Artists’ Books in UC Collections: A Scoping Study

John Baldessari, The Telephone Book (With Pearls), (1998), University of Canterbury Library Collection

Project Leader: Dr. Barbara Garrie
Student: Sophie Davis

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INTRODUCTION

Artists' Books in UC Collections: A Scoping Study, undertaken as part of the University of Canterbury Summer Scholarship Scheme, provides the foundation for a larger project by the Department of Art History and Theory. This ongoing research initiative will investigate the place of artists' books within UC collections, and explore ways in which the collection and display of these objects can be enhanced through innovative collaborations with the Digital Humanities, librarians and external partners.

This particular report details initial research undertaken between November 2013 and February 2013. It reviews the quantity, nature and location of artists' books within UC Collections, which are scattered throughout the James Hight Library, MacMillian Brown Library and Modern Fine Printing Collection (which is in MB).

The report will begin by establishing a working definition for the artists' book drawing on recent literature in the field. It will also offer some identifying characteristics that may be used as guidelines in attempting to categorise printed material produced by artists and obtained by the university in the future. It will then review current relevant debates in the field of artists' books that will help readers to gain a broad understanding of what artists' books can contribute as a teaching and learning resource for the fine arts and humanities. A broad overview of the collection will help to determine areas for further research.
DEFINITION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS’ BOOK

Put simply, an artists’ book is a book made or conceived by an artist. They can be produced as one-off objects, as part of a limited edition, or as inexpensive, mass-produced items. Artists’ books can take a variety of different sizes, materials and formats and can consist of text, image, or a combination of both. However their common identifying characteristic is that they are works of art realised specifically in book form. In this way, artists’ books are distinct form exhibition catalogues, books of artistic illustrations or reproductions, or publications about a particular artist.

Artists’ books often serve to document performances and conceptual works of art in diverse ways, frequently blurring distinctions between the creative act and its record. The book can also document an investigation or process that is the work itself, or function as a space of exhibition and display, replicating the functions typically served by the museum or gallery. Yet the artists’ book has certain tactile and durational possibilities that conventional exhibitions do not, potentially distributing artwork, information and ideas to a wider audience for a longer period of time. The formal specificities of the book, a series of flat pages bound into a fixed sequence, result in certain material qualities and constraints that can help artists to explore a particular idea or a certain mode of encounter with the viewer.
The book has long been recognised a culturally predetermined yet relatively open and adaptable artistic form. Over the past 50 years, critics and art historians have emphasised the ability of the artists' book to resist easy definition. As Clive Phillpot, former Director of the Library at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, has pointed out, artists' books are in fact 'distinguished by the fact that they sit provocatively at the juncture where art, documentation and literature come together'. The possibilities of the book-as-artwork are expanded through these intersections with other creative practices, such as independent publishing, graphic design and literature, which can be exploited by a variety of cultural practitioners who wish to experiment with different mediums and formats in their work.

As a somewhat peripheral field of enquiry, the discussion of artists' books has, until very recently, been largely preoccupied with establishing the book as a legitimate art form and attempting to pin down a definition for the artists' book which considers its complex relationships with other creative practices. Questions of definition and common language continue to reappear in the critical discussion of artists' books. Sarah Bodman and Tom Sowden's *A Manifesto for The Book* (2010) begins by posing the problem of terminology in this field: 'book – artists' book – artists' publication – [or] book art? In this text, Bodman and Sowden recount the shortcomings or confusions of these different descriptors, invoking a broader issue of how we might pinpoint a definition for the artists' book in the 21st century. Although several authors have attempted to resolve such debates, the artists' book seems to resist easy definition or categorisation by nature.

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In a recent paper published in 2012, Annie Herlocker, a librarian at the Watkins College of Art, Design and Film, observed that definitions of the artists’ book 'often end up being subjective and/or open-ended – for example, the artist intended it to be an artists’ book, or the book’s meaning comes from its form as much from its content.'

Clive Phillpot has written extensively on the subject of terminology in the field of artists’ books. In 1992, Phillpot produced several diagrams attempting to come to terms with the artists’ book, one of which consists of a series of a Venn diagram of an apple, pear and lemon. The apple is used by Phillpot to represent art, the pear to represent literature, and the lemon – situated over the area where regions overlap – to represent artists’ books.

Johanna Drucker, another of the most prominent writers on contemporary artists’ books, considers artists’ books as a ‘zone of activity’ that ‘is made at the intersection of a different number of fields, disciplines and ideas, rather than at their limits.’

