The Library in Art’s Crosshairs

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Abstract— The library has been examined critically by many artists, particularly those working since the 1960s. This article identifies four ideas recurring in art works that critique this institution. These themes relate the library to its community, to issues of authorship and ownership, to restrictive forms of order, and to the tension between chaos and order that often accompanies creativity.

“I’m thinking about the library being this place of projection and the production of certain myths.”
—– Edgar Arceneaux'

I N T R O D U C T I O N
In the 1960s, disruptive conceptual artists often sought to replace abstract formalist objects with an art based on ideas. Championing this movement, Lucy Lippard famously noted the new role for information as a replacement for material. Works such as Robert Morris’s 1962 Card File, which was a standard Cardex file obtained from an office supply and filled with records about its use as an art object, manifested a new fascination with information systems and interest in art as a mere record of ideas—notions that filtered into other types of art making and survived to the present. Therefore, it is not surprising that many works of the past fifty years tapped into the imagery of the library, one of society’s most visible information systems. In considering this group of works, I have found value in excluding a large number of laudatory...
memorials consisting of references to the great writers, winged books, and other standard rhetoric of education, and focusing on the edgy, anxious, or simply humorous—points of view that are extramural in some way. It may be fair to characterize most of these works as institutional critiques of the library. As such, they could be situated between the literature of the institutional critique of the museum, which perhaps peaked in the 1990s, and the more recent discourse on the archive. Focusing on this type of art from the mid-1960s through the early twenty-first century has yielded several themes—surprisingly grand ones. Some of these artworks suggest a cultural compulsion to see the library represent the interests of the community or to find the library to be a site for complications of authorship and ownership. Others of these works urge one to regard with suspicion the order that characterizes a library, or further, to ponder the relationship between order and disorder that seems integral to creative processes.

All types of libraries appear in the works selected here, but beginning with the small private library might clarify these themes before tackling their more complex relationship to institutional libraries. Many artists have amassed impressive collections for their own consultation. More often than one might imagine, these personal collections have made appearances in art works or become works in themselves. Buzz Spector’s *Unpacking My Library* was a solo exhibition consisting entirely of “all the books in the artist’s library, arranged in order of the height of the spine, from the tallest to the shortest, on a single shelf in a room large enough to hold them.” Such an exhibit recognizes, among the many reasons that we keep books, the value of a collection as a display of our interests—a very object-oriented way of projecting our enthusiasms and values. Video and performance artist Martha Rosler was persuaded to present her highly interdisciplinary library as an art installation, and there are several other examples of exhibitions of artists’ libraries. Musing on his own library, cultural critic Alberto Manguel, author of *The Library at Night*, sighed, “Every library is autobiographical.” However, a personal collection is not a projection of personality plain and simple.

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5. Alberto Manguel, *The Library at Night* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 194. Manguel goes on to nuance his statement and would probably agree with James Wood that “libraries are always paradoxical: they are as personal as the collector.
Any collection suffers from complications of ownership and authorship. Spector’s exhibit borrowed its title from Walter Benjamin’s essay on book collecting, first published in 1931. Thumbing through the bookplates and marginalia left by other readers in his books, Benjamin described the collector’s “feeling of responsibility” as “the attitude of an heir, and the most distinguished trait of a collection [as] its transmissibility.” Of course, he could only hope to possess the paper and boards, not the words or ideas of the authors of his books. Pondering Martha Rosler’s library, Elena Filipovic asked, “Who is the author?” She was concerned primarily with the question of the collector’s agency but used the question to reheat the critical discourse on author functions, originally stoked by the publication and republication of key essays by Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and others from the late 1960s through the early 1980s. If the author had died, or at least could only be recognized in multi-vocal discourse or the multiple roles of narration or in the reader’s eye, what better image to contain all of these possibilities than the book? Or better yet, lots of books (Figure 1). Heaps of books are easy to relate to postmodern concepts of the many players involved in the creation of meaning. Indeed, the large number of artworks in which books have been used as building materials—to construct walls, stairways, furniture, and all manner of structures, seems to respond both in spirit and chronologically to the pronouncements of Foucault, Barthes, and the other heroes of late twentieth-century critical theory.

Even the order of books in a collection can be a multi-voiced construction of meaning or a projection of the world view of an individual. When Rosler’s books were moved from her home, studio, and office into an exhibition space, she criticized the installation for its rearrangements and persuaded the curators to recreate her collection’s idiosyncratic order. Spector insisted on the objecthood of his books by sequencing them by size—an order that seems to defy any useful meaning—perhaps even to take a jab at the value of order. Of course, presentation of these personal libraries implies some sort of insight into the thinking and creative process of the artist-as-reader.

