

REANIMATION LIBRARY

543 UNION STREET | BROOKLYN, NY 11215

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Mirthful Morbidity

By GREG COOK

At the heart of the Storefront's presentation of the "Carpenter Street Branch" of Andrew Beccone's Brooklyn-based "Reanimation Library" (186 Carpenter Street, Providence, through April 27) is a utopian vision. "The library is here for you," a sign explains. "It's about making. It's about authorship. It's about re-authorship." But deep down, it's about striving for a better community through group art making.

The library itself is a group of shelves displaying fascinatingly eccentric vintage books discovered in local thrift shops, used bookstores, and antique malls. You're not allowed to borrow these volumes about home design, anatomy, fashion, makeup, roller-skating, toys, stars, mushrooms, sign languages, embroidery, and egg decorating, but a copier and scanner are provided to encourage you to reuse their contents in making your own art. Even for an artist, walking in on a quiet day, this invitation to not just look but actually make something (albeit partly recycled) can feel a bit like going to see a magician and suddenly being called on stage to assist. It can leave you feeling a bit unprepared and awkward and unsure of just what to do. It asks you to be giving, good, and game.

real action is a series of workshops that mine the library. Amy Walsh helped participants use the library to design "personal and experimental maps." Andrew Oesch and Jori Ketten will show participants how to "generate a set of personal encyclopedias" on April 5, 21, and 26. Shea'la Finch will help people use the library to create "visually compelling stories" on April 9 and 16. Lara Henderson teaches bookbinding on April 11 and 18, and Oesch will tell you how to make pop-up books on April 19.

The umbrella academic term for these sort of art projects is relational aesthetics, though the idea goes back at least as far as Joseph Beuys's "social sculpture" and feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s. And for some of the local organizers, it's a logical outgrowth of their work leading youth art programs at places like New Urban Arts. The idea is to move us beyond passive looking to interaction. So it's not really about what you see in the exhibit, but the possibilities it proposes. It can feel a bit like a parlor game, but its aims are big, encouraging us to directly participate in the art world — and then to get more directly involved in the rest of the world as well.

[<http://providence.thephoenix.com/arts/136536-mirthful-morbidity/>]