Although more nuanced discussions of artists’ books undoubtedly open up greater possibilities for artists and audiences alike, they also present a challenge in terms of the classification and management of these objects in library and art collections. As such, artists’ books may be spread throughout different subject areas of a library.

The fragile and often rare nature of many artists’ publications also means that they cannot be borrowed and displayed on library shelves as conventional books might. Moreover, the book’s tactile and durational qualities can be manipulated in order to construct a certain type of experience that can either contribute to or define the meaning of an artwork. Artists’ books are almost exclusively made with the intention that they will be touched and handled. However, this poses the problem of conservation. As Herlocker notes:

Artists’ books have become a dichotomous experience in that they are valuable art objects, but unlike most traditional forms such as painting or sculpture they need to be handled by the viewer to be experienced fully. As such, artists’ books

straddle the space between the world of museums or art galleries and that of library special collections.\textsuperscript{7}

These tensions effect the display, cataloguing and collections management of artists' books at the University of Canterbury and their accessibility to both students and teaching staff. This discussion also highlights the importance of linking different areas of library collections together in order to promote the accessibility of artists' books.

The unique qualities and 'problems' of the artist's book have certain implications for staff and student engagement with UC's collection of artists' books. As Anne L. Burkhart points out, 'artists' books are a nexus of sensory modes and systems of communication' and the 'multi-sensory and experiential aspects of artists' books point to the limits of approaches to art education that privilege only visual aspects'.\textsuperscript{8} She additionally argues for a 'material culture orientation', as opposed to a purely visual understanding of these works.\textsuperscript{9} It is this framework of understanding that we draw upon in this study, which investigates a number of different platforms and strategies for students, teaching staff and the public to experience our collection in innovative ways.

These discussions begin to point towards some of the ways that artists' books can be engaged as teaching and learning resources at UC, as well as enriching the University's cultural environment. The ability of the artists' book to resist easy definition and classification, together with its position at the intersection of a number of different creative practices, emphasises the cross-disciplinary possibilities of the study and presentation of these objects. This report uses current discussions around artists' books as a starting point for attempting to identify artists' books in the university collection and begin to explore the ways that we can bring this collection to a wider audience.

\textsuperscript{7} Herlocker, p. 67.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid
THE COLLECTION: AN OVERVIEW

During the project approximately 370 artists' books were identified in the University collection. The majority of these books were located in the James Hight Library, although there were a significant number of publications by New Zealand artists held in the McMillian Brown Library's 'Art Files' and Modern Fine Print Collection.

Throughout the process of finding and compiling a database of these works, the unique strengths and points of interest in the collection became apparent. The collection has a clear focus on works by established contemporary New Zealand artists such as Bill Culbert, Gordon Walters, Richard Killeen, et al. (also known as Lillian Budd, P. Mule or Merlyn Tweedie), and Julia Morrison, amongst other practitioners who are very well respected in their fields. Many of these works were published during the 1990s, where there seems to have been a period of more intensive production of artists' books in NZ, as well as very active collection of book works by the University.

There is also a large collection of photobooks on the 4th floor of James Hight, many of which are recent works. Again, there is an emphasis on works by New Zealand practitioners.

It is evident that the University is continuing to acquire works by younger or up-and-coming New Zealand artists such as Louise Menzies, Ruth Buchanan and the collective All the Cunning Stunts. The School of Fine Arts' Ilam Press is also becoming more involved in publishing artists' books and hopefully the small collection of artists' books printed in-house will continue to grow in the future.

The collection also has a strong cross-section of works by several of the pioneers of conceptual art, the majority of which were published in the 1960s and 70s. Several of these books were published in a limited edition (often only 300-1500 copies were printed) and will have since become valuable and sought-after objects. These books are almost exclusively located in James Height.
Subsequently, one of the recommendations of this report is the need to re-evaluate the access and borrowing restrictions placed on some of these works. There will be a need to balance the long-term availability and accessibility of some of the works in the collection with the risks of potential damage and the need to preserve these works for future students and teaching staff.

There are a number of intersections between the collection and other areas and disciplines in the library collections, notably the Julio Campal Experimental Poetry Collection, as well as works by concrete poets. Due to time restrictions of this study, works included in these collections were not compiled in the artists’ books database. Relationships between these collections could be a valuable area for future investigation.
SPOTLIGHT: NINE WORKS IN THE COLLECTION

During the project, nine catalogue entry style pieces of writing were produced about works in the collection. These works were selected on the basis of providing a broad survey of the collection, and could provide the foundation for a future online or offline exhibition, blog entries or other possible outputs in the future.

