

Hyperallergic
25 September 2012

Collection (Not) as Curation: How Exhibitions are Different From Libraries

By JANELLE GRACE

The Reanimation Library in Proteus Gowanus (image via reanimationlibrary.org)
Is a library collection like a curated exhibition? As the use of the verb “curate” proliferates outside of conventional exhibition organizing, especially in regards to the ways people collect and arrange visual material on online platforms such as Tumblr and Pinterest, backlash against terming such casual content organization “curation” continues. While there seems to be some consensus on the specificity required of actual curation among those questioning these new uses of the word, another term has yet to become the new standard, though the word “collecting” is often juxtaposed against curating. But how do we define “collecting,” especially since it also already exists in a specific professional context? If someone were to draw a Venn diagram with “collecting” and “curating” as intersecting circles, how much would they actually overlap?

When I learned about Independent Curators International’s (ICI) event with Andrew Beccone’s Reanimation Library happening tonight, I became curious about the intersections between curating and library collection. The event will consist of a reading of several selections from the Reanimation Library as well as “an accompanying stream of decontextualized images,” “provid[ing] a personalized, fractured and incomplete portrait of the wide-ranging attitudes, ideologies, and visual systems contained within the collection.” This reading being presented as an ICI Curatorial Hub event speaks to the specificity of Beccone’s project in creating and maintaining the Reanimation Library collection (specificity of purpose being the dominant link between curating and collecting).

The Reanimation Library, based in the gallery and reading room Proteus Gowanus, is a library of discarded and often out-of-print books, selected for their rich visual material, often culled from thrift stores and throwaway piles. Amounting to a cabinet of intellectual curiosities, the library includes titles such as *Far Out Factories: Manufacturing In Space* and *CATS CATS CATS CATS CATS CATS*. The collection exists as a testament to bygone visual cultures, but its non-circulating contents are also very carefully chosen by Beccone to serve the library’s additional function as a resource for creative expression. As such, its home base is outfitted with scanning and photocopying equipment, and individuals are encouraged to utilize the library’s offerings to create new works based on what they find. Beccone has been commissioned by other arts spaces to create additional branches, further

establishing the Reanimation Library as a mobile artspace and workshop in addition to a library.

Does an understanding of professional collecting, as is done in libraries, give us a better understanding of what's happening on Tumblr, or at least help us better understand how we define curation? I turned to the founder and organizer of the Reanimation (RA) Library, artist and professional librarian Andrew Beccone, for his thoughts.

Janelle Grace: I'm curious about how this event with Independent Curators International came about. How did it all happen?

Andrew Beccone: In 2010 I was on a panel about experimental libraries at the Contemporary Artists Book Conference. Renaud Proch, ICI's Deputy Director, moderated the panel, and we have since stayed in touch. Last year we started talking about the possibility of organizing a Reanimation Library event at ICI's curatorial hub and started planning one in June. Based on what he has told me, I think that Renaud wanted to put this together because he sees the library as an art practice that incorporates curatorial components — both through the development of the collection, and through its many events and programs that often engage the participation of multiple artists.

The conceit of the ICI event — the incomplete portrait of the library — resulted from me growing tired of repeatedly giving a talk about the library that addressed straightforward facts and figures such as when and why it started, projects and events that it has generated, its size and scope, and so on. I don't have a problem providing that information, but I became bored with presenting it. In April of this year, I was invited to talk at the Carpenter St. Branch of the library in Providence, Rhode Island. Rather than deliver my usual spiel, I read fragments of language that I had extracted from books in the collection. This seemed like a more direct and less didactic way to represent the library and I was encouraged by how it turned out, so I decided to continue with it.

JG: The Reanimation Library has been installed in a number of arts spaces, separate branches as "site-specific" or "site-sourced manifestations," as you call it. I understand the RA library as a library, but also as an art project of sorts. You actively and deliberately seek out and cull selections to be included, and as a librarian, I take it you're knowledgeable about the content and you care for the collection. Do you ever think about what you do as curating? Could the work of librarians generally speaking be considered curating?

AB: I think that there are obviously areas of overlap between the work of librarians and curators, but I wouldn't equate the two. When you consider the overarching activities of librarians, which include things like reference work, instruction, community engagement, cataloging, and preservation, it's clear that the "curatorial" dimension is only one of many. In library-speak, those who are responsible for acquiring materials and shaping collections

are known as collection development librarians. These are probably the closest corollary to curators in librarianship, but there's a difference (and this is speaking very broadly because there is an incredible range of conditions within which both librarians and curators operate), for instance, between a curator who is able to assemble a group of artists based on a particular idea of his or her own choosing, and say, a collection development librarian at a branch of the Brooklyn Public Library who is "curating" a collection based on a concrete set of criteria such as the demographics of the neighborhood, the library's own circulation statistics, or some institutional policy.

