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Bedside nursing, firearms and doll repair: welcome to the Reanimation Library

By Jeff Severns Guntzel

When Andrew Beccone left Minneapolis for New York City in 2003, he had pretty much exhausted the rock band thing. He had traversed the country by van a dozen times or more, sweating and stinking and drinking and being broke playing drums with beloved locals Mickey Finn and Capital!Capital.

On the eve of his departure, Beccone took his drums to a friend who managed a warehouse. The drums were shrink-wrapped to a pallet and fork-lifted high onto a shelf for storage. He was a drummer retired and free to pursue a most unlikely path: He was headed to New York City to start a library.

But first: library school.

"Many people who go to library school, myself included, think that open access to information is a vital component to democratic society and that being a librarian is a noble profession," he says. "At the same time, I was incredibly attracted to these strange images that I was finding in old, outdated books." He told every student and professor he met at the Pratt Institute of his plan: to open a library of unusual images plucked from decades-old reference books, technical manuals, and other such genres of specialization. The library would be called the Reanimation Library.

"Most of my professors and fellow students just gave me a blank stare," Beccone says. One professor pulled him aside after class. "This is really interesting," said the prof, "but you're not actually going to do this, right? I don't know how you're going to do it."

Long story short: he did it. He started a library. Which, by the way, almost nobody does.

Beccone, who is the librarian for the art world powerhouse Marian Goodman Gallery by day, rents space for "a reasonable rate" from the Proteus Gowanus gallery in Brooklyn. He's been invited to speak about his library to classes at NYU and Rutgers. The library's carefully curated catalog of roughly 600 books is browsed with frequency by artists, designers, videographers and, not too long ago, seven blindfolded playwrights.

The latter was part of a project called "Dewey's Nightmare" wherein seven playwrights were blindfolded and led into Beccone's library with the assignment of picking a book at

random. With whatever they selected they had seven days to write a short play to be performed together at a fund raiser for the McSweeney's affiliated youth-writing center 826NYC.

When Eric Sanders, the project's creative director, met with Beccone about the project, Beccone warned him: "You realize there aren't any novels here?" he said. "And you realize that you might end up with a play called *Atlas of the Human Brain in Section*, right?" Exactly, came Sanders' response.

A few other titles, to give you a sniff of the collection:

Sex Lives of Animals Without Backbones (1976)

Swine Science (1970)

A Guide to Gymnastics (1968)

The Gun Digest Book of Exploded Firearms Drawings (1982)

Bark Structure of North American Conifers (1954)

You don't have to go to Brooklyn to see it--you can browse some of the collection online. A listing of the books is there with a selection of some of the many thousands of images. The image gallery won him a hat-tip from the internet curiosities blog Boing Boing, which won his website 100,000 hits in 24 hours.

"Beccone's collection is so unique and odd I thought it would be perfect," says Sanders, who was impressed with Beccone's quality-control. "There has been a sort of junk shop curiosity movement over the last 10 years in indie culture--with things like Found Magazine--and I think there is a misconception that Beccone is just taking random trash and calling it a collection, but he's vetting everything and treating his library like its the rare books collection at Harvard."

There is a guru for "outsider" libraries like Reanimation: Rick Prelinger. The Prelinger Library in San Francisco is the ultimate outsider library. Prelinger didn't go to library school before starting his library of 40,000 items organized in a system of Prelinger's invention, intended to force the kind of browsing you just don't do too much of in modern computerized libraries.

Prelinger visited the Reanimation Library recently and liked what he saw: "It's not huge but everything is there for a reason." He speaks of the "gestalt experience" of libraries like his and Beccone's--browsers come to get their hands dirty and to experience the collection, not merely grab and run.

For the gestalt-types, Reanimation provides a reading room with two scanners. Visitors are encouraged to connect the scanners to their laptops and take what they want. For the lo-fi, there's a photocopier.

Sure, Beccone says, you'll find all the oddball images you can stomach spending a few minutes on Google. But there are still people out there who long for the labor of the hunt. And from that hunt have come paintings, visual art, poems, video animation and at least seven plays.

"What he's doing," says Sanders, "is making you reconsider the notion of what value is. If you treat something not just as a curiosity but as a valuable tool, then it *becomes* a valuable tool--because Andrew afforded it his respect."

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