

Library as Incubator
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The Library as Platypus: On the Dual Nature of the Reanimation Library

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In January of this year I was invited to write a piece about the Reanimation Library for Library as Incubator. In the course of events, time got away from me and I wasn't able to begin working on it until recently. But I encountered a problem as soon as I read the submission guidelines: I was instructed to choose between two categories—Artist or Library Staff.

That seems simple enough, but what if I am both? What if I understand the library that I started, and continue to operate, to constitute an artwork in and of itself? In a situation well known to catalogers everywhere, the imperative to classify was vexing me.

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In 2001 I began collecting books that would eventually form the nucleus of the Reanimation Library. At the time, I used images from the books to create two-dimensional artworks. After a full year of acquisitions, I had the idea to turn what had been up until that point my private stash of source material into a publically accessible collection.

As someone who had made visual art since childhood, and who had been working in a library for nearly 8 years, it felt entirely natural to combine these two activities. What I didn't anticipate was that once I started developing the library in earnest, I would largely stop making images—a shift that occurred precisely because the process of assembling the library began to satisfy my art-making instincts. I didn't set out to make a library/artwork, but that's what I found myself doing.

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What is the Reanimation Library, and why is it here?

The Reanimation Library is a small, independent Presence Library* open to the public. It is a collection of books that have fallen out of routine circulation and been acquired for their visual content. Outdated and discarded, they have been culled from thrift stores, stoop

sales, and throw-away piles, and given new life as a resource for artists, writers, cultural archeologists, and other interested parties.

Its mission statement:

The Reanimation Library was established in order to

- build a collection of resources that inspire the production of new creative work
- pan for gold in the sediment of print culture
- draw attention to the visual and textual marvels in seemingly ordinary books
- encourage collaboration among human beings
- call attention to the generative potential of libraries
- contribute to our cultural commons and gift economy
- explore pathways between digital and analog worlds

You are invited to join the library in these endeavors.

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Since 2006, the library has been situated in Proteus Gowanus, an interdisciplinary gallery and reading room in Brooklyn, NY. During this time, it has acted as the catalyst for a wide range of creative activity resulting in paintings, drawings, collage, prints, books, digital video, conceptual art, sound art, graphic design, fashion design, animations, songs, poems, short stories, plays, and critical essays.

The non-circulating collection is cataloged according to the Library of Congress Classification system and presently holds approximately 1,700 items, though it is continually growing. It is accessible to the public at its physical location – which is equipped with two scanning stations and a photocopier – and to a wider audience through its online catalog and image collection, the latter of which now contains over 4,400 scanned images.

I consider the library itself to be an ongoing collaborative artwork that is activated by people who engage with and use it. The library-as-artwork is defined in part by the accumulating body of material that is created in response to it—an evolving exoskeleton of images, words, sounds, and ideas. It is entirely unnecessary for me to interact with the library's users or to see the results of their work, though I usually enjoy doing so. And while I often do, I certainly don't need to like what they've made.

Part of my relationship to the the library as an artwork involves surrendering a significant degree of control over the work that it generates.

This provides an important counterbalance to my relationship to the library as a library; as a solo librarian, almost all systems are under my control, from acquisitions and cataloging to fundraising and website development. To a large extent, my interest in the project is sustained through the unpredictable dynamics that are triggered by the interaction of its comparatively incongruous components.

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Upon its introduction to the Western world, early naturalists determined that the milk-producing, egg-laying platypus had to be some kind of hoax. Accordingly, I remain encouraged by the fact that some artists dismiss the Reanimation Library as merely a library while some librarians refuse to regard it as anything but an art project.

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In the past few years, the library has initiated two programs that have expanded its physical presence and deepened its internal investigations: Branch libraries are periodic, site-sourced, temporary manifestations of the library established in locations outside of Brooklyn. They are interactive, hybrid spaces that contain elements of libraries, galleries, and studio workspaces, without settling neatly into any of them.

Branches have been set up in Philadelphia, London, Carlisle, PA, Chicago, Manhattan, and Providence. 2013 will bring them to Joshua Tree, Los Angeles, Stamford, CT, and Mexico City. Each branch has given me the opportunity to meet and collaborate with new people, to explore the cities that they're situated in, and to build, promote, and experiment with the library.

Word Processor, published nine times a year, invites guest writers to contribute essays on books in the collection that they are particularly drawn to. After years of programs emphasizing the visual content of the library's collection, Word Processor now focuses attention on the library's language and ideas, which can be as captivating, perplexing, and anachronistic as its images. Upcoming essays will be written by Craig Epplin, Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Rahel Aima, and Colin Dickey.

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After more than 10 years of working with the Reanimation Library, I remain genuinely astounded by the ways that it continues to surprise me. It has repeatedly led me to people and experiences that I wouldn't otherwise have encountered, and I'm certain that I've only begun to chart its waters.

*Presence Library is a mistranslation of the German word for Reference Library, Präsenzbibliothek. I use it because the library is a non-circulating collection and because I appreciate its allusion to objects in the physical world.

[<http://www.libraryasincubatorproject.org/?p=6629>]