

## **Opening – context**

Hello, and thank you for coming.

This paper is based on my 2017 dissertation for the Information Management and Preservation MSc at the University of Glasgow. The project aimed to increase the accessibility of the Glasgow School of Art Library's artists' book Collection. It encompassed a research process designed to identify impediments to access, and a no-budget DIY digitisation project which produced an online exhibition and finding aid. Today I'll be talking about the delivery of this project along with some reflection, analysis and next steps, particularly regarding use of the resulting digital resource as a teaching and learning tool.

This project began when I was employed as a Library Desk Assistant at the Glasgow School of Art. For those not familiar with the institution, its Scotland's only public self-governing art school, and its Library is one of the finest Collections on art, design and architecture in the UK. One Collection which demonstrates the richness of its holdings is its Collection of artists' books, which encompasses over 2,000 works and features internationally renowned artists such as Doug Aitken, David Shrigley, and Thomas A. Clark as well as small independent presses and lesser known artist. A stylistically diverse Collection, it encompasses artistic methodologies ranging from illustration and photography to concrete poetry. Many of these titles employ the form of the book in subversive ways, with elements of material construction (such as binding and typography) deployed to radical ends. The Collection contains flip-books, binders and boardgames and encompasses both ephemeral works (such as posters and postcards) and complex sculptural pieces. These books are distinct from the main Library Collections as primary works of art in their own right, a unique bibliographic quality which present unique challenges to their collecting institution.

## **Survey**

The genre has always been a particular research interest of mine, and I was struck by the fact this unique resource seemed to be underused by students. This was confirmed by the results of an online survey I carried out to gauge levels of awareness and use of the Collection among students. I found that 69% of respondents were aware of the Collection, a majority which nonetheless suggested that more could be done to promote the collection. Despite this, only 25% had actually accessed the collection. And while all respondents who had accessed the collection described the experience as either 'good' or 'adequate', only 19% of respondents felt the Collection was easy to access. A further 44% were unsure if the collection was relevant to their practice or course of study, suggesting a lack of clarity among students about the collection's content and purpose. Although this survey represented the opinions of only a small cross-section of students, it did allow me to begin to establish current user-perceptions of the Collection. Encouragingly, an impressive 94% of respondents to the survey expressed an interest in learning more about the Collection, suggesting there was scope to radically increase engagement among potential users.

## **Research project**

In order to ascertain possible impediments to access, I began by researching collection management process which underpinned the artists' book collection. Its underuse could in part be ascribed to the recent history of the School, which at that time was facing a period of disruption and transition. Along with the rest of the Library's Special Collections it had

previously been housed in the Mackintosh Library, a Grade A-Listed building constructed by the School's most famous alumni Charles Rennie Mackintosh. While the main Library collections and Learning Resources were housed in the modern Bourdon Building directly across the street, The Mackintosh Library served as a reference Library, and its holdings included the School's historic periodicals, journals, and around half of the Rare Books Collection. In 2014, a large fire ripped through the building, and the Library was badly damaged. While a large percentage of the collections themselves were salvageable, the Library's infrastructure was almost entirely destroyed. At the time of this project reconstruction work aiming to restore the Library to Mackintosh's original vision was well underway, with the building work due to be completed by academic year 2018/19. However, this loss of facilities had a far-reaching impact on Library services and presented unique challenges in relation to how affected collections are cared for and exploited.

The remaining collections were temporarily re-homed and the Artists' Book Collection, which had escaped unscathed, was moved into storage in the rather cramped closed-stack Bookstore within the Bourdon Building. Although the bookstore isn't an ideal storage solution, by employing a rare books model of access with viewings by appointment only, GSA library conforms with best practice in this field. This model allows libraries to establish environmental control and more effectively respond to the material needs of structurally diverse Collections. For example, Erica Van Horn & Simon Cutts' 'Water of Recess', one of the works in the GSA collection, takes the form of a miniature glass bottle of water contained within a small cardboard box. It would sit poorly among the books in the Lending Collection; its small size may cause it to become lost among the stacks, while regular handling would put it at risk of damage. Yet the Special Collections model presents the librarian with a collection management paradox, in which action to preserve and protect works limits the key mandate of access provision. It greatly limits the accessibility and discoverability of collections, negatively impacting user awareness by reducing their visibility within the library. It prevents users from being able to browse the Collection and interact with the books, removing the opportunity for serendipitous discovery and encounter.

