

Clare Qualmann

## The Artist in the Library

Through the course of this paper I seek to intertwine a story of my own creative relationship with libraries with accounts of artists' work, including the work of my students. My goal is to articulate the ways in which artists work with, in, and on libraries and in doing this to define features of a library aesthetic. It is impossible, writing in London in 2016, to ignore the dire context for UK public libraries. Reductions in local government funding have resulted in widespread disregard by local authorities to their responsibilities under the 1964 Public Libraries and Museums Act – their statutory duty to provide a 'comprehensive and efficient library service for all persons to make use thereof'. (Culture, Media and Sport Committee 2012, online) Cuts to library services continue apace [note]1. Writers, poets, artists and authors add their pleas to the protests against closures [note]2, but go largely unheeded. The idea of defining a library aesthetic might seem futile in the face of this austerity drive, but through my analysis of such an aesthetic, I hope to explore the potential of artworks to highlight and extend our understanding of its possibilities.

Libraries accommodate personal and private space. Within them the individual pursuits of knowledge and cultural development overlap and collide with the shared pursuits of others within the public structure – the system – the architectural space of the library and its 'epistemic framing' (Mattern, 2014). Exploring the way in which artists reveal these rich complexities of the library seeks to contribute to the argument for their essential status. Insights drawn from interviews, analysis and archival research are interspersed with autobiographical and anecdotal fragments to construct a 'method assemblage' (Law, 2004). This assemblage enables the broader context to connect with a specific, located and personal account in order to articulate and define features of a library aesthetic. This aesthetic is multifaceted and, as I will establish, includes: ephemera and the palimpsest of shared use; ideas of order and chaos; languages of display; practices of

classification, cataloguing and organization; and relational aspects of library interaction – both interpersonal and between people and things, places and spaces.

I am writing this in Commercial Road Library, the Art and Design library of London Metropolitan University. I want to try to capture something of it before it closes. The smell is distinctive. Library smell. Paper, old paper. Glue. Probably rabbit skin glue, and pva glue, and sellotape that's got no stick left. Dead sellotape. It's crispy and yellow and the remains of the glue have gone powdery. Brown card, beige card, archive magazine boxes. Dust. I just walked over to the stacks and sniffed a box of journals to try to get a better sense of the smell, to try to describe it more accurately. I decided to lick it (the box, not the journals), to get a better understanding of its smell (taste and smell so closely entwined). It doesn't taste of much, but the surface is surprisingly smooth, I didn't give it a big lick, I just touched it gently with my tongue. The aftertaste is very slightly sour. **152.166** Class here perception of smells.



[[figure1]]

Clare Qualmann, Library Book, 2002, library ephemera, ink and pencil drawings, approx. 15cm x 15cm, photograph courtesy the artist, collection of London Metropolitan University

Ephemera and Shared Use: Library Book

Library Book (2002 fig.1) was the first piece that I made directly in response to the library. It's simply a collection of ephemera gathered from the day to day

life of the library, stitch bound into book form, interspersed with small drawings of library minutiae. It celebrates an ink-stamp, beige card, pink-slip library aesthetic that is probably (writing in 2016) a thing of the past. This 'stuff' of the library could, in its ephemerality, be dismissed as rubbish. By gathering it together in book form I wanted to raise the status of the everyday stuff and make it visible in a new frame. As Maddison (2016, np) pointed out to me, 'the aesthetic markers that so many of us have internalized are emblems of how important the experience of shared space was/is. Card indexes bore the imprints, literally, of the people who had read these books, exchanged them, shared them with others.' Popular texts in the library had sheet after sheet of date labels attached within them – a book within a book – detailing the borrower history through the density of repeated date stamping.

