlying structure that allows for serendipity.

⁵ John Cage, *M: Writings, '67-'72* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1973), 61.

[SLIDE: Thinking made visible- Paul Klee]

With this perspective the library supports the educational aims of art schools. The structure and schemas of library shelves provides context. Look for a contemporary American photographer and you will find other artists working in that medium. You are also just as likely to find “non-masterpiece art” (examples being the sketch, the minor works, the mistake, the preliminary work) which are of central relevance to artists developing their practice, because of their contextualising value. They are also examples of artistic thinking made visible.

If you know where to look, the library can be full of unexpected surprises [...] Libraries have always been about juxtapositions and discovery.⁶

Because libraries place books next to each other (sometimes because of arcane cataloguing rules, sometimes out of sheer randomness), the unexpected surprise element of libraries is also important. Discovery of sources on library shelves if anything shows the dynamic potential of material sources.

[SLIDE: Discussion of the themes and stations]

Our theme of the library as a collection of sources that can be seen as comparable to a curated space was an important part of our in-lecture activity, and you can see on the slide some photos of the materials which we brought to the lecture.

[SLIDE: Photos of students moving between thematic stations]

The activity was designed not only to break up the lecture but it also allowed for the desired tactile and tangible engagement with the real. We placed the sources within a thematic setting as they need to be understood within a context, whether that be disciplinary, historic or thematic. In this instance we drew the themes—beauty, post-colonialism, nature and feminism—from the unit of study content. This enabled students to engage with the library materials in a newly curated context which was predetermined by their assignment—a critical review of a current contemporary artwork. The thematic grouping meant students were able to create their own meanings and relationships between the sources while the variety of sources allowed students to understand why you would prioritise one source over another and at which particular point in the research process.

Reference books, books about artists and their work, exhibition catalogues from local and major international exhibitions, and journal articles made up the assemblage of sources. Journal articles were included in all possible formats—within their print journals, as printed PDFs and also online on an iPad or laptop.

We asked students to move around the stations and consider the questions you can see in the PowerPoint.

⁶ Laura C. Damon-Moore and Erinn Batykefer, *The Artist's Library: A Field Guide, from the Library as Incubator Project* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2014).

By having conversations with a librarian around each station, students identified the differences between the different kinds of information and how they related to their art practice and research.

[SLIDE of the post it notes students wrote]

We've pulled out a few interesting responses to the activity—one states “Using a variety of materials to understand a variety of feminist perspectives.” Another one says, “start with material with broader information (the reference works), then find more specific material (exhibition catalogues and journal articles).”

Once we'd captured their attention by helping them to recognise how the library related to them as artists, how to compare different kinds of information resources and how to make connections between library sources and their research assignment, we were able to demonstrate a couple of ways to find these resources both online and in print by identifying key visual arts resources from the library website. This was the “how to” moment.

Artists make informed choices about the imaginative and intellectual approaches they use when they create and respond to art. The process of making insightful decisions when carrying out research in art is not predicated on the assumption that there is a prescribed body of knowledge one learns and then applies.⁷

Treating the stations as analogous to curated spaces was an acknowledgement that the library is a conceptual space as well as a physical space. Libraries provide a variety of sources where the individual must make deliberate choices about what to leave in and what to leave out. This aspect of the library has the potential to feel familiar to studio artists: in a library as in a gallery, meaning is made by the placement of objects; in both a library and a gallery, new understandings can be made by rearranging objects (in the case of the library, information-based objects).

In this quote we've emphasized the word “informed”. In the past when you went to art school you were taught how to paint in a particular way and you were taught a canon of great artists in a highly structured way. Because of movements such as postmodernism, surrealism, cubism, and abstract expressionism the “rules” are no longer binding (you can paint the sky green if you like) but in some ways that makes it harder to break the rules and find your own way through.

There is huge potential for presenting the art library to studio art students as a conceptual and physical space that has parallels to their development as artists and curators. How artists use sources should be a guiding model in how we talk about libraries with students. It's important that we engage with the idea of libraries and research being part of (and not ancillary to) the creative process.

Linking the materiality of library sources with students' development as practising artists provides us with the opportunity to connect with students' motivations for studying art.

⁷ Graeme Sullivan, *Art Practice as Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2005), 220.

Focusing on sources of inspiration in the library, on the variety of sources available, and on the library itself as a physical space which encourages contextualisation allows us to show the library as a conceptual environment where artists can discover and find sources which will help them develop a critical language with which to understand their own practice. It places the library at the centre of the art school experience and at the heart of the artist's development.

References

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