In addition to these issues surrounding storage, as a cross-disciplinary genre artists' books sit uneasily with-in conventional cataloguing systems. The cataloguing standards employed by GSA Library - Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, MARC21 and Resource Description and Access - are bibliographic mode of description designed to describe the work as a book, not an art object. While the Descriptive Cataloguing of Rare Materials manual can help us to describe books as an artefact, the vocabulary necessary to describe artists' books is very different to that employed in rare book cataloguing. Details such as provenance are less likely to be of importance, while the conceptual characteristics which typify the genre cannot be satisfyingly indicated in standard cataloguing fields. For example, Library catalogues have no easy way to reflect books which subvert or abandon the traditional codex format, like Kurt Schwitters' Merzhanky, a poem printed on a tissue. If we compare this to its catalogue entry, we can see the radical form, which is central to our understanding of the work, is unobtrusively listed under 'Physical Description'. In an attempt counteract this and to make the work's physical form more obvious to catalogue users the cataloguer has described it further in a note field. This reflects a prevalent tendency in artists' book cataloguing to compensate for the inflexibility of cataloguing by using descriptive notes to provide additional physical and contextual information. However, the addition of new description at this area does not create additional access points and provides no additional information to users browsing the catalogue,

as we can see from this screenshot of the catalogue. Writing on the challenges of cataloguing artists' books, Ann K.D. Myers the Rare Books Cataloguer at Stanford University has claimed that traditional subject headings are often not sufficient.

Subject description can be equally, if not more, problematic than bibliographic description. As original artworks, rather than works on secondary topics, the meaning of the artists' books can be unclear, and often deliberately so. For example, Carla Novi's *White Book* is comprised of empty pages contained within blank PVC covers. As cataloguers, how can we describe or even ascertain the subject matter of *White Book*? Yet subject description can be all the catalogue user has to go on when deciding whether or not to access the book; as in many cases, the title of *White Book* tells us little about the work itself, limiting discoverability.

The material properties of the book have proven to be of marked importance to users, particularly in facilities teaching art such as GSA. In a 2012 survey of artists' book collections in academic libraries Annie Herlocker found that students most often search for artists' books according to physical characteristics such as binding or printing, a finding also reflected by numerous sources cited in a 2005 literature review by Louise Kulp. However, these physical properties are not searchable on the GSA catalogue.

Finally, as art objects, a visual perspective can be crucial to understanding artists' books, yet very few of the catalogue entries for books in this collection contain images. This is primarily due to inherent limitations in the Library's COPAC, which derives images of book covers from a database of large publishing houses. The specialist nature of artists' books and the fact they tend to be self-published or published by small presses means they are not included in this database. These issues aren't institution-specific - Elizabeth James, Senior Librarian at the National Art Library has identified this as a problem common to many library catalogues.

If the catalogue user decides to access the book, they are instructed to ask at the Library reception desk, in line with Special Collection access provision. The lack of immediate access this entails can be discouraging to students. It also restricts the manner and setting in which these books can be experienced and handled, treating them as precious objects to be accessed within a sophisticated framework.

