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THE LIBRARIAN AND THE ARTIST'S BOOK: NOTES ON THE SUBVERSIVE ART OF CATALOGING

As an avant-garde medium, the artist's book challenges the expectations of the reader/viewer and violates the conventional distinctions between literature and the visual arts. Those expectations and conventions are institutionalized in the popular notion of the library as a repository for books and of the librarian's role as custodian of that repository. This article rejects this conventionalized approach and posits in its stead the library as a sort of performance space in which the confrontation between artist and audience may occur. In this model, the librarian becomes an avant-garde performer who uses the library's conventional cataloging systems to establish a set of expectations that are challenged by the work in hand. As a kind of "straight man," the librarian becomes an essential actor in the realization of the work.

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Sometime around 1970 a civil servant in California committed a subversive act. The unknown culprit was not employed by the Defense Department, or the CIA, or any of the agencies generally associated with intrigue domestic or foreign. He or she was a cataloger in a public library, and the act in question consisted of assigning the subject term "Real Estate Business" to Edward Ruscha's *Real Estate Opportunities* and sending this artist's book to be shelved with works about the real estate market. A copy of the catalog card was reproduced in the *National Union Catalog,* and through this medium, the error spread like a virus to library catalogs throughout the country.

Now for many years art librarians have had good fun with this classic instance of miscataloging, but surely I am overstating the case when I call this subversive? To explain myself, I must ask you to look at *Real Estate Opportunities* from two distinct but related points of view: that of a librarian and that of a library patron.

What does the cataloging librarian do when confronted with a book that must be placed on the shelves within a logical subject order and made accessible to the public through appropriate indexing terms in the catalog? First of all, he or she describes the work at hand, providing information on the authorship, publication history, physical characteristics and content of the work. Some of these details are established as access points, so that a patron can search for the work in the catalog by author, title, collaborators, and so on. Second, the cataloger makes the sometimes simple, often problematic determination of what the work is about, in order to assign subject terms from a controlled vocabulary (the Library of Congress Subject Headings.) At this point, the classic functions of the library catalog should be served: to enable the patron to determine whether the library has a particular known title, what works the library has by any given author and what works are available on a given topic. The final step in cataloging, assigning a classi-fication number, is intended to place books in a logical browsing order on the shelves by grouping works on related topics close to one another.

Now picture the poor librarian who finds *Real Estate Opportunities* in the day's pile of books to be cataloged. It is safe to assume that a cataloging supervisor, who presumably has never heard of Edward Ruscha, has

glanced at the title and sent the book to the appropriate subject cataloging specialist in business and economics. This cataloger leafs through the book, finds that the work consists entirely of photographs of lots for sale in Southern California, wonders why this thing was published in the first place, shrugs, assigns the obvious subject heading, "Real Estate Business," and sends Ruscha's book off to sit on the shelves among factual accounts of urban land use and the real estate market. An understandable mistake.

But I want to suggest a different interpretation of this event, approaching it from the viewpoint of a library patron. Consider the following pair of truisms, one concerning the avant-garde, the other concerning library cataloging. We all know that an essential characteristic of avant-garde art is that it challenges, disappoints or subverts the expectations of the audience. Of course, one of the chief difficulties faced by the avant-garde is that it attracts a very limited audience, and that this limited audience, composed of devotees of the avant-garde, comes with the very clear expectation and hope that its expectations will be challenged or thwarted.

The truism about cataloging is that the aim of the cataloger is to match the right book to the right reader. Now I want you to imagine a library user, someone who is thinking about getting involved in real estate investment and is looking for some sort of introductory overview of this subject. He or she comes to the library's catalog, enters the search term "real estate business," browses the citations on the monitor (or flips through the cards in the drawer) and finds a promising title: *Real Estate Opportunities.* The user writes down the call number and retrieves the book. A book and a reader have been matched, and I would like to suggest that the cataloger has achieved what many avant-garde artists only dream of. The expectations of this particular reader are about to be disappointed, thwarted and challenged. The cataloger has become the ally of the artist in reaching an appropriate audience. In this respect, then, the cataloger of *Real Estate Opportunities,* whoever he or she was, committed a subversive act that was entirely in keeping with the intentions of the avant-garde.

In the intervening years, subject catalogers at the Library of Congress have come to recognize the phenomenon of

the artist's book and have created for it both a subject heading and an appropriate place within the classification scheme for books on art. So if *Real Estate Opportunities* were cataloged today, we would find it shelved not among general works on real estate, but among works by Edward Ruscha and other creators of artists' books. The question becomes one of context: which context serves *Real Estate Opportunities* better? From the viewpoint of the art historian, the latter arrangement is clearly more convenient. But if the aim of the pioneers of this medium was to create a democratic art form, freed from the economic dictates of the museum and gallery establishment, affordable, available alongside the tabloids at supermarket checkout counters, then perhaps their dream is better realized in the happy or distressing accident of a novice real estate investor chancing upon Ruscha's book on the shelves.

In a sense, the very act of placing an artist's book in a library rather than in a museum creates a radically different context, one that may be more appropriate to the subversive intentions of the avant-garde. In the context of a museum, an artist's book can only be displayed statically, either closed to show the cover or opened to a single pair of facing pages. It is seen in the context of other art objects, and more likely than not it is separated from the viewer by protective glass. It has become entirely subservient to the institution that the medium had originally hoped to subvert.