The Practices that Constitute the Library: An Ode to Shelf Tidying

An Ode to Shelf Tidying: a Poem for the 709.24s (2002) also took the form of a book, and extended into performance. One of the most monotonous jobs in a library with open stacks is shelf tidying. The task is to check that every single book is in the correct order on the shelf, and if it isn't to make it so. We used to do it for an hour on Monday mornings, before the library opened for users, and when it had been busy and there was a mess. In the Dewey Decimal Classification system three-letter extensions are added to numerical class marks to enable more precise shelf locations – especially in sections that have a lot of books at the same class mark. In an art library, sections like 709.24, described in the Dewey scheme as 'description, critical appraisal, biography, works of artists not limited to or chiefly identified with a specific form' (OCLC 2016, p.787), have hundreds of books in them that need to be placed in alphabetical order - usually by the first three letters of the author's surname or the artist-subject of the book. So as I would go along tidying I would say the letters in my head, or sometimes aloud, making a kind of nonsense poetry: 'ABA, ABR, ACC, ACC, B, B, BAL, BAN' and so on, a micro performance for myself and for the accidental audience around me. The artist's book that I made records the same bookshelf at two points – firstly when messy, secondly when tidied.

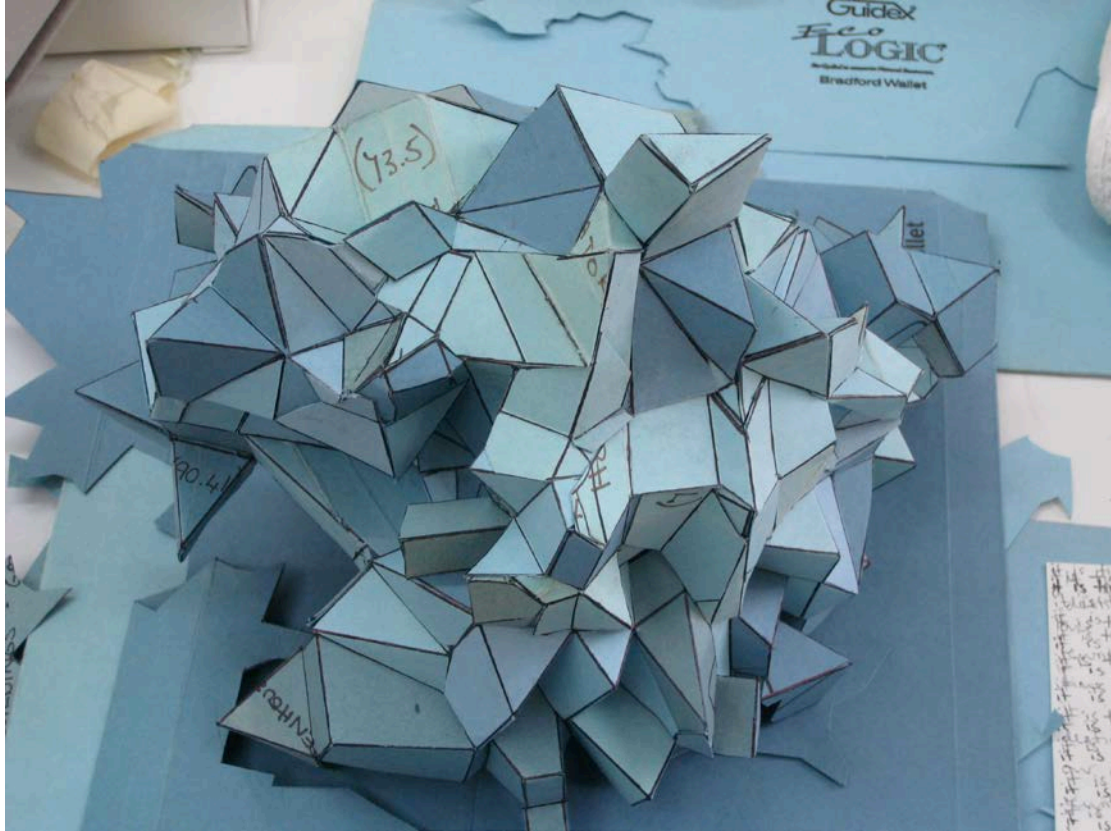
The first version of the book was made using moveable rubber type, set in a simple block formation. My decision to record two 'polar' states - one of perfect order, and one of utter mess – reflected the very different attitudes of library colleagues, some of whom seemed to embrace disorder as an indicator of successful library use, and others who regarded users as a nuisance who disrupted their perfect order. Of course the reality of everyday library life was somewhere in between these two states, titled in my book 'order' and 'chaos', but the middle ground is so much harder to identify and capture compared to the extreme satisfaction of precise tight shelves, or the (possibly equally satisfying) view of shelves disrupted by very heavy use.