This effect is often perpetuated by the very channels designed to promote the collection and make it more accessible. One of the most popular methods used to overcome limitations to access and awareness of artists' books collections is by creating exhibitions – a survey of holding institutions carried out by Andrea Chemero et al. in 2000 noted exhibitions were employed by 78% of libraries surveyed. GSA Library has a number of exhibition stands within the library building which house rotating displays of items held in the Collections. Here's an example of one such exhibition, titled 'Travel and the Journey', which featured artist's books by Hamish Fulton, Alec Finlay and Blair Cunningham. Exhibits like these combat the lack of visibility of collections held in closed stacks, enabling visitors to the Library to 'browse' the books in a way which is usually impossible while showcasing the diversity of the Collection. The images of this exhibition come from GSA Library blog 'Treasures of GSA Library'. Here, and on the Library's social media, staff can perform outreach to a potentially large audience highlighting specific books or raising awareness of the collection as a whole, while providing images and information not available on the catalogue.

However, there are conceptual limitations to the effectiveness of these forms of outreach. In both gallery-style displays and in photographs the librarian must choose one access point to the work by displaying a single page spread or book cover, which is presented as a flat pictorial plane. In addition to revealing only a small part of the whole art work, this negates the artists' intention in choosing the codex form. As poets Steve McCaffery and bpNicol put it, the codex is a 'mechanism' to be 'activated when the reader picks it up, opens the covers and starts reading.' A key limitation of exhibition and social media as outreach activities for this genre is thus the lack of opportunities for interaction with the books which they afford. For example, 'Travel and Journey' features the work *In Situ* by David Michael Clarke, which can be seen in the top right corner in figure. Only a small part of the works full size can be shown in the display, and the body of the text is obscured. More crucially, in my opinion the full impact of the work can only be experienced on handling it. The familiar gesture of opening, spreading out and pouring over a fold-up map is de-familiarised when in place of the expected topography the reader encounters conceptual areas of experience. Simultaneously, the map form informs our experience of reading the work. Just as we read maps in the direction of our choosing, the reader is free to chart their own path across the page, encountering the text in the order of their choice. The multisensory and experiential qualities of the book are only apparent upon handling, and the reader's agency in choosing how to interact with the book is thus crucial to its realisation.

As we can see, in relation to cataloguing, housing and access provision, artists' books present an internal challenge to library systems. Faced with these impediments to accessibility, Libraries must be active participants in unlocking the haptic potential of artists' books, turning where necessary to non-conventional methodologies to create new spaces for encounter and engagement between artists' books and users.

### **Digitisation – Project rationale and delivery**

With this in mind, I chose to digitise a cross-section of works from the collection. I selected 50 books featuring a wide variety of formats, mediums, bindings and materials in order to give a sense of the Collection's breadth. Titles by artists who feature prominently in the Collection, such as David Shrigley, were included to showcase areas of strength. Works which were particularly experimental or radical in form were also selected in order to give sense of the creative potential of the genre. This project represents a risk-managed approach to copyright, in line with GSA Library guidelines, and was covered by the takedown policy outlined in the Library Collections Strategy.

Carrying out a digitisation project with no budget presented some obvious problems, and the methodology of the exhibition delivery can most accurately be described as trial and error. The chosen platform for the exhibition was image sharing social media site Pinterest. The rationale behind this was largely that it is free and was already used by the organisation, which meant there was already an audience in place. With no specialist photographic equipment or expertise, all the images in the exhibition were created using my own iPhone. I have a brief walk-through video demonstrating this process:

After taking the photograph I would adjust the images until it was straight, as shown here, and then edit it using Instagram. This is an example of a free resource being used in a slightly unconventional way. I applied the filters to colour-correct images to make them brighter and

clearer, like so. Once I was happy with the results of the edit I would screen shot the resulting image, crop it to size and save it, delete the draft Instagram post and so on with the next book. The edited images would then be uploaded to the Pinterest.