PROJECTION OF INTERESTS

Just as a personal collection of books can be studied for insights into the collector’s world, so too a larger, institutional library might be seen as a characterization of interests of the community it serves. Librarians certainly attempt to tune collections and programs to the needs of the community, but achieving harmony can be difficult. After a period of minimal spending for large, central public library buildings during

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and at the same time are an ideal statement of knowledge that is impersonal, because it is universal, abstract, and so much larger than the individual life.” James Wood, “Shelf Life: Packing Up My Father-in-Law’s Library,” The New Yorker (November 7, 2011): 40–43.
7. Filipovic, “If You Read Here,” 95.
8. Many compelling structures assembled from large quantities of books have been exhibited by Matej Kren, Buzz Spector, Annette Lemieux, Anselm Kiefer, Hong Hao, John Latham, Naylan Blake, Ann Hamilton, Adam Bateman, and many other artists. Some are illustrated in Heartney, “The Treacherous Library” and Stewart, Bookwork.
the 1970s and 1980s, Americans experienced two or three decades of constructing impressive monumental public libraries as competing cities elevated libraries to the status of essential cultural features, alongside sports stadiums and museum wings. These library buildings generated scores of art commissions employing a variety of tactics for invoking community. During this building wave, public library systems, with their neighborhood branches and highly visible main libraries, offered a useful structure to public art programs that wanted to engage the citizenry in their aesthetic decisions. A sterling example was the commissioning of art for San José’s new Martin Luther King Library. As with many cities, a percent-for-art ordinance required that a small portion of the new building budget be used to commission art to enhance the facility. Not unusual for this type of project, planning documents sought art that would “reflect the many people of many different cultures in San José.”

In response to the call for pluralism, artist Mel Chin, well experienced in site-specific installations, proposed a large number of sculptures rather than a single gesture. Once awarded the commission, he and Mary Rubin, the project manager for San José’s Office of Cultural Affairs, held a series of meetings at libraries throughout the city to solicit ideas from the public. In a clear example of the process, an elderly woman answered one of the focus group questions, “What is your favorite book?” with “Aesop’s Fables.” “Which one?” asked Chin. As they discussed the tale of the fox who longed to eat

beautiful grapes only to find that they were sour, Chin sketched a gnarled portion of grape vine that evolved into a glass sculpture on the ceiling above some book stacks. A number of the thirty-four works, collectively titled *Recolecciones*, grew from ideas of community members, whether individuals or ethnic groups. Other motifs were drawn from the collections themselves. A special collection of Beethoven materials generated a sculpture entitled *Beethoven’s Inner Ear*. Small gilt-framed mirrors were installed behind the self-help books (Figure 2). By scattering these sculptural “insertions,” as he called them, throughout the building and creating a popular treasure hunt, the variety of potential discoveries in the library collection were related directly to the variety of interests of the people of San José.\(^{10}\)

Artists may find the responsibility of representing the entire community difficult or impossible to achieve. Though *Recolecciones* was generally received as a popular

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and successful project, it encountered some protests. The curator of the Beethoven collection appealed to have the *Inner Ear* moved to another part of the library, and complaints that the Latino community was represented only by tricked-up tables designed by low-rider aficionados led to a late addition to the sculptural program that highlighted the locations of Latino authors by placing enameled monarch butterflies (which migrate between North and South America) strategically throughout the building. Community identity resists fixed form. Sensitivities abound. In discussing a commission to work with the Providence Public Library and the museum of the Rhode Island School of Design, Cuban-American artist Ernesto Pujol complained of high expectations of community-based art residencies, where artists are expected to “translate contemporary art for mainstream audiences, which often perceive it as a hermetic language, and to engage people of color from previously untapped working-class communities and recent immigrant populations. . . . an almost messianic role.”

Librarians sometimes share Pujol’s frustration. Just as it is difficult for art to represent a diverse community, so the idea that a library collection can “reflect” the interests of the community has not gone unchallenged by artists. Perhaps the clearest refutation was the Library Project staged by the trio of artists working under the name of “Temporary Services.” In 2001, they organized sixty artists in the creation or accumulation of 100 books, then smuggled them into the collections of their hometown Harold Washington Library, the flagship of the Chicago Public Library system. Rubber stamps and other labeling devices, purchased from standard library suppliers, disguised each book as a routine acquisition (Figure 3). The group openly stated its intentions:

Despite its great size, beautiful architecture, massive holdings, and extensive art collection, Temporary Services feels that this library should offer the public a little more. . . . Artists that are doing extraordinary work shouldn’t have to be famous or widely-published before they can have their work in the city’s public library. For once let’s take the bureaucracy out of the equation. Let’s let a few books enter the collection without a passport, a permission slip, an acquisition number, or an RSVP.