In 1999 I left art school in Liverpool and moved to London. I got a part time job in the Art and Design Library at Commercial Road. I planned to do it for a year. I ended up staying for eight. This is the library where I have spent the most accumulated hours of my life. Twenty five hours a week for two years, then seventeen and a half hours a week for six years, minus annual leave, plus independent work probably = 7,000 hours. **709.2 Class here artists: biography.**

Although I never catalogued professionally using Dewey I find it immensely pleasing to understand its system a little, its logic of class and subclass, its building of numbers (sometimes into implausibly long chains) to indicate an extraordinary level of detail. The processes of cataloguing, organizing, labeling, shelving and tidying are some of the practices that constitute the library. There is a sense, in their repetition, of the service of a goal (facilitating the acquisition of knowledge perhaps?), the sense of a project. It is possible to become very bored doing this work – but also to find great rewards in it creatively.

Repetition fosters a different sort of attention by numbing customary activities. Its temporality is that of a progressive 'tuning in' to a particular level of existence, a new mode of attention that is responsive to the uneventful, to what is initially hidden by the habit. (Sheringham, 2007, p.146-147)

The everyday-ness of the repetitive work of the library led me to explore notions of the everyday more extensively, but also to build my capacity for repetitive making – laborious studio practice – stitching, constructing (see fig. 2), mark-making.



[[figure2]]

Clare Qualmann Untitled (Ci/SfB Sculpture) work-in-progress, 2008, library files, glue, approx. 30cm x 30cm x 25cm, photograph courtesy the artist.

Susan Hiller discusses the compulsion that children display in collecting and organizing objects:

putting all the green pencils to one side and the red pencils ... making categories and then some kind of analysis of these categories and all of that. It is a very pleasurable kind of thing ... then later at a certain point you just chuck out all your collections ... what seems to come to an end isn't the act of collecting but the process of analyzing, sorting and creating a typology that is given up. (Hiller, S. 1994, p.43-44)

Her words capture something of my connection with libraries – and doing library work – relating to the ‘childish’ pleasure of organizing, using a taxonomy, ordering the things around me. I see a clear parallel in art making that uses rules or instructions as a frame or base – setting the parameters then executing them. This conceptual base holds a strong link even when the visual manifestation of the artwork might not bear any connections to ideas of the library. The library aesthetic includes organization, the creation of taxonomies and structures for collections, and the repetition of these in the service of a project.

Sheringham’s writing on the everyday resonates again in relation to repetition, and also to ideas of ‘the project’. Here there are more substantial connections to social practice:

To outline a project is not so much to focus on an achievement as to invoke, on the one hand an idea, a mental postulation, and on the other hand a range of actions conducive – in theory – to its realization. A project – a commitment to midterm actions – implies a preoccupation with the domain of practice. (Sheringham, 2007, p.144)

After leaving my job at Commercial Road and taking up a part time post as a lecturer in Performing Arts at the University of East London (UEL) I approached the library with the specific intent of making work there. I developed a project entitled The Artist in the Library as part of a first year module Public Project One. I chose the library for several reasons. Firstly its status as a public space (within the context of the University) meant that it was readily accessible. Secondly, it provided a defined physical area that was easy for students to comprehend, but also contained sufficient diversity of spaces, systems and communities of users to allow them to pursue different avenues of enquiry with their work. Thirdly, it required first year students to spend time in, become familiar with, and use the library (not always an easy task). Fourthly, it was familiar to me – I felt at home in the project – and I wanted to re-connect with the library as a space of creative enquiry to serve

my interests in relation to my art practice and my research into artists and libraries.