Place the same book in a library and it becomes a gadfly in an institution that is designed for less problematic kinds of artifacts, but an institution that is also deeply democratic in its traditions. Any book (indeed, any medium of information or expression) has its potential place in the library, and the librarian feels impelled to find that place so that the book may be used as intended: glanced at, skimmed or read from cover to cover. The artist's book poses a challenge to the reader, and the cataloging librarian may well be the perfect personification of that reader. As a hybrid form, the artist's book both is and is not a book. In particular, those works which play and experiment with the conventions of the book form are, in a sense, daring the reader to take them as books. And who is better prepared to take up that challenge than the librarian? Armed only with a set of rules and standards

which were designed for the traditional book format, the librarian finds himself or herself faced with the task of describing, for example, three collections of texts printed on various pieces of bodily attire—a task approached in an almost wholly straight-faced manner by a cataloger at the National Library of Canada:

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Hairy Legs / Lise Melhorn. -- Toronto : Transformer Press, 1982.
[9] leaves ; 75 x 28 cm.
Text prined on 9 leg-shaped leaves in a 'leg-work' stocking, held
together by garters.

High heels / Lise Melhorn. -- Toronto : Transformer Press, 1983.
1 box ; 11 x 18 x 33 cm.
Shoe box containing a pair of paper mâché shoes. Text is printed
on 8 insoles in each shoe.

Leaky stories : a monthly periodical / Lise Melhorn. -- Toronto :
Transformer Press, 1985.
1 box ; 8 x 12 x 22 cm.
'12 maxishields:  fifty percent more absorbing reading.' Text
'rubber-stamped ... on maxishields non-adhesive pads ...'
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The cataloger must understand and describe this work as being in some sense a book. In taking up this challenge, the cataloger becomes the artist's co-conspirator and the work's ideal reader.

Subject cataloging, too, provides an opportunity for collusion with the artist, a collusion that occurred unwittingly in the case of the cataloger of *Real Estate Opportunities*. Now that we have appropriate subject terms and classification numbers for artists' books, can the matter be left at that? "Artists' books" is a term for the genre of the work; but what about the subject matter of the book? Should Ruscha's *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations* receive the additional heading "Automobiles—Service Stations—Southwestern States—Pictorial works"? I realize that we could get into serious questions about artists' intentions: does Ruscha intend his book to be in any sense "about" service stations? Should a cataloger, or for that matter a critic, be concerned exclusively or at all with the artist's intentions? Unlike the literary critic or art historian, the librarian cannot afford to be overly concerned with the problematic natures of intentionality and referentiality. After all, a librarian is supposed to be concerned with the user; and it is clear that a user who is seeking photographic depictions of service stations in the Southwest will be very happy to find Ruscha's work, even if

he or she has never heard of artists' books. And if the book happens to be housed on open stacks, and the user notices other books by Ruscha shelved next to it and happens to wonder why *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations* is found among the art books, he or she might start posing some questions that are very much in the spirit of the artist's "intentions."

Perhaps the most dramatic instance of collusion, be it witting or unwitting, with a maker of avant-garde books occurred a few years ago when the Library of Congress established the name of Dadaist Johannes Baader for its Name Authority File, and in doing so extended one of the archetypical actions of Berlin Dada into the 1990s.

In 1919, newspapers across Germany reported the "death of the Oberdada" Baader; obituaries recapitulating Baader's life and his activities within the Dada movement appeared in major Berlin dailies and in small provincial papers in all corners of the republic. But it was soon revealed that Baader's death was a hoax; Baader had manipulated the media to the ends of his own program of self-mythologizing. Baader even devised a new system for measuring time, with the day of his "death" and "rebirth" in 1919 serving as point zero. Long after Baader's actual death in 1955, this event is remembered among historians of the avant-garde as a classic Berlin Dada gesture.

In 1988, the Library of Congress cataloged a reprint of Baader's writings. Whenever our de facto national library catalogs an author's works for the first time, the librarians conduct painstaking research in order to establish an appropriate heading, which then resides in the Library of Congress Name Authority File; libraries throughout the United States rely on this file in order to use a form of the author's name that is correct and consistent. Thus, as of early 1990, libraries across the nation, following their most authoritative source, were attributing the works of the Oberdada to "Baader, Johannes, 1875–1919." It was only after considerable soul-searching, and with the distinct sense of becoming a traitor to Dada, that I finally decided to report the error to the Library of Congress. The "correct" form, "Baader, Johannes, 1875–1955," is now established, and Baader's mythic death survives in the file only as a cross reference from the "old cataloging form." But for a period of about twelve months in 1989 and 1990, Baader's hoax was perpetuated in electronic cataloging

networks spanning the globe.

The librarian, then, in his or her confrontation with the avant-garde book, may well be drawn into a form of complicity with the artist, becoming an effective practitioner of the avant-garde. We may picture the library as a kind of performance space in which the librarian acts as the "performer" of the avant-garde book. I can imagine the development of avant-garde cataloging as an art form in its own right, whose aim would be to manipulate and subvert the established conventions of descriptive and subject cataloging as they have been institutionalized in national libraries and library associations around the world. But I rather prefer to think that, for the librarian, the most effective form of complicity with the aims of the avant-garde is to play the role of "straight man," taking the avant-garde book at face value, treating it, insofar as possible, like any other book in the library, force-fitting it, if need be, into the established conventions of bibliographic description and indexing. In this way, the avant-garde book is placed in the context in which it may best achieve its aim of undercutting the expectations of its audience.

ENDNOTE

Some of the material in this article was presented in a different form at the planning conference, "Art Networks and Information Systems," co-sponsored by the Franklin Furnace Archive in New York and Alternative Traditions in the Contemporary Arts at the University of Iowa, and held in Coralville, Iowa, in April 1989. The earlier paper was published in the conference proceedings, and later in *Art Documentation* 10:1 (Spring 1991).