1. Seth Siegelaub, *July, August, September 1969*

During the 1950s and 60s, New York art dealer Seth Siegelaub became known for his attempts to redefine the exhibition catalogue. Siegelaub worked closely with a small group of artists in order to expand and open up the exhibition environment to issues and possibilities posed by new forms of art, particularly what is now known as Conceptual Art. *July, August, September 1969* brings together work by Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Daniel Buren, Jan Dibbets, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol LeWitt, Richard Long, N.E. Thing Co. Ltd., Robert Smithson and Lawrence Weiner. The publication contains an exhibition that exists only in printed form, treading the line between ‘artists’ book’ and exhibition catalogue. For *July, August, September 1969* Siegelaub invited each artist or collective to produce a work in a different part of the world. They were then allocated a printed spread where this work could be presented or documented in a variety of possible forms. The resultant pageworks are composed of photographic documentation, sketches, plans, maps, and written descriptions. Siegelaub’s publication emphasises how printed reproductions can exist as artworks, together with the book’s ability to function as a curated space of display. *July, August, September 1969* can be considered an artists’ book as a product of a creative and investigative process akin to an experimental curatorial or artist practice, where traditional distinctions between the work of art, the exhibition, and the catalogue are scrutinised.

Graphic designer Stuart Bailey and artist Ryan Gander's collaborative publication *Appendix Appendix* (2007), edited by Christoph Keller, presents a script for a twelve-episode television series. This TV series encompasses interviews and snippets of film, advertising, text, and voiceovers. *Appendix Appendix* reflects Gander and Bailey's shared experiences growing up in the UK watching the same children's television programmes, referencing *Monty Python* and John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*. The publication is described as 'neither straight documentation nor an “artist’s book”, pushing for a third way'.

*Appendix Appendix* also acts as a catalogue of Gander and Bailey's own individual projects, which are woven into greater narratives and conversations about contemporary art and graphic design throughout the publication. This alternative 'translation of practice' approximates the variety and fragmentation of Gander's artistic approach, bringing together a diverse range of fields and formats, including lectures, audio-visual material, literature and cartoons.

In *Appendix Appendix* Bailey and Gander also experiment with the conventions of the book. Although art books often present work as 'finished', 'DRAFT' is stamped in blue ink on the cover, while contents pages, chapters and gratuitous photographic images are omitted from the publication. The resulting document is part-script part-collage, resisting classification. As the artists themselves describe, *Appendix Appendix* 'consists of – and is equally about – art and television'.

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11 Ibid.
3. Lawrence Wiener, *Having Been Done At/Having Been Done To*

Lawrence Wiener, a well-known pioneer of conceptualism, often uses language as primary material for his artworks. Weiner’s publication *Having Been Done At/Having Been Done To* (1972) includes a number of the artist’s characteristic written statements. These small pieces of text often describe artistic projects or act as instructions for completion of the work itself. In *Having Been Done At/Having Been Done To*, Weiner presents two short pieces of text printed in small type on each full-page spread of the book. The first half of the book is printed in English, while the second is printed in Italian. Rather than a direct translation, the English and Italian versions of the book present text with different meanings, emphasising the discrepancies and gaps in meaning between the two halves of the work. While some of Weiner’s written statements are oblique in nature, for example ‘having shone before mutilation’, others refer to the form of the work itself, such as ‘having spread before binding’, ‘spreading during binding’ and ‘standing after binding’. These statements act as linguistic propositions but also document the material processes involved in making the book, foregrounding these actions as transformative processes.
4. Ruth Buchanan, *Lying Freely*

*Lying Freely* (2010) is the fourth and final part of an iterant project by New Zealand artist Ruth Buchanan beginning in June 2009. Over the course of two years, Buchanan staged encounters between herself and the authors Janet Frame, Virginia Woolf and Agatha Christie, using their texts or events from their lives as a point of departure to explore tensions between artistic agency and collectively received legacies. The project was developed in three stages: *Nothing is Closed* (Part I), a guided tour through the Rietveld Schröeder House in Utrecht, The Netherlands; *Circular Facts* (Part II), a performance at Frascati Theatre, Amsterdam; and *Several Attentions* (Part III), an exhibition at The Showroom, London. In *Lying Freely*, the three previous stages of this project meet within the physical and conceptual space of the book, generating a dense network of relationships. *Lying Freely* was developed accumulatively between June 2008 and December 2009 in close collaboration with graphic designer David Bennewith. Each section was put together during Buchanan’s research-based residency at the Jan van Eyck Academie, Maastricht, The Netherlands, as the different stages of the project were ‘completed’. It is an unassuming and slender publication with a soft cover, just over A5 in size (15.5 x 25.5cm). However, *Lying Freely* creates space for the different functions of the artists’ book to come together in conversation with one another: it acts as a body of documentation, a series of instructions to be performed, and a performative space where new interactions can take place.
5. Douglas Huebler, *Crocodile Tears*