The project aimed to respond to the issues identified during my earlier research into factors limiting the collection's accessibility. It was designed to counter the limitations of the COPAC by providing a visual counterpart while simultaneously creating new access points into Collection. The design methodology also aimed to address, and as far as possible counteract, the limitations identified as inherent to outreach activities such as display and social media. This was influenced by Johanna Green's concept of 'digital hands-on' experience which employs creative digitisation to create a sense of engagement among 'materially disenfranchised' users with limited first-hand access to the works themselves. Rather than presenting static and disembodied digital surrogates I aimed to convey the material and physical qualities of the books as prominently as their aesthetic or intellectual content, critically engaging with the analogue materiality of the works rather than simply digitally reformatting them. This was achieved through the provision of photographs emphasising the physical qualities and construction of the books and through handling videos, like these.

I wanted to convey as far as possible the experience of physically interacting with the books, and to emphasise that these are functional and pleasurable resources designed to be handled, read and engaged with first-hand. In this way the exhibition aimed to de-mystify Special Collections resources, making them appear less remote and intimidating to students. Interpretative material for the exhibition was deliberately kept to a minimum, as the exhibition aimed to excite interest in the Collection rather than to exhaustively describe or explain it. This aimed to allow potential users scope to approach the exhibition, and Collection, based on their own areas of conceptual interest. The ultimate goal was to provide users with an accessible and engaging introduction to the works.

In addition to showcasing items from the Collection, the exhibition also operated as a rudimentary finding aid. Each image on the dedicated Pinterest board is equipped with a link to the catalogue entry for the book it represents, and users can re-direct to the catalogue simply by clicking on it. This provides them with additional bibliographic data on the title, including the information necessary to request to view the book itself. While providing a digital supplement to the collection, the overriding intention was to encourage users to access the books first-hand. By adding a hyperlink to the MARC field 856 in the records of the books themselves, each catalogue entry was linked to images or handling videos of the books. This allowed me to incorporate the visual supplement into the catalogue itself to further support students browsing.

Following the completion of this project I accepted a role as Graduate Library Trainee at the Glasgow School of Art, and we decided to expand this project and attempt to digitise the entire 2000 strong collection over the course of this one year post.

During this time I began to explore the potential of this resource as a digital study and teaching tool. Pinterest is not traditionally thought of as an educational site, but it's a tool for independent research particularly well-suited to the study of visual art, and a number of our students were already employing it in this way. Here is the Pinterest profile of a former GSA student of architecture, reproduced with his permission. As you can see students can save

images to refer to later and can create collections based on specific projects, courses or research interests. The 'More like this' function then suggests a variety of images similar to the ones they've saved, recreating to some extent the experience of browsing visual resources on a specific subject.

Artists' books from the collection are currently employed by GSA in research on subjects including typography, graphic design, illustration, photography and of course book arts. The digitised collection provides examples of these modes which can easily be accessed in the classroom or at home, making them well suited for teaching and study. I aimed to promote it as a study resource by incorporating introductions to the digitised collection into Library artist's books workshop, like this one, and in student library inductions. I also included information about the resource in Library material such subject guides for relevant topics, like book arts. Simultaneously I performed outreach among staff to encourage its use as a pedagogical tool. By developing the digital exhibition in this way the project aimed not only to increase access to the Collection but to promote its creative use as a practical resource for students and art practitioners, in line with the Library's Collection Strategy.

## **Fire**

The project was on track to be completed within the one year timeframe of my post when, on June 16th 2018, the Mackintosh Building caught fire for the second time. Miraculously once again no one was harmed and this time no library material was lost, but the building itself was largely destroyed. Obviously this was absolutely devastating for everyone involved, and it had an enormous impact on all elements of life at the School.

In the immediate aftermath our main priority was to continue to deliver as effective and accessible an academic library service as possible. Due to the cordon put in place by Glasgow City Council we had no access to the Library building, the library management software or any of the physical collections, including the artist's books. Under these conditions the digitisation project had to be postponed. Access to the Library was finally granted on September 21st – you can get a sense of the extent of the disruption based on the sorry state of my desk plants when we returned.

