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Reanimation Library

By ZACK FRIEDMAN

Within minutes of entering the Reanimation Library, I have leafed through books including *Sex Lives of Animals Without Backbones*, the unbelievably creepy *Handbook of Doll Repair and Restoration*, and *Oahspe*, a new Bible revealed to a New York dentist in 1882. It's a thrilling tour through obsolescence. All these thrift-shop finds have striking and unusual visual content adorning subject matter hilarious in its eccentricity or banality. The combination and juxtaposition of image and text calls up the disparate dead ends and sealed-off doors of the recent American past. These books, and a vast collection of other print-matter equivalents of lost socks, have been assembled by Andrew Beccone, a Minnesota transplant, library school grad, and occasional post-punk drummer. Beccone is interested in cultural detritus, things we as a culture created but have discarded, and the Reanimation Library is a way of figuring out how to put them back into (a kind of) circulation. More than archaeology, the library also aims to be a space for generative projects of all kinds, a resource for artists and the discerning public. Andrew's just packed up the books for a show at MoMA. Print Studio won't be a colony of Faithists, as adherents of *Oahspe* were called, but an interactive space related to an exhibit on the evolution of print-based art. Andrew and I exchanged emails after my visit to the library's permanent location at Proteus Gowanus.

Zack Friedman What does it mean to reanimate books?

Andrew Beccone I think that on balance, most people would look at the kinds of books that I collect and have trouble seeing much value in them, aside from being a kind of minor historical curiosity. By collecting, cataloging, and making these books available, I am really hoping to demonstrate their continuing relevance and facilitate their further use. So rather than sitting in a basement or rotting away in some thrift store, they can continue to be of value. Perhaps the books have outlived their original intended purpose, but that doesn't mean that there aren't other ways to use them.

ZF What about the genre of these books? Many are science (or pseudoscience)-oriented, written by a mix of professors and cranks. What about these texts leads to such unusual images and diagrams? Why do these images lend themselves to reappropriation and decontextualization?

AB Because a book's visual dimension is the most important factor in its acquisition, there tend to be certain subjects that are well-represented, while others are hardly included in

the collection at all. This makes sense—cartography, for instance, is visual in nature, whereas a book on foreign policy might not include a single figure. But for me, what is even more salient than the kinds of subjects that are represented in the library’s collection is the inherent strangeness that is woven into the fabric of visual explanations. You could pull almost any image in the library out of its context and it would probably be nearly impossible to identify its source or its meaning. In other words, the bizarre quality of the images might not necessarily be a function of the texts that they live in. It’s possible that strangeness might just be a fundamental characteristic of decontextualized visual explanations.

At this point in history, any image lends itself to appropriation; as a mode of expression and communication, appropriation has moved far beyond its avant-garde origins to become something so commonplace that it hardly seems remarkable.

ZF What sort of archaeology gets done by looking through and at these castoffs? Is it about discovering discarded parts of our culture and lost patterns of thought?

AB I wouldn’t want to prescribe a particular approach. I think that books are really interesting objects in part because they are relatively stable. Unlike electronic information, books are relatively difficult to change and revise. So if you look at something like a title that has multiple revised editions, you can actually trace the changes over time—you could overlay them and observe a kind of palimpsest. The trace of evidence is there. This is not the case with a blog entry. Obviously there are ways to capture that information, but stability is not in the DNA of electronic information to the same degree as it is in print. Aside from the “pure” information (i.e. the subject that is being transmitted), books also contain a number of other kinds of information that I find interesting—typesetting, graphic design, material, binding, marks of prior readers, size, odor. Taken together, all of this information can be sifted through and used as potential source material. Rather than dictate a particular way of interacting with the collection, I want the library to provide an opportunity for anyone to engage it from whatever angle interests them. My work consists of bringing the collection together and making it available. The books do their own work, so it’s really up to visitors to figure out what their work is. I mean, I’m happy to help, of course, but I wouldn’t want to send someone in a particular direction. One of the most interesting aspects of the library to me is that people use it in ways that I never anticipated. In that regard, it continues to reveal itself to me in new ways.

ZF How did you become fascinated with this sort of “cultural detritus”? You mentioned that coming across one book, a textbook entitled *The Behavior of Man*, pulled you in, as well as your own background, in library school, art, and punk rock.