That said, just as there are curators who are working within certain financial and institutional limits, there are obviously specialized libraries that enjoy a great deal of leeway in guiding the growth of their collections. In these cases, there's no question that curation can take on a bigger role. The Reanimation Library is clearly an extreme example of this.

While I do acknowledge curatorial aspects to the library, I don't consider myself a curator, and I have no desire to speak for them, who as a group must be sick to death of the word "curation" being attached to every last pursuit that remotely involves grouping things together or putting them in a list. At the same time, I think that the Reanimation Library can provide a platform for fruitful curatorial projects and I'm interested in working with curators to develop and present those.

JG: Does a library's role of being a resource limit its overlapping with curation, or can collecting function as interpretation? If so, how? Putting it another way, can a library have a thesis?

AB: I would say yes to both, with qualifications. To answer the first part, I find it difficult to talk about the "library" as a general concept given the wide range of libraries that exist. In the vast majority of cases, though, the pragmatic concerns (both of the library as resource and an entity in need of resources) usually trump a loose approach to "curation." Libraries don't make money and rely on outside funding to operate. These sources, governments, educational institutions, or corporations, have particular needs they want met in order for funding to continue. So more often than not, curatorial activities of the library are limited.

Can collecting function as interpretation? Absolutely, but many libraries don't have the freedom to approach their own collections from such a standpoint. One of the things that I find interesting about the current trend of independent libraries is the attention that they often call to collection-as-interpretation. The Prelinger Library in San Francisco and the Read/Write Library in Chicago are both good examples of this.

JG: How do you view the rise of online open-sharing and remix culture, especially the proliferation of platforms like Tumblr that are designed to display individual collections of

visual material, in relation to libraries and archives? Do you think RA Library is reflective of this moment?

AB: In some ways my experience of a site like Tumblr isn't all that different from that of being in the city. In both places I am confronted with a steady stream of images that don't add up as a whole. Despite the fact that a Tumblr stream may be mediated by someone, they often come across more like scrapbooks than curatorial projects. There are obviously some Tumblrs that are given far more thought (I'm quite partial to Mass Mirage), but many of them seem like excursions through teenage brains (not that I don't love those). That said, I certainly don't think that there's anything wrong with sites like this and, like any essentially neutral platform, they clearly have potential to generate interesting projects.

One of the things that interests me about the library is the interplay between its analog and digital homes, so while I think that the library has a place in that digital ecosystem, it also exists outside of it. As much as I want to provide an engaging online representation of the library, I call it a presence library because it is ultimately rooted in the physical, non-digital world. The online catalog wouldn't exist without books.

JG: There's been a lot of discussion lately about the nature of "curation," especially as the term has been applied to the ways people use social media like Tumblr and Pinterest, but also to other fields and venues, like fashion and design. Some say that those are misappropriations of the word "curating," and that these applications are more akin to collecting. With that context in mind, do you have any opinions on how we define or use the word, and how it relates to your work? How do you define what collecting is or isn't?

AB: I'm more comfortable discussing the misuse of the term "library," though I think that there is again some overlap between the two. Ideally, both librarians and curators invest significant amounts of time and effort into their collections or projects. I think that what gets lost when every collection is a "library" and every act of collecting equals "curation" are those time-consuming activities like cataloging and research, and without them, I'm less inclined to regard a stack of books as a library, or the act of bringing them together as curation.

JG: Do you see art exhibitions and library collections serving as similar purposes?

AB: Not really, but I don't see them as incompatible either. Both can serve to inform and inspire, but the degree to which they do so depends upon both the visitor's experience and his or her expectations going in. I think that libraries tend to be more self-consciously positioned as tactile resources, whereas art exhibitions are generally more concerned with the visual encounter.

JG: Are there other libraries that function similarly to RA, as art spaces or otherwise? Other art projects that function as libraries? Inspirations?

AB: Shannon Mattern wrote a fantastic and thoroughly researched article about the current trend of micro-libraries. Just read that. I'm completely sympathetic to her position and she's a much better writer than me.

As far as inspirations go, there are of course many, but I'll name a few: Machine Project, the Museum of Jurassic Technology (of course), friends who work tirelessly on their own creative projects, my wife, Rachel, and son, Felix.

JG: What other kinds of projects are you working on?

AB: I'm working on four branch libraries in 2013: Joshua Tree, Los Angeles, Stamford, CT, and Mexico City. I'm also continuing to work on Word Processor — the library's guest writer initiative. Upcoming essays will be written by Craig Epplin, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Rahel Aima, and Colin Dickey.

[<http://hyperallergic.com/57475/interview-reanimation-library-andrew-beccone/>]