## **Outcomes**

By the end of the project 1,295 books were digitised, of a total collection of 2,080 books. The impact of this project can be measured in two ways – in relation to use of the Pinterest board as a stand-alone digital resource and in relation to student and staff engagement with the physical collection. In both cases, these were evaluated using quantitative monitoring.

Pinterest offers a free analytics tool for all business profiles which allowed us to track traffic to the page and engagement with posts. This service has its limitation – it only provides data for individual boards for the last thirty days, so when analysing data over a long timescale the results necessarily include all activity on the GSA Pinterest site. Using this resource, we can see that on average, throughout 2018, every day an average of 281 users viewed images on the GSA Library Pinterest, and they were included in the search results or suggested images of an

additional 807 users. Of these an average of 2 users per day followed the images links to their source, and images were saved by users at a rate of 1 per day.

Looking at the more recent project-specific data, we can see throughout July of this year, 19 images from the artist's book board had been saved, 10 had been followed to their respective catalogue entry, and the images had been appeared in search results or suggested images 8,010 times. For me this data is very encouraging, as it demonstrates the board is still in regular use even though it hasn't been updated or actively publicised in almost a year.

Analysis of use of the collection itself is made more difficult as all requests to view Special Collections at GSA library are recorded on the same document, so no individual numbers exist for viewings of artist's book collection. However from own experience fulfilling Special Collection viewing requests I'm aware that the majority of these are requests to view artists books, a fact confirmed in conversation with head of collection Duncan Chappell.

In academic year 2017-2018 there were 97 requests to view Special Collections materials. In 2018-2019 there were 409, an increase of 321.6%. Even taking into account the four months of the previous year in which the collection was inaccessible, this still represents a significant uptake. It's difficult to quantify the extent this increase is the result of this digitisation project. Many other unidentified factors, like changes to the curriculum, could also have impacted the rate of collection use. This could be clarified using qualitative analysis, which could be as simple as asking users what has brought them to the collection. However, these figures do suggest that the digitisation project has led to an increase in student engagement with the physical collection itself.

### **Reflection**

With the benefit of a longer timeframe the most obvious next step would be to digitise the entire GSA artist's book collection. This would ensure the long-term sustainability of the project - the process of photographing new books and adding them to the Pinterest could easily become part of the cataloguing procedure for new additions to this collection.

More could be done to explore and exploit the projects potential as a pedagogical tool to support collection-based learning. In an academic context this would involve working directly with teaching staff incorporate the digital board, and the collection, into the curriculum. In practical terms this could entail the creation of supplementary teaching and learning materials such as a guide on ways it can be employed as a research tool. There's a wealth of literature on the use of visual finding aids as research tools that this could draw on.

As I said, this process was largely the result of trial and error, and more could be done to explore alternative digitisation methods. Different formats including GIFs and 'backstage' images of the books in situ or during processes such as conservation could also be incorporated to engage users with Special Collections materials and processes. Different image hosting sites such as Flickr or Instagram could be employed, and process could benefit from a range of editing programmes like Photoshop. This DIY digitisation process could be tailored to the expertise of the individual librarian, to the characteristics of different collections and to the desired outcome, be it a digital exhibition or a visual catalogue, or indeed both.

### **Conclusion:**

Today, the GSA Library artists' book collection remains in an uncertain state. The School is committed to rebuilding the Mackintosh building and this is still intended to be the Collections ultimate home. However there's currently no official time frame in place for this project, and given the scale of the work needed it could take up to a decade. In the meantime the collection remain in storage, with staff working to develop it via an internal collection audit and an ambitious re-homing project while also exploring alternative interim options for storage and access provision.

I believe that artist's books, which fit so uneasily within conventional library systems, call for unconventional interventions by their holding institutions. As an 'alternative' no-budget model of digitisation, this project is an example of one such a methodology designed to increase the genre's discoverability and accessibility. By creatively employing readily available digital resources it aimed to both encourage and facilitate physical engagement with Special Collections.