They quoted the Chicago Public Library’s mission statement and the American Library Association’s Library Bill of Rights in defense of their guerilla action: “Books and other library resources should be provided for the interest, information, and enlightenment of all people of the community the library serves. Materials should not be excluded because of the origin, background, or views contributing to their creation.”

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Of course, librarians must interpret their professional creed within limitations of funds and space. In addition to topics of interest to the community, libraries usually select publications because of their quality—works that have been well reviewed, written by recognized authorities, published by good presses, etc. Librarians are often fully versed in these conventions and could easily identify, even when it was new in 1961, Clement Greenberg’s collection of essays entitled *Art and Culture* as a classic statement of the theory of mid-century modernism in general and abstract expressionism in particular. British artist John Latham, while teaching at St. Martin’s School of Art in 1966, checked out a copy of Greenberg’s respected book from his school’s library and took it to an evening gathering of friends and students, where the book’s pages were removed and chewed, by a number of participants, and spat into a jar. Later Latham, keenly interested in science, performed a series of chemical transformations on the remains, slowly reducing them to a goo, which he sealed into a glass vial. Overdue notices were received from the library, so Latham eventually attempted to return the book to the librarian in its modified state. This offer was refused. Latham’s teaching contract was not renewed. A few years later, Latham fashioned a carrying case for the vial, some of the lab apparatus, and the library notices, and today the assemblage is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art.  

By selecting

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proven publications, libraries provide an easy target for those rejecting the status quo. Although the approach taken by Temporary Services, thirty-five years later, was more positive than Latham’s, the 100 books they chose for their city’s library (primarily original creations by little-known artists or the publications of small, alternative presses) came from well outside the bounds of accepted authority.

**Ownership / Authorship**

Temporary Services acknowledged that their thinking was influenced by the artistic duo Michael Clegg and Martin Guttmann, whose *Open Public Library* projects, begun in 1990, consisted of shelves of books installed outdoors at street corners, vacant lots, and other ambiguous urban settings. In Hamburg neighborhoods, abandoned electrical utility boxes were fitted with shelves and supplied with an initial stock of books along with the instructions: “You can take a limited number of books for a limited time. Contributions of books welcome.” Clegg and Guttmann had these alternative libraries monitored closely, keeping statistics and other observations to create what they called “community portraiture.” They argued that their fragile libraries surpassed institutional collections in their ability to capture community.¹⁵ Moreover, they described their work as an exploration of the operations of shared property in a consumerist society. They maintain that, for at least a century, modern art has been popularly conceived as the expression of an individual soul—feelings overriding realities in making decisions and choices growing introspective and seemingly arbitrary until reaching a climax in the purely abstract painting. By this way of thinking, “self-realization is, simply, the ability to make seemingly arbitrary choices” a way of life also encouraged as the key to consumerism.¹⁶ Advertising and many other modes of communication urge us to express ourselves by shopping, by choosing what to own. By using the word “libraries” for their outdoor book exchanges, Clegg and Guttmann chose one of the few institutions in modern capitalist society that is fully shared public property. Publicly accessible libraries appeal to Temporary Services and to Clegg and Gutmann, partly because they disrupt the tenants of capitalism. Nonetheless, both artists’ groups wanted to reform the library, defined by Clegg and Gutmann as “the environment where the image of knowledge is integrated with the image of state power and private patronage,” by replacing bureaucratic systems with “direct democracy.”¹⁷

But in their efforts to foster direct democracy, these artists encountered a problem of currency and relevancy with which those in the library professions also struggle. What does community mean in the age of the Internet? Like many postmodern artists, Mel Chin, Clegg and Gutmann, and Temporary Services employed multiple authorship as a

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way of escaping the self-serving mode of expressionism-as-shopping. They distanced themselves from involvement with the content of their work. Mel Chin did so by playing the role of mediator between ideas from the community and features from the library. The trio Temporary Services recruited sixty other artists to create and select books for their “gift” to the Chicago Public Library. Clegg and Guttman had students gather random donations for their initial book stock and took no part in the resulting interactions. By creating an infrastructure for the participation of others, the tactics of these artists anticipated aspects of the cultural impact of the Internet, where user-contributed content is commonplace and murky identification of ownership is the norm. The popularity of Wikipedia, not long after its appearance in 2001, and the spotlight it placed on the contributions of anonymous hive workers, may have taken some of the wind out of the sails of the conceptual art projects I have discussed. The Open Public Library experiments ceased some time before 2005, their impact perhaps overshadowed by social computing’s potential to deliver portraits of communities, albeit usually communities of interest rather than of geographic proximity. Temporary Services did not repeat its Library Project, but later one of its members, Marc Fischer, started a web-based Public Collectors network of people willing to share (either by accepting visitors or by posting scans) their personal collections of alternative media (artists’ books, zines, ephemera, realia, obsolete audio and video formats, and more).