Douglas Huebler's *Crocodile Tears* consists of photographs and texts related to 'brief fictions re-sounding from the proposal in *Variable Piece #70: 1971* "to photographically document the existence of everyone alive"'. *Crocodile Tears* was published in conjunction with an exhibition of the same name at Albright-Knox Gallery in 1985. In the book, photographs taken by Huebler as part of his *Variable Piece* are interspersed with a multi-narrative screenplay. The script follows Decker, a 'signature artist' mass-producing saleable works to pay his mortgage, Eric Lloyd, an advocate of traditional painting and visitor at a provincial college art department, and Alec Gregory, a shady character who is negotiating the illegal sale of a (fake) Degas painting to a wealthy collector. Presented alongside these narratives are images of found knock-off works by Degas, Matisse and Van Gogh. Heubler's book resembles a black-and-white photocopy, its inexpensive production values juxtaposed with our knowledge and experiences of the 'old masters' discussed. Taken together, these different components emphasise the complexities of authenticity and authorship in a post-conceptualism art world where artists often work with multiplies and ideas are the primary currency.

6. Michael Stevenson, *Celebration at Persepolis*

*Celebration at Persepolis* (2008) is an artists’ book by New Zealand expat Michael Stevenson. The publication focuses on a lavish party held at Persepolis in 1971 by Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, supreme Monarch of Iran. Persepolis '71 marked the 2500\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire by Cyrus the Great, a figure of great adoration by the King. Stevenson describes that 'today at Persepolis, the luxurious tent built by a French interior design company to accommodate dignitaries still remains standing', although the site of the celebration 'is now dilapidated, overgrown, and vandalised. The tents themselves exist as ruined skeletal structures; their tattered cloth coverings have been all but destroyed by the elements.'\textsuperscript{14} In *Celebration at Persepolis*, Stevenson builds up a dialogue around this celebration together with other writers and interviewees. The research presented in the book formed the basis of an installation at Art Basel 38, June 2007. Stevenson’s installation *Persepolis 2530* presented a bare frame with scraps of sun-bleached fabric, a replica of one of these once-lavish tents as they are today. *Celebration at Persepolis* was designed in collaboration with graphic designer Christoph Keller and draws together text, photography and found images. The first section of the book relays a conversation between the artist and a structural engineer around the tenuousness of the physical structure of this tent. This is juxtaposed alongside later discussions about the instability of the political and socio-economic context surrounding the Iranian Monarchy that were intensified by the celebrations as Stevenson teases out the complexities of the context for the celebration.

\textsuperscript{14} Michael Stevenson, *Celebration at Persepolis*, Arnolfini, Bristol, Christoph Keller Editions and JRP Ringier, Zurich, 2008, inner sleeve.
7. John Baldessari, *Brown and Green and Other Parables*

John Baldessari’s book *Brown, Green and Other Parables* plays against his earlier publication *Ingres and Other Parables* (1972). It was published in 2001 by the Reykjavik Art Museum in a limited edition of 1500. The book is printed in a landscape format similar to a calendar. Each spread consists of a photograph of an object or objects with a short parable-esque text printed underneath. These texts contain ambiguous ‘morals’ for art students or young artists. Baldessari’s stories are funny, sad and droll, yet each shares an element of surrealism. *Brown, Green and Other Parables* includes a story about an artist who can only afford to paint with jam rather than purple paint, a characteristic that becomes associated with his work, an abstract painter who fervidly maintains that painting should depict subject matter who keeps accidentally painting ducks, and an archaeologist who destroys a painting with pieces of broken plate in it through trying to put the smashed ceramics back together. Baldessari’s book speaks to the difficulties of artistic production and reception with a sense of humour. *Brown, Green and Other Parables* is designed in a way that encourages an artist to hang it on the wall in their studio, turning the pages to a new photograph and accompanying story when they feel like learning a new ‘lesson’ from the artist.
8. Gordon Walters, A Geometric Order