AB I think that there were a number of factors that led me towards my interest in outdated material. Certainly the aesthetics of the 1980s-mid-’90s punk and post-punk scene had

something to do with it, but I was also influenced by a set of the *World Book Encyclopedia* from the 1950s that my mother brought home from a library where she was working at the time. I used to pore over those books for hours. I was completely seduced by them. There was something very appealing about seeing images of, for instance, a place that I knew, but having it look very different. I couldn't articulate this at the time, but I was also very captivated by the image quality in that set. The photographic reproductions made everything look slightly off, like they existed in an altered state. So in 2001, by the time that I started collecting the books that would become the Reanimation Library, I was already receptive to this kind of material. I grew up in Minneapolis, which is really a fantastic city to grow up in for all sorts of reasons. I played music, as any sane person who grows up there should do, and went on fairly regular outings to the Walker Art Center and the Minneapolis Institute of the Arts. The music scene instilled a DIY ethic that really helped me understand that if the library that I wanted didn't exist, then I should just start it.

ZF How do you situate the library in terms of other waves of interest in discarded culture and found materials?

AB Well, there are obviously kindred spirits at work, some of which I'm aware of and others that I'm not. I can't honestly say that I've spent whole lot of time considering how the library fits into the broader cultural interest in found material. This is probably a shortcoming of mine. But there are a few things that I hope to avoid: I don't want to run a nostalgia fun house. Obviously, people are going to have very different responses to my collection. Occasionally people come in and find textbooks that they once used in high school or college. That's fine, of course, but it's not the primary goal of the library. By providing scanners and a photocopier I hope to encourage the creative re-use of the collection, and not just a trip down memory lane. I want to emphasize that there are other ways to engage with materials from our recent history aside from nostalgia. Additionally I would like to avoid building a point-and-laugh collection. Obviously there are things in the collection that I find funny, and I have no desire to ban humor, but the last thing that I want to do is to reduce the library to a joke. Without a doubt, many things from our recent past seem completely incongruous and strange, but if our only response to these ideas is to laugh, I find that a little depressing.

ZF What are some of the ways in which other people have used images from the space?

AB I'd like to stress that while the library is certainly a visually rich collection, many projects that have emerged aren't necessarily visual in nature. Many are, of course, but one of the most important aspects of the library is that it's not simply a picture collection. The fact that the books remain whole and contain multiple facets to engage with has ended up facilitating more non-visual work than may have otherwise occurred if it were simply an image collection.

That said, there has been some amazing visual work generated. For example, Jen Bervin made a weaving for a show that the library did at GRIDSPACE. In that show, each artist was asked to respond to the RAND Corporation's 1955 book, *A Million Random Digits*. Jen's weaving was an abstracted facsimile of one page in the book. It's completely great. Another strong project that I really liked was for a temporary branch library that I set up in Chicago by Kristoffer Ørum and Anders Bojen. They pulled title and subject information from the library's database and wrote a simple computer program that reconfigured the titles and subjects, so we ended up with an entire alternate catalog of slightly off, but somewhat plausible-sounding books like *Food Book: A Text to Chrysanthemums* or *Metal Students Computed World's Encyclopedia of Life* or *How Flower Grading Programs Work: The Universal World Evidence and Actors Layout*. These were presented in a rolodex, alphabetically by title. Kim Beck created a looped digital animation from an architecture textbook of a house building and un-building itself. But there have been a wide variety of responses in terms of the type of work that has been generated from the library—drawings, paintings, animations, videos, photographs, conceptual projects, poems, clothing design, it keeps going.

ZF How have you gone about tracking down books? What about the space itself, in Proteus Gowanus, and its 1950s-schoolish blue bookshelves?