Perhaps more important than competition from the wiki-world, Mel Chin, Temporary Services, and Clegg and Guttmann met a temporal barrier inherent in their library interventions. Andrea Fraser, master of the institutional critique, says the impact of a critical intervention is usually limited to a particular time and place. The artists in these three projects attempted to engage community members by providing discoveries for them (a mirror in a surprising place, an unexpected book about police, or bookshelves on a street corner). In principle, these discoveries should extend indefinitely into posterity, engaging future community members, but in practice the works became more frozen in time than the creators might have hoped. The self-help books had to be shifted away from the Self-Help Mirrors. Temporary Services’s careful insertions into the stacks of the Harold Washington Library have mostly been gathered and boxed as an archival collection. The Open Public Libraries established by Clegg and Guttmann in Hamburg and other cities have disappeared. Once fixed in time, most interventions can only respond to living and breathing communities with mere commemoration.

Interactive media artist George Legrady’s Making Visible the Invisible: What the Community is Reading, installed in the new Seattle Central Library in 2003, scrutinized more directly the relationship between the library and its community. His coordinated video

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20. Perhaps I exaggerate the demise of these projects. Archival preservation of the Temporary Services intervention was interpreted largely as an honor by Marc Fischer, who coordinated The Library Project. Moreover, a small number of books remain well-hidden in the stacks. At least one was absorbed into the collection, perhaps thought to be a processing error. “Pop-up libraries” (also known as “little free libraries” or “guerilla libraries” or “phone booth libraries”) have been common before and after the Clegg and Guttmann project, but usually more as a matter of neighborhood recycling than art installation. Despite some weathering, Recolecciones remains a popular feature of the San José Library. Nonetheless, the edge of critique tends to dull with time.
panels display the titles, subjects, and formats of all items recently borrowed, as well as impressive loan statistics, in a series of animated data spectacles (Figure 4 and the video posted at George Legrady Studio, www.georgelegrady.com). Perched above the main reference desk, these choreographed displays, in the artist’s words, “make visible the library’s functioning as a living entity.” By wiretapping the hidden workings of the library, his entertaining myriorama defines community with sweeping breadth and sparkling granularity as the sum of the strivings of its individuals. The terms of this achievement include erasure of conventional categories of identity (ethnic, racial, etc.), suggesting art critic Blake Stimson’s “common baseline” where “the category of identity itself [is taken] all the way down to its zero degree . . . where the old Marxian slogan ‘I am nothing and I should be everything’ is once again possible.” This possibility is pushed to the foreground by placing the video displays adjacent to 142 computer workstations used incessantly by Seattle’s poor, homeless, and underequipped.

Beyond supporting the economic and social utility of the library, Legrady’s tactic critiques the library’s current and future roles. It questions what a library should be in the twenty-first century. I cannot look at Legrady’s panels without thinking of all of the things libraries do not do with data on the use of their collections. Procedures that gather data on individuals and the choices they have made to help inform the decisions of future individuals—processes that have made Amazon so much more popular than any library catalog and processes that might even help the local community maintain identity and validity during the globalization of practically everything. Legrady claims that “We are data,” and he seems to want to help the library nurture and develop its data set, in spite of the library profession’s overreaction to impositions on readers’ privacy. Of course, the names of borrowers were not available for the display, but the names of authors are also absent, approximating Foucault’s 1969 foretelling of distributed authorship as “the anonymity of a murmur.” Legrady’s headlights freeze the library in its current moment between the storage and gathering place it has always been (the information well) and the Facebookish, wiki-style community that it should become. In positioning his art at the very center of what he saw as “a network of independent actions that result in an emergent order at a higher level, somewhat like a complex organism,” Legrady moves beyond commemoration and exposes the library and its community in a single real-time gesture.


24. The system configuration of Legrady’s installation, developed with Rama Hoetzlein and others, is designed to resist obsolescence and, with support from the Seattle Arts Commission, appears to be the longest running dynamic data visualization artwork. George Legrady, e-mail to the author, August 16, 2015.
Most librarians regard classification as a convenience, a way to facilitate browsing, at best, and at least to locate a book when its identity is known. However, the cultural perception of classification and related systems of order employed in libraries can be much more profound. In addition to concern about the collecting priorities of Chicago’s Harold Washington Library, Temporary Services did not speak highly of the standard practices for cataloging and classification. “As any librarian knows, cataloging certain items is highly subjective. . . . Categorizations are flimsy. Lots of books address multiple subjects simultaneously.” Asserting that “artists should have a voice in how their work is presented,” Temporary Services asked each of the artists making or purchasing a book to suggest a classification number for it or to choose a book already in the stacks that they thought would make an interesting neighbor for their contribution.25 Clegg and Guttmann also assaulted classification in a project in a small public library in New Jersey, where they created a card file organized by the color of each book and produced a small artist book with a bibliography that seems to intentionally assign Dewey Classification numbers incorrectly.26

