

Critical Art Librarianship & Artists' Publishing

INFO667: Art Librarianship

Beth Rudig

May 10, 2021

Critical librarianship has been gaining traction in librarian communities over the past few decades, however, the discussion does not seem to be taking hold amongst art librarians, even though art libraries could benefit greatly from shifting their views towards a more critical practice. Critical librarianship is a nebulous community without a manifesto, and critical librarianship can mean many different things to different practitioners. However, it is generally agreed upon that critical librarianship is a loose framework, rather than a prescribed set of rules or regulations. The goal of critical librarianship is to create a better, more equitable future for librarians and for the communities that utilize library services. Emily Drabinski, one of the foremost advocates of critical librarianship currently working in the field, stated in her keynote address at the conference *Towards a critical (art) Librarianship* at Chelsea College of the Arts in 2019, “For me, critical librarianship begins with acknowledging and then interrogating the structures that produce us as librarians, our spaces as libraries, our patrons as students, faculty, and the public, whose interface with the sum of human knowledge is produced, in large part, by us.” (Drabinski 2018) This introductory remark gets straight to the point of what critical librarianship is about, including adopting a critical perspective of power structures and systems at various scales, acknowledging the social, economic, and political context of library processes and policies, articulating the systems that enable some voices to be heard and not others, and making visible the labor that is often meant to be invisible. These are overarching and formidable goals, but through critically examining and shifting our daily practices including frameworks for reference and instruction, collection development, staffing and workplace culture, relationships with institutional structures and patron relationships, concrete and practical shifts can take place every day within art libraries, and all libraries, for a better future.

Critical art librarianship begins with shifting one's perspective and includes implementing practices and programs across all aspects, duties, and divisions of the library. Criticality focuses on unmasking, naming, and surfacing disparities and historically inequitable systems and processes that allow libraries to function. These practices could be adopted within an art library setting more seamlessly than in other generalized libraries due to the age-old link between art and activism. Art is not neutral, and impactful art scholarship and education are not either, so why do art libraries still attempt to uphold the librarian myth of neutrality? "If art librarians reinforce the notion that we offer apolitical research help and traditional library instruction, we leave out the very nuanced way that artists and creative practitioners do research and explore politically charged and personal themes within their work." (Meeks 2019) The work that art librarians do when providing reference, research, and instruction assistance or programming is inherently and often overtly political, so the guise of neutrality must be left behind by art librarians committed to shifting to a more critical art librarianship. Patrons and staff alike will benefit from this shift, which will allow for greater and broader engagement with critical arts education practices, critical visual literary ideas, and the internal structural goals of critical librarianship.

The effort to do away with the neutrality of librarianship also encompasses the effort to decolonize the library, which is distinctly different from the process of diversifying a library. Decolonizing collections can be achieved through proactive collection development policies, including examining demographics of collection materials, making weeding and acquisition decisions based on patron usage, re-thinking cataloging and classification terminology, and being aware of the context of the collection. "Decolonizing collections is not simply a form of diversification; it includes a critical re-contextualization of the collections that we hold." (Crilly

2019) Critically re-examining and re-contextualizing collections is a key aspect of a critical art librarianship, and a continued and sustained effort towards decolonization is an important critical practice, especially in an art library where issues of repatriation, ownership, and ethics are more visible in collections dealing with the arts. A recontextualization of objects manifesting power and privilege in the collection that are a direct result of colonization or reflect the unlawful trade of art objects are easily found in art library collections, and art librarians should use these materials as teaching opportunities. Reconsidering who these materials are for and how they might impact the patron's experience and efforts of information seeking and knowledge production is an important step in recontextualization. Information is always contextualized, and the patron's experience of the collection will impact how they use it. There is no universal patron and understanding the complexities of varied sociopolitical and cultural experience can allow for a more equitable art library experience for patrons as well as create a more satisfying and fulfilling work environment for the art librarian.

For art libraries to effectively empower and serve the user community and the world at large, they need to not only re-contextualize dominant and harmful ideologies but also collect and make available alternative and outsider voices. This is especially important for art libraries since artists and scholars utilize collections for inspiration or critique, and without a collection representing the multitude of voices involved in art and culture production, an art library is not providing its patrons with adequate resources. These voices are often found in self-published zines and artists' books. These publications hold power within the context of an art library collection and can even act as interventions in the same way activist art does. Many zines and artists' books are explicitly political or educational with similar goals to activist artworks. As Lucy Lippard states in her seminal essay defining activist art, "Maybe the Trojan Horse was the

first activist artwork. Based in subversion on the one hand and empowerment on the other, activist art operates both within and beyond the beleaguered fortress that is high culture or the ‘art world’.” (Lippard 1984) Since art libraries are often a part of museums or arts institutions and contribute to and support “the art world”, they are for all intents and purposes synonymous with the beleaguered fortress Lippard speaks of. Artists’ books and self-published zines can act as “Trojan horses” in the library collection, sneaking their ways onto shelves, later becoming a site for empowerment through representation of knowledge and art not represented elsewhere in the collection, created outside the ‘art world’ for a specific purpose and audience, and collected within the ‘art world’ to disseminate these ideas into the knowledge production present in art libraries. Artists’ books, especially self-published or collectively published artists’ books, are not confined to one role in the art world or the market, and this mutability can allow for their entrance into art library collections and their revelatory potential. Collecting and contextualizing artists’ books as alternative knowledge production creates new avenues to discover a wider range of artistic voices within the art world and allows for patrons and librarians to utilize these materials as critical education resources and tools for decentering dominant ideologies.