AB I'm always looking for books. Whenever I travel, I hit thrift stores and library sales in search of new acquisitions. In New York, a city with surprisingly bad thrift stores, most of my acquisitions come from donations. There have been a few memorable church sales in Brooklyn that have delivered the goods. I tend not to hit used bookstores so much, simply because they are more expensive, but I don't avoid them as a rule. I came across Proteus Gowanus in 2006, the way many people seem to—by stumbling across it. I was immediately intrigued by the way that they were presenting art, books, and artifacts in a way that seemed to deliberately avoid establishing a hierarchical relationship between these objects. It was a gallery where art wasn't necessarily privileged, it was simply—like books and cultural artifacts—another mode of expression. At the time, I was looking to get the library out of my apartment and into a publicly accessible space, so I contacted Sasha Chavchavadze, PG's founder, to set up a meeting. I was not thinking that the library would end up there, I really just wanted to pick her brain about how she started the space. I told her about the library, and after a few more conversations, she asked me if I would like to co-curate a show about libraries that would include bringing the Reanimation Library into the space. Naturally I said yes. So that was the start of my relationship with PG. At the end of that show in the spring of 2007, we agreed that it would be great to bring the library into the space on a more permanent basis, so I started renting space and have been there ever since. Proteus Gowanus is a fantastic location for the library for numerous reasons—its interdisciplinary nature that drew me there in the first place is still compelling, there are a handful of other projects such as Morbid Anatomy Library, Fixers

Collective, and Observatory that I find really interesting, and it is regularly accessible to the public, so people can visit the library even when I'm not there.

Thanks for acknowledging the library's beautiful blue shelves—I totally love them. I bought those from a place in Providence called Yankee Supply, which basically just sells used industrial warehouse equipment. I got a deal because apparently no one wants blue steel shelving except for me.

ZF There will be a Reanimation Library installation at MoMA opening January 23rd. Can you tell me about that, and other branches of the library?

AB MoMA invited the library to be a part of an exhibition called Print Studio, which is being organized by the education department and will be located in the mezzanine of the Education and Research Building. It is associated with a show that is opening in March, called Print/Out that is going to examine the evolution of artistic practices related to the print medium. The idea behind Print Studio is to set up a studio-type space where people can come and engage with some of the ideas central to Print/Out by actually making prints using a variety of different techniques. To that end, different types of technology—some new, some quite dated—will be installed and free for people to use. I will be moving the entire library (including its beautiful blue shelves) to Print Studio so that it can be used as a resource for the workshops and for anyone who cares to take advantage of the studio. In many ways, the library will continue to function as it always does, but it will be situated in a space that will facilitate the production of artwork, so in that regard and many others, it's very exciting.

To date, I have set up four branch libraries of the Reanimation Library in other cities: Philadelphia, London, England, Carlisle, PA, and Chicago. I am currently working on a branch in Providence that will run in March and April of 2012. Branch libraries are temporary, site-specific manifestations of the Reanimation Library that provide a way to engage people who might otherwise be unable to visit the main library in Brooklyn, and to exhibit library-generated artworks. Like the main library, branches are hybrid spaces that contain elements of libraries, galleries, and studio workspaces, without fitting neatly into any one of these categories. Each branch library contains a collection of books that has been gathered from sources in its local community; I usually arrive in the city a few days or weeks ahead of time to collect and catalog as many books as I can. I like the idea that Reanimation Libraries can exist anywhere, and that the raw material to assemble them is just sort of scattered around. It's simply a matter of bringing it all together. More info about branches can be found [here](#).

ZF Any thoughts about the role of libraries today, or their value for artists?

AB It's well known that archives have been the subject of artistic investigation since at least the 1960s, but in the past 10 years or so artists seem to be shifting their attention more and more towards libraries. Maybe this has to do with the fact that libraries tend to promote open access in a way that archives do not. Or perhaps it has to do with the fact that despite predictions for the past 15-odd years that libraries are "doomed", they are still very much with us and possibly more relevant than ever. It's not precisely clear to me why artists are so taken with libraries today, but it is clear that as generative spaces, libraries are completely suited to the production of artworks, much as they are to the production of scholarship. Two recent projects that explore the intersection of artists and libraries include Rachel Gugelberger's exhibition at Art Space in New Haven entitled Library Science and a website called Library as Incubator.

ZF Can you pick out a few bizarre or otherwise intriguing items to share, and briefly describe?

AB *Home Taxidermy For Pleasure and Profit*

An earnest work. Albert B. Farnham presents taxidermy techniques in a straightforward and humorless fashion. Includes a brief historical overview of the art as well as a guide for setting prices of various mounted specimens.

Bacteriology for Sanitary Engineers

Essential reading for those grappling with the complexities of constructing a new municipal wastewater treatment facility.

The Loom of Creation: A Study of the Purpose and the Forces that Weave the Pattern of Existence

Pseudoscience at its best. A carefully assembled argument that purports to reveal the scientific basis of mysticism. Really, really wonderful and also sheer nonsense.

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