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25. Temporary Services: The Library Project.
David Bunn won a commission to create an art installation for the two public elevators in the rebuilt Los Angeles Central Library (Figure 5). He chose to line a wall of each elevator shaft with the library’s discarded 3×5 catalog cards appropriate to the classification numbers for that floor. Through windows, riders watch the elevator burrow through the organized library collection. Bunn shares critic Howard Singerman’s

Figure 5. David Bunn, A Place for Everything and Everything in Its Place, 1993, installation in the Los Angeles Central Library. Photograph courtesy of David Bunn. Please see the online edition of Art Documentation for a color version of this image.
fascination with the expandability of the Dewey Decimal Classification system: “Our world of knowledge—and our knowledge of the world—is divided into 10 categories. . . . Whatever we write, whatever we will write, is already expected.” Inside the elevators, the walls are lined with all of the cards beginning with the words “complete” or “comprehensive.” Bunn called the card-lined elevators A Place for Everything and Everything in Its Place and commented on the scope of the project:

A condition of all collections is that they aspire to be complete and comprehensive. The Library (certainly like the giant Los Angeles Central) presents an image of itself and its collection as universal and complete. And, implicitly, the Library is the privileged center of that universal knowledge; the repository of “All the World’s Knowledge.” But no collection is or can ever be complete; thus even the largest library is a perpetual ruin. The defunct catalog cards in A Place for Everything and Everything in Its Place summon the Library as a living ruin, always incomplete and never comprehensive. So, while there is a memorial function implicit in using the obsolete card catalog at this moment of shift in the phenomenology of knowledge, the work isn’t nostalgically driven. Rather it employs the ruin of the catalog as allegory for the ruin of a utopian, organizational structure (the Dewey Decimal system of classification) and, of the Library itself, to claims of universality.

While Bunn’s use of elevators may have been unique, presenting library architecture as an accomplice to hyper-systematic order is common in the arts. Clegg and Guttmann maintain that “Libraries are spaces which are supposed to be determined completely by a system of organization. Every aspect of the environment is supposed to be transparently related to the system of order as a whole . . . but of course nothing can be completely determined by an abstract system of order.” This perception of the library shares some of the ethos of two literary works: Jorge Luis Borges’s Library of Babel and Umberto Eco’s Name of the Rose. In both, a comprehensive organization of knowledge was tied to symmetrical library architecture. The short story by Borges described “the Universe (which others call the Library) . . . composed of an indefinite, perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries”—a structure where absolutely everything conforms to the system of organization, each hexagon with a set number of shelves, containing its quantity of books, each with 410 pages, 40 lines to a page, etc.

Classificatory pigeon holes also figured prominently in the medieval library in The Name of the Rose, forming a secret arrangement, the decoding of which occupied

most of this metaphysical murder mystery. “The maximum of confusion, achieved with the maximum of order: it seems a sublime calculation,” observed the novel’s protagonist. In the visual arts, these honeycombed labyrinths tend to be translated into grand and monumental spaces. Illustrations by printmaker Erik Desmazières for The Library of Babel (Figure 6) captured the flavor of Borges’s hexagon galleries but opened them into cavernous megastructures that lend credibility to the librarian-narrator’s oath: “I declare that the Library is endless. . . . When I am dead, compassionate hands will throw me over the railing; my tomb will be the unfathomable air, my body will sink for ages, and will decay and dissolve in the wind engendered by my fall, which shall be infinite.”

Candida Höfer’s 2005 book of photographs titled simply Libraries also highlighted the largest open spaces—the grand reading rooms of Europe’s historic libraries—and linked systematic order to architecture, often by selecting points of view that emphasize symmetry and immensity. People were generally absent from the pictures in this book. One of the few that contains people was her Stockholm Public Library, a shot of the reading room of the building by Gunnar Asplund completed in 1927 and featuring a rotunda which, as more than one critic has pointed out, “since the famous British Museum reading room in London has been the architectural symbol for our knowledge of the world.” Almost as if to correct Höfer, Andreas Gursky, once her classmate at the Düsseldorf Kunstkademie, produced a much larger and spookier photo of the same room entitled, more generically, Bibliothek (Figure 7). A master of manipulation, Gursky composed this image from numerous shots and removed the furniture, stairways, and lighting fixtures, leaving only a huge enclosure of unreachable bookshelves—an image much like his 2002 photo of the Stateville Correctional Center in Illinois, a maximum security prison arranged as a circular panopticon (Figure 8).