The UEL library at the Docklands Campus is perched alongside the dock so that the windows are full of a view of water. Although this sounds restful, the site is exposed, often windy, and the choppy water filling my vision makes me feel slightly nauseous. There is one window, facing west, where the grounding plane of the concrete dockside counters the motion sickness effect reasonably well. But I've still not found my groove here. **727.827019** Class here college and university library architecture: psychological principles.

In collaboration with the Library services team I developed plans to facilitate students in an exploration of the library: its systems and structures; its user groups and communities; its spaces and its functions, before developing their own work in, for, or with the library. The process of developing content for the module spurred my research further -- writing introductory lectures I began to uncover the extensive amount of art work on libraries, including Joshua Sofaer's Rubbish Library/Library Rubbish (2008), Ant Hampton and Tim Etchell's The Quiet Volume (2010), Lucy Harrison's Library Bingo (2007), Ruth Beale's Pamphlet Library (2009), French & Mottershead's Borrow Me (2006), Martin Creed's Toilets for the London Library (2008) and Roni Horn's Library of Water (2007), to name just a few. I used examples of artists' works to develop practical tasks with which students could experiment to get a feel for working live in a public space. Ian Breakwell's photograph Episode in a Small Town Library (1970) was one of these.

Order, Chaos and Creative Disruption: Episode in a Small Town Library

In Episode in a Small Town Library (fig. 3) a human figure sits in a space that registers visually as a library – bookshelves behind, a desk with a newspaper on it in front – the figure's head is entirely covered in a large round sculptural form made from scrunched newspapers; in fact all that is visible of the person beneath is their hands. Giving this image to students, I asked them to imagine the performance that took place, that was recorded here in this singular shot.



[[figure3]]

Ian Breakwell, Episode in a Small Town Library, 1970, Dyed photograph 71.1 x 58.4 cm. Copyright the Estate of Ian Breakwell, courtesy Anthony Reynolds Gallery, London

Their imaginations provided many and varied accounts, which they re-enacted within the Docklands library at UEL, from a frenzied squashing and self-covering event, to a slower, more casual and gradual account in which one by



one 'passersby' would add a newspaper sheet to a student sitting 'working' at a desk.



[[figure4]]

Christopher Hanratty and Benjamin Stanley, Reenactment of Episode in a Small Town Library, 2013, performance, UEL Docklands Library, photographer Christopher Hanratty

Breakwell's image connects to my earlier discussion of the motifs of order and chaos in relation to libraries – a key element of the library aesthetic. The chaotic form of the crumpled bow-shaped newspaper sheets that cover the figure counter the 'proper' order of the newspaper on the table and the bookshelves behind. The only word that is visible on a book on the shelf is 'Civilization' – the title is Art and Civilization (Myers, 1967). I wondered if this connection – between the civilized space of the library and the disruptive 'episode' of the performance intervention – was an accident? The

title Episode in a Small Town Library contributes to the sense of an action that disrupts the ordinary calm and order – the civilized space -- of the library. The derogatory associations of the term 'small town' contribute to this effect – the art action is disrupting the norms of the small-town library (or perhaps the small-town library environment inspires the art action). In the combination of these elements lies the power of Breakwell's work.

I grew up in a small town, Winchester (technically a small city). I spent a lot of time in the library at school. My favourite carrel was on the end of a row, with a poster in it of red/orange semi abstract faces – it might have been a Klee painting. The carrel was panelled in a pale yellow wood with rounded corners. I don't remember what I used to read in there, but I distinctly remember using the card catalogue, pulling out the long drawers and noticing how the metal spine held the cards in place. I remember the feel of the rounded corners and the rounded edge of the desk. Later I had a job in a fish and chip shop opposite the public library, a beautiful space with a round central room. I would wait there after college until it was time to go to work, reading my way through shelves of novels. I would take a book with me to work and, when it was quiet, I could swallow one whole in an evening. **709.2** Class here artists: biography.