Gordon Walters, one of New Zealand best-known Modernist artists, published *A Geometric Order* in 1993 together with Workshop Press in an edition of 250 numbered and signed copies. In each spread of the book a single word is paired with a black-and-white geometric composition. A brief acknowledgement on the inside cover describes that these images were put together 'with the assistance of Richard Killeen on an Apple Macintosh computer.' Killeen himself published an earlier book with same publisher called *Destruction of the Circle* (1990), which shares the exact materials and dimensions of *A Geometric Order* and also features early computer-made imagery, giving the impression of being part of a series. As well as an experiment in computer rendering, Walter’s selection of words, such as 'oriental', 'flag', 'mirror' and 'pacific' recall tropes in the interpretation of abstract geometric paintings. The accompanying text emphasises that the rhetoric, reception and production of abstract geometric compositions are often culturally or historically loaded.
9. Louise Menzies, *The Pursuit of an Ideal*

“This artist’s book considers modern, scientistic attitudes to wellbeing through the example of the little known New Zealand-based mid-twentieth-century movement, the School of Radiant Living. Founded by English psychologist Herbert Sutcliffe in the 1930s and active until the early 1980s, the School taught a holistic philosophy of spirituality and physical health. A response to archival material produced by the School, and now held by the J.C. Beaglehole Room at Victoria University Library, Wellington, *Pursuit of an Ideal* includes a wealth of ephemera in reproduction.

Characteristically, Menzies abstracts from this highly specific reference in order to consider its possible relations to our current situation. The publication imaginatively reconfigures the materials it responds to, collapsing document and invention. In this way, it draws out broader themes; tensions between the individual and the collective, the practical and the ideal, and the persistence of desire in nostalgia and utopian visions.

This publication exists within a larger body of work that includes the installations *Move Your Arms in Circles*, *Letters to Students of the Radiant Life*, and a short film *Peloha* that shows a performance of exercises adapted from the School’s ‘Physical Culture’ manual and that was filmed at the house of the same name (a contraction of ‘peace, love and harmony’) in Havelock North, the international headquarters of the School. It includes a poster insert and pamphlet featuring a text by Anna Sanderson which was first presented with these earlier iterations of this exploration of Radiant Living’s modernist vision.” – Clouds Publishing, New Zealand
THE DATABASE

Bibliographic data related to these publications were recorded in a database which will hopefully be made accessible to staff and students in some form in the future, and could be used to link different areas of the collection together.

Taking into account current discussions in the field of artists' books, several subcategories were identified and used for tagging works in the database. These included:

- Artists' Books: New Zealand
- Artists' Books: Catalogues
- Artists' Books: Photobook
- Artists' Books: Mass Edition
- Artists' Books: Limited Edition
- Artists' Books: Poetry

A complete list of works in the database is located in the appendix to this report.
CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has provided information about the artists’ books located in the University of Canterbury’s art and library collections, with the understanding that this information will provide the basis for further research by the Department of Art History and Theory.

As well as providing data about the nature, location and quantity of artists’ books in the collection, it has also established some significant tensions and points-of-discussion in the field of artists’ books that may help to build a particular direction for future research outputs, such as online platforms, exhibitions and conferences.

A number of recommendations have emerged through this research. One particular suggestion is to reevaluate the location and access of some of the more fragile or rare artists’ books currently housed in the James Hight Library. Another is that the collection, particularly the restricted access works in Macmillian Brown, be made available to students and staff through an online platform in the future. This could be initiated through collaboration with the Digital Humanities.

Engagement with artists’ books in UC Collections would no doubt be strengthened through events such as exhibitions and conferences hosted by the university, and collaborations with external partners.
BIBLIOGRAPHY AND RESOURCE LIST

The publications in bold type have not yet been acquired by the UC Library and would be advantageous to purchase in the future if more research on artists’ books is to be conducted.

The ‘Conferences, Exhibitions and Research Initiatives’ section provides some innovative models to look at for future events and online platforms that could enhance the collection and display of artists’ books at UC.

Books and Journals


**Online Resources:**


Keller, Christoph, “re: a place where things cannot come to their end”, in *Books Make Friends*, Culturgest, Roma Publications, 2006, retrieved from

**Conferences, Collections, Databases, Exhibitions and Research Initiatives:**


APPENDIX A: LIST OF WORKS IN THE COLLECTION


Dashper, J. (2010). This is not writing. Auckland, N.Z: Clouds.


Lüthi, U., & Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum, J. (1975). Some day when my longing is gone, I'm gonna take a smile for a walk in the sun. Graz: Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum.

Lüthi, U., & Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum, J. (1975). Some day when my longing is gone, I'm gonna take a smile for a walk in the sun. Graz: Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum.