Artists’ books are notoriously undefinable and varied in their goals, messages, format, and distribution techniques. There is no consensus on the definition of artists’ books, but there have been many attempts to define them. For the efforts of critical librarianship, artists’ books created by blue chip artists in extremely expensive and limited runs, collected as art objects and never interacted with are not of any use to art libraries. However, beyond that small section of artists’ books, there is a wide spectrum of worthwhile efforts in book art production, which has become more diverse and plentiful than ever before in recent years due to the explosion of art book fairs and ease of self-publishing due to technological advances. One worthwhile example of

an artists' book publisher currently creating intriguing work is Coloured Publishing, based in Los Angeles and founded in 2015 by artist Devin Troy Strother and designer Yuri Ogita. Their works deal with personal and political topics through a tongue in cheek, self-critical, and satirical bent, allowing their works to fit well into the educational and representational goals of collecting artists' books to support critical art librarianship. From their website, "Publishing outside institutional standards, the press aims to share ideas about an eclectic range of topics with full autonomy – being people of color in the US, celebrating underappreciated cultural phenomena, and publishing works by their fellow artists." (Coloured Publishing, 2021). These works can be used in educational programs and serve as inspiration to artists browsing collections.

The nebulous and uncategorizable quality of artists' books does not diminish their possible impact on the project of critical art libraries, it instead strengthens their impact by allowing these unique books to act as disruptions in the expectations of the library. Artists' books are a highly experiential form of art, able to be handled and felt in ways other art works are not, often centering their materiality as meaning against personal and political themes. "Artists' books ask us to make connections that go beyond formal aspects and traditional boundaries of art. Toward this end, they are poster children for integrated and interdisciplinary curricular approaches." (Burkhart 2006) According to Burkhart, the aspects inherent in artists' books are best utilized not only as a discoverable part of art library collections, but also as an educational tool. Educational programs and outreach are an important part of the critical librarianship movement and can help shift the power dynamics in a library. Critical librarianship acknowledges that invisible power structures and processes have a very real and material effect and relationship with knowledge construction. Making connections between these invisible structures in an art library and the art world at large through exploring specific examples of

works such as artists' books and self-published zines that play with the ideas of materiality, power, borders, and boundaries, our library patrons and students will become better and more interdisciplinary artists, thinkers, and citizens at large.

Artists' books use of textual, visual, experiential, and personal elements to illuminate production of meaning allows for them to be utilized to illustrate and interrogate the invisible systems at play in a library, to disseminate alternative and outsider artistic voices in an art library collection, and finally to surface the political, social, and economic dynamics present in these systems. As an educational tool, artists' books can also help teach students critical visual literacy, something all arts educators should be engaged with. Critical visual literacy is especially important in art libraries, as it can have lasting impacts on art students' practice and knowledge production. "We consider critical visual literacy in library instruction as a means of engaging art and design students in conversations concerning social justice within the context of their profession, education, and personal creative practices." (Grimm & Meeks, 2017) Critical visual literacy takes the idea of visual literacy, which examines how meaning is constructed through images, and pushes it further to investigate the sociopolitical meaning and context in images to illuminate power structures and relations, much like critical librarianship.

Critical visual literacy brings social justice to the fore when evaluating and investigating the ways in which images produce meaning. This includes interrogating the representation in images and media of marginalized and underrepresented groups and surfacing the role of education to counteract oppression. Critical visual literacy allows art students to reflect on the impact of images, the ways one conducts visual research, and builds an awareness of what isn't represented in visual culture. Asking questions during the research process and interrogating sources allows for artists to interpret the visual materials they use and produce based on

historical, political, cultural, and social contexts in which they were created. This exploration of the context and position of the creation of images also allows for art librarians to re-frame potentially problematic or offensive, albeit historically significant, objects in their collections. Patrons with visual critical literacy approaching art library collections that are managed and developed by critical art librarians have the power to break down the oppressive structures and habitual thinking prevalent today in libraries.

Through collecting and teaching with artists' books and self-published zines, art librarians can build visual critical literacy in their patrons that will shift patron behaviors and ways in which patrons utilize collections and interact with art libraries. Allowing for library interactions to be critical and questioning instead of passive acceptance of systems and processes can create a sense of belonging to many patrons and artists who had never felt supported, understood, or able to contribute to the knowledge production processes at work in art libraries. Engaging artists to speak to their own experiences and communities, in an equal and open exchange of information, is what will keep art libraries alive and thriving in the future. Exposing patrons and students to art works and resources created for and by audiences both like and unlike themselves will generate critical thought and artistic expression. Through education, outreach, and proactive collection development, art libraries will become truly accessible, open, and user centered.