Why so ominous? What would support this dystopian perception? One sympathetic position indicts classification as a dishonest, perhaps even hostile, force. A 2001 work by Clegg and Guttmann constructed a scenographic forced perspective of library book stacks in a Milan art gallery (Figure 9). The work consisted of twelve boxes in two rows, with life-sized photographs of bookshelves mounted on the boxes. A false floor raked up toward the back of the room, and the boxes reduced in size to create the same illusion of distance employed in seventeenth-century theatrical scenery. Almost as a pun on the term “single-point perspective,” the bookshelves contained a classified arrangement of six subjects deemed relevant to the principals of false perspective: geometry, architecture, psy-

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The installation was titled *Falsa Prospettiva: Reflections on Claustrophobia, Paranoia, and Conspiracy Theory*. The artists have distinguished several phases in the response to the optical illusion of false perspective: 1) A false belief appears to be true; 2) The appearance of truth is based upon an overall system of...

*Figure 6. Erik Desmazières, Salle hexagonale from the Library of Babel, 2000, etching. Photograph courtesy of Fitch-Febvrel Gallery.*
order (geometry and, in this case, also classification); 3) One cannot resist the illusion, even when one knows it to be false; and 4) Because of the highly structured nature of the false perspective, “we tend to believe that we were deceived intentionally . . . that it happens for a reason.” Some of the comments by Clegg and Guttmann on *Falsa Prospettiva* seem applicable to Gursky’s *Bibliothek*:

The realization that we are presented with false impressions which we cannot rid ourselves of at will tends to create in us a sense of claustrophobia. We begin to imagine ourselves trapped in a tight system which we cannot leave. In its turn, the sense of forced confinement often invokes in us a feeling of rage, and the latter motivates us to seek and find an object which can be considered blameworthy.35

Clegg and Guttmann go on to equate false perspectives with ideological stances—both “presuppose the necessity and absolute reality of a certain social order which, as a matter of historical fact, may not always exist and, as a matter of political and moral world view, it should not. In other words, ideology is always embedded in a false historical perspective.”36 Here the image of the library is associated with history—that is to say, with the public forms of memory. “Libraries, after all,” Elena Filipovic mused, “not only store, but also participate in the production of history. They beg the question of the ideologies they promote, and the roles they fulfill in the process of truth production.”37

36. Ibid.
37. Filipovic, “If You Read.” 93.
If the library may be implicated in the production of history, then it qualifies as an “archive” in the sense of the term established by Michel Foucault in 1969 and rekindled by Jacques Derrida in a 1994 talk that was published in English as “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression.” Although the scope of Derrida’s paper might be called modest, it ignited a discourse that has been broad, cacophonous, and sometimes indeed feverish. Most participants use the term “archive” to indicate some aspect of public memory, particularly the exercise of power that determines what is included in recorded history and what is not. The image of library shelves, which identifies itself more clearly than the nondescript boxes of an archive, has often made a convenient and rich visual signifier for the problematics of public memory. A striking instance is Rachel Whiteread’s controversial Holocaust Memorial in Vienna. Whiteread, known for casting sculptures from the spaces under chairs, tables, or on bookshelves, built an inverted, anti-library—a solid instead of a container, exposing the fore edge, rather than the spine, of the books (Figure 10). It stands in the Judenplatz, the traditional center of Vienna’s Jewish ghetto, over excavations of an ancient

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bimah, the platform from which the Torah was read to “the people of the book.” The sculpture has been described as “an impenetrable archive of public and private memory, of pages laden with secrets they can never disclose.”

Like Gursky and Whiteread, a number of artists have explored this imagery of an inaccessible library. Andrea Fraser moved the art library of the Kunsthalle Bern into an exhibition gallery but reversed all of the books so that their spines faced the walls and the fore edges faced the browser. Svetlana Kopystiansky turned books inside out so that they resemble scrolls and reshelved them to interrupt the helpful order of a scholarly reference collection (Figure 11). Without their labels, these collections could be used only through some sort of trial-and-error investigation. Disrupted bookshelves by Fraser and Kopystiansky amplify the tension between what is known and what is discovered, between order and creativity. Is there a creative need to thwart the confines of systematic access? In the hands of some artists, the image of the library

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**Figure 10.** Rachel Whiteread, *Holocaust Memorial (Nameless Library)*, 1995, public sculpture, Vienna. Photo posted on Flickr by lightsgoingon under CC license: https://www.flickr.com/photos/lightsgoingon/5790848457/.

