

The Coffin Factory
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Reanimation Library: Book Collecting and the Built World

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The world once seemed to stretch before us, passive and limitless, awaiting the gift of form. Pristine categories like nature and the libido were resources for minds and hands intent on making the world anew. All the familiar horrors and marvels of the modern age flowed from this desire.

The arts were no exception. The pursuit of novelty was an imperative, and it meant not only saying something new but saying it in new ways. All idioms, linguistic or otherwise, were to be stripped down to their barest, basest substance—the line, the sphere, the guttural cry—from which would spring a new language and a new humanity. To plunge the depths was to set the stage for the coming of form.

This is no longer the case. The world does not await us. It never really did, and this is now starkly apparent. The world has been built and rebuilt; its infinite complexities reveal themselves at every turn. Our task is to grapple with these complexities, and the arts have responded. Hence the emergence of relational, archival, and remix aesthetics. Finished form, in these orientations, cedes way to the dual endeavors of ordering materials and revealing process. Evidence of this turn is all around us. Even the Diego Rivera exhibit currently on display at the Museum of Modern Art, the great archive of the modern visual imaginary, provides an example. Rivera is a classic modern artist; his murals embody the desire to usher in the new world of the revolutionary state. But at MoMA, this desire is placed in relief. The exhibit is not monumental, but rather thoroughly demystified: the artist's preliminary sketches are on display, alongside an x-ray image of one mural's internal architecture. That same mural's concrete inverse is displayed as a work of art in its own right. The sublimity of form is countered by the intricacies of material production.

The Rivera exhibit is on the second floor. I walked through it last weekend on my way to the education and research building, which currently houses Brooklyn's Reanimation Library. This project is, to sum it up briefly, a collection of old books, ordered according to the conventions of the Library of Congress. It has, since 2007, occupied space at Proteus Gowanus, where it meshes well with the general current of oddities and particularities on display there. This is because its founder, Andrew Beccone, has a keen eye for the rare and peculiar, usually out-of-print, volume. The Q section, which corresponds to science, is extensive, and its particular strength lies in the sort of popular science writing that details, for example, the life of freshwater streams or that tells the story of noise pollution. The

collection as a whole is rich in images, and the project's beautiful website houses an extensive archive of some of the most striking ones.

The project is a library, which means it's there to be used, and this is something that Beccone has emphasized in interviews. Its website lists eight projects inspired by the collection, and there is also a small but growing number of commissioned reflections on volumes held by the library. In other words, as an aesthetic project, the Reanimation Library eschews autonomy, rather seeking to insert itself into a feedback loop wherein texts generate more texts. It is a node in a network, rather than a point of transcendence.

This is why the library fits in uneasily at MoMA—because it understands itself explicitly in terms of use and participation, rather than abstraction and autonomy. Not all modern art, of course, was wedded to these latter terms, but its signal movements—abstract expressionism, for example, or cubism—were triumphs of autonomous form over the mess of the world at large. The modern work of art had utopian aspirations, whereas the Reanimation Library aims more at the here and now.

This is how the project represents a new departure—not modern and not postmodern, but rather simply nonmodern. If the world of modern art was a world to be reinvented, the world of the Reanimation Library is a world to be pondered, touched gently, sifted through. The four essays grouped under the heading “Word Processor” on the project's website are exemplary in this regard. The first is about an alarmist work of healthy-living propaganda by Paul and Patricia Bragg (of liquid aminos fame). The second profiles an early edition of a well known advertising manual. The third places a photographic study of splashes in relief against the backdrop of nineteenth-century scientific culture. The fourth and (for the moment) final essay is a reading of a congressional report on space exploration that dates from the heights of the Cold War. This breadth of topics reveals the motley character of the Reanimation Library's collection. But what is most striking is not this heterogeneity; rather, it is the feeling of wonder that spans the four contributions. The overall sense is that of encountering, unexpectedly, a material relic that does not reveal the follies or ingenuousness of the past, but that instead shines brightly and humbly in itself, a quiet revelry of particularity.

This sense doubtless tells us something about the aesthetics of the Reanimation Library as a whole. It tells us that the project sees the world not as a blank slate to be filled with letters and scrawls, but rather as a complex and fragile archive, something to be handled with care, the way a collector picks up a tattered book off the shelves. Therein lies the relevance of the project's sensibility for the present day, for it takes complexity as a given. The world is full. It teems with particularities that push and pull on us unexpectedly, at any distance. We need a cultural imaginary adequate to the challenges of this world, a sensibility less of iconoclasm than of wonder and care. The Reanimation Library is helping to forge that imaginary.

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