The final tenant of critical librarianship that is of utmost importance to art libraries is the development of a healthier, more inclusive, and more human-centered workplace culture. Education and collection development can only go so far in shifting the power dynamics that silently play out daily in art libraries. Staff members need to feel supported, heard, and able to bring change into the library environment, no matter their level of leadership or professional

development. Allowing for art libraries to function without such strictly stratified staff hierarchies will allow for more diverse hiring practices and more swift and productive critical shifts in practices across all aspects of the library. Libraries, and especially academic and specialized libraries such as art libraries, have a serious diversity problem and a fraught history. Critical librarianship asks us to acknowledge and confront these inequalities, as nothing will happen if diversity is treated as a benchmark or statistical guideline, power must be acknowledged and challenged for workplace culture to shift. Drabinski states, “Critical librarianship must grapple concretely and directly with the dynamics of white supremacy and consolidations of wealth and opportunity to a vanishing few that produce these facts on the ground. We need to be serious with ourselves about why librarians consistently fail to hire people who do not look and act like them.” (Drabinski, 2018) Breaking this cycle begins at the top, with those in power continuing to hire candidates that they deem more qualified because of how they fit into the current climate or historical ideal of the art librarian. Directors and top-tier staff members must begin to shift their hiring practices and their ideas of the ideal art librarian away from outdated and offensive ideals that mirror their own positions of power.

Without a diverse staff bringing varied experiences and different perspectives into the art library, it will never be able to truly engage with critical librarianship practices in a lasting way. While this is obviously easier said than done, critical art librarianship can help shift the tide in power dynamics, allowing for hiring practices that bring new ideas into the library that have historically never been welcomed or heard. Asking the questions “Who speaks?” “Who listens?” within an art library workplace dynamic can help illuminate the gaps in expertise and put an end to the further silencing of BIPOC voices within an institution. Art libraries must make space for

and listen to the forward-thinking visions and critical perspectives coming from historically silenced and marginalized voices.

While the collection and use of artists' books, self-published zines, and independent publishing will not solve all the problems and disparities at play in art libraries, it can and should be utilized as one tool in the toolbelt of a critical librarianship practice. As Lucy Lippard stated decades ago, "It is crucial to remember that grassroots activism begins at home. We tend to forget that organizing within the art community is also effective. Artists alone can't change the world. Neither can anyone else, alone. But we can choose to be a part of the world that is changing." (Lippard 1984) Adopting critical librarianship practices in art libraries is how we as art librarians can choose to be a part of a world that is changing. There is no universal ideal of a patron or librarian, we all approach and utilize the library in a myriad of ways informed by our cultural, economic, racial, and social backgrounds. Surfacing and highlighting underrepresented voices through materials in collections, creating novel and diverse programming, and supporting change-makers and leaders throughout the library are all concrete actions that will allow us to shape the future of art libraries. Artists and art librarians alone cannot change the world, but if we put in the work to shift institutional power, interrogate invisible systems, provide more transformative educational resources, and foster a sense of belonging for everyone in libraries, we will find ourselves closer than ever before to the vision of a truly equitable art library.

References

About Us. (2021). Coloured Publishing. <https://colouredpublishing.press/pages/about-us>

AthanasIU, E. (2015). Belonging: Artists' Books and Readers in the Library. *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America*, 34(2), 330-338. doi:10.1086/683388

Burkhart, A. (2006). "Mongrel Nature:" A Consideration of Artists' Books and Their Implications for Art Education. *Studies in Art Education*, 47(3), 248-268. doi:10.2307/25475784

Cheinman, K. (2014). Creating Alternative Art Libraries. *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America*, 33(1), 41-58. doi:10.1086/675705

Crilly, J. (2019). A reflexive lens: Critical librarianship at UAL. *Art Libraries Journal*, 44(2), 83–91. <https://doi-org.ezproxy.pratt.edu/10.1017/alj.2019.9>

Drabinski, E. (2018, May 25). *Critical Art Librarianship conference*. Emily Drabinski. <http://www.emilydrabinski.com/critical-art-librarianship-conference/>

Drucker, J. (1997). The Self-Conscious Codex: Artists' Books and Electronic Media. *SubStance*, 26(1), 93-112. doi:10.2307/3684834

Grimm S., & Meeks A. (2017). Break the Stereotype! Critical Visual Literacy in Art and Design Librarianship. *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America*, 36(2), 173–190.

Lippard, L. (1984). Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power. In B. Wallis (Ed.), *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (pp. 1–13). MIT Press.

Meeks, A. (2019). Art as the practice of freedom: Critical alliances and professional identities within art librarianship. *Art Libraries Journal*, 44(2), 61–66.