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**CHAOS/CREATIVITY**

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evokes important aspects of the creative process itself. I want to use the theoretical framework developed by Elizabeth Grosz in her set of essays entitled *Chaos, Territory, Art* to facilitate this effort to describe art that touches upon the library’s role in creative endeavor. Included in her explorations of “the common forces and powers of art” are discussions of precedent and the chaotic character of nature, of the primordial soup from which culture is constructed.\(^4^2\)

Precedent can be overwhelming. Chinese-French artist Huang Yong Ping’s installation for the 1991 Carnegie International proposed removing approximately forty-four feet of art books from the lovely old bookcases in the Art and Music Department of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, washing them in a cement mixer, and returning the resulting pulp to the shelves (Figure 12). This might seem to be simply an amplification of John Latham’s rebellion against established authority, but Huang insisted it was a positive gesture, among other things a means of synthesizing cultural traditions that have for too long been compartmentalized, and a way of creating something fresh.\(^4^3\) Grosz also characterizes the past as a fuel for the present:

Art is not simply the expression of an animal past, a prehistoric allegiance with the evolutionary forces that make one; it is not memorialization, the celebration of a shared past, but above all, the transformation of the materials of the past into resources for the future, the sensations unavailable now, but to be unleashed in the future on a people ready to perceive and be affected by them.\textsuperscript{44}

If precedence may be a raw material, what is its nature? What are its properties? Basing her thinking on the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Grosz names chaos as the medium for all art forms: “Art is not chaos, but a composition of chaos that yields the vision of sensation, so that it constitutes, as Joyce says, a chaosmos, a composed chaos—neither foreseen nor preconceived. . . . Art struggles with chaos but it does so in order to render it sensory.”\textsuperscript{45}

In 2003, Los Angeles-based artist Edgar Arceneaux published pages from his notebooks which documented the thinking behind two exhibitions of his work, one entitled “Library as Cosmos” and the other “Library as Chaos.” In these notebook pages, Arceneaux associated cosmos and its origins in the Greek word for “order” with the

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\caption{Huang Yong Ping, \textit{Unreadable Humidity}, 1991, pulped paper and plexiglass, installation at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, Music and Art Department, for the 1991 Carnegie International. Photograph by Richard Stoner. Please see the online edition of \textit{Art Documentation} for a color version of this image.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{44} Grosz, \textit{Chaos, Territory, Art}, 103.

\textsuperscript{45} Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, as quoted in Grosz, \textit{Chaos, Territory, Art}, 9.
writings of modern cataloging theorist Seymour Lubetsky, who sought consistency as the key to effective access. He contrasted these references to order with chaos and chaos theory, which posits that truly complex systems such as the weather (and why not “All of the World’s Knowledge”) are not fully predictable because small influences can have large effects and huge influences sometimes no effects. The hero Arceneaux counterpoised with Lubetzky was Benoit Mandelbrot, whose work with fractals uncovered beautiful patterns of self-replicating order in apparent chaos—consistencies that are not imposed by a theory-of-everything, but exist as self-organizing collective behaviors, the mathematician’s chaemosos. Elizabeth Grosz’s definition of chaos seems appropriate: “Chaos here may be understood not as absolute disorder but rather as a plethora of orders.” Mandelbrot credited his discovery of fractal mathematics to his ability to pay attention to visual clues, powers of observation that he said that he shares with visual artists. Discovery for Mandelbrot is a combination of observation and chance. Grosz might argue that Mandelbrot did not so much “discover” as “frame,” since for her framing is the first gesture of all art. “Framing is how chaos becomes territory. Framing is the means by which objects are delimited, qualities unleashed, and art made possible.” In the context of Arceneaux’s notebooks, the library may be seen as another framed territory, and the process of framing can be broadened from art-making to culture-building. To make this step, we must acknowledge that a library meets her definition of territory: “Territory is always the coming together of both spatiotemporal coordinates (and thus the possibilities of measurement, precise location, concreteness, actuality) and qualities (which are immeasurable, indeterminate, virtual, and open-ended).” Both art and the library frame a profusion of orders to make culture possible.

However, the art I have chosen for this discussion of order and chaos deconstructs the library’s modes of order, engaging in what Grosz describes as deframing:

Insofar as its primordial impulse is the creation of territory both in the natural and human worlds, art is also capable of that destruction and deformation that destroys territories and enables them to revert to the chaos from which they were temporarily wrenched. Framing and deframing become art’s modes of territorialization and deterritorialization through sensation; framing becomes the means by which the plane of composition composes, deframing its modes of upheaval and transformation.

Yet it would be unfair to characterize the library as merely a target for Temporary Services, Bunn, Huang, Fraser, and Kopystiansky. Their works seem to recognize the

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46. Chang and Joo, Lost Library, unpaged. On Mandelbrot’s visual problem solving, see Hans Ulrich Obrist: Interviews, vol. 2 (Florence: Fondazione Pitti Immagine Discovery, 2009), 204–21. In relation to his installation beneath a library, computer artist Charles Sandison stated, “Sometimes I . . . imagine, when standing in a public library, that all the books are quietly talking. The vision that occurs in my mind is that of a vast flock of birds, which seem to move chaotically, yet somehow manage not to collide.” Charles Sandison: The Reading Room (Donostia-San Sebastian: Gipuzkoako Foru Aldundia, 2006), 29.

47. Grosz, Chaos, Territory, Art, 5.
48. Ibid., 17.
49. Ibid., 19.
50. Ibid., 13.
library as a site for both framing and deframing and, because of this duplicity, perhaps as a metaphor for creation itself.

This recognition of duplicity may be illustrated with the poetry of David Bunn. Bunn continued to mine the millions of cards from the abandoned catalog of the Los Angeles Central Library and catalogs from other libraries, creating a variety of found art works over a number of years, manifested in exhibits and artists’ books. These have included more than 100 poems composed of the first lines of a chosen series of catalog cards—each poem completely faithful to the alphabetical sequence as it was encountered by Bunn’s browsing fingers. Each poem is presented in verse and usually followed by the cards that “wrote” the poem51 (Figure 13). The alphabetical order of the card catalog is rational, but meaningless. When Denis Diderot’s band of Encyclopedists, and a few predecessors, replaced classified arrangements with alphabetical ones, they were criticized for subverting the instructive power of hierarchy, replacing it with the homogenizing alphabet, a chaotic scheme where kings might be wedged between kangaroos and knitting.52 Howard Singerman called it “dumb order—an order without depth or knowledge.”53 Bunn uses this accidental order to expose the failure of a “utopian organizational structure”—to deframe. Then via his editorial re-framing, the relentless juxtapositions of the alphabet take on the role that Grosz describes as “the chaotic indeterminacy of the real” from which artists “extract something consistent, composed, immanent.”54 Of course a special source of charm in Bunn’s intervention is that he did what he was supposed to do as a library user: he carefully browsed the catalog, perhaps more carefully than any other person. His example suggests that deframing and reframing is a requirement of successful art as well as for successful uses of the library. Artist-like, we all need to find what is relevant in the vast collection of culture that is the library, to make our own sense of it. Perhaps even, on a good day, to spark the aesthetic sensation described by Elizabeth Grosz.

**Coda**

A performance by Bunn may be repurposed here to summarize the elements of this survey. His 1997 *Here, There, and Everywhere* was a collection of poems culled from the catalog of the Liverpool Central Library and that of his hometown Los Angeles Central. These works recognized the community portraits contained in the library collections by comparing differing poems with the same incipit, or by contrasting Liverpool’s impressive holdings under “Beatles” to Los Angeles’s cards filed under “Doors” (with sporadic holdings on the City of Angels’ native-son acid-rock band peaking out between scads of cards listing house parts and doorish metaphors.)

51. David Bunn produced six titles (a total of seventeen volumes) of books based upon library catalogs. Ironically, the cataloging of these books has been inconsistent because of Bunn’s unconventional approach to title pages. Those familiar with the makings of card catalogs know that many systems (title entries, name authority control, subject heading lists, cross references, classification numbers, and the like) co-existed in those drawers and might be considered a plethora of orders.


Author-like, Bunn staged a public reading in the Picton Rotunda, the grand reading room of the Liverpool Central; even as his voice echoed through the grand empty space, not a word was his own. Although Bunn seems less interested than Legrady in the future of libraries, he was pleased to have the opportunity to perform in the Rotunda while it was stripped of furnishings and shrouded for remodeling—presenting itself as a “living ruin” but also as the site of some form of rebirth or renewal.55

Standing at the focal point of the authoritative interior, he pronounced a litany of the accidents of order, a process of deframing and reframing analogous to what Umberto Eco has called “the swing between the poetics of ‘everything included’ and the poetics of ‘etcetera.’”56

Much like Edgar Arceneaux in the quote prefacing this paper, those of us immersed in the nuts and bolts and algorithms internal to the workings of a modern library may be surprised by the issues raised in these works of art. I marvel at the profundities that artists have projected upon libraries. Is this partly a response to changes in the library’s role? Some observers find it ironic that the building boom for grand public libraries occurred when the web began to feed or displace many of our needs for books and magazines. Art works of the sort discussed here began to appear in the 1960s when computing was first used for library information and continue through those decades when the screen took precedence over the page. Have we


begun to aestheticize—to rarify—to romanticize the library? Now that we need libraries a bit less, do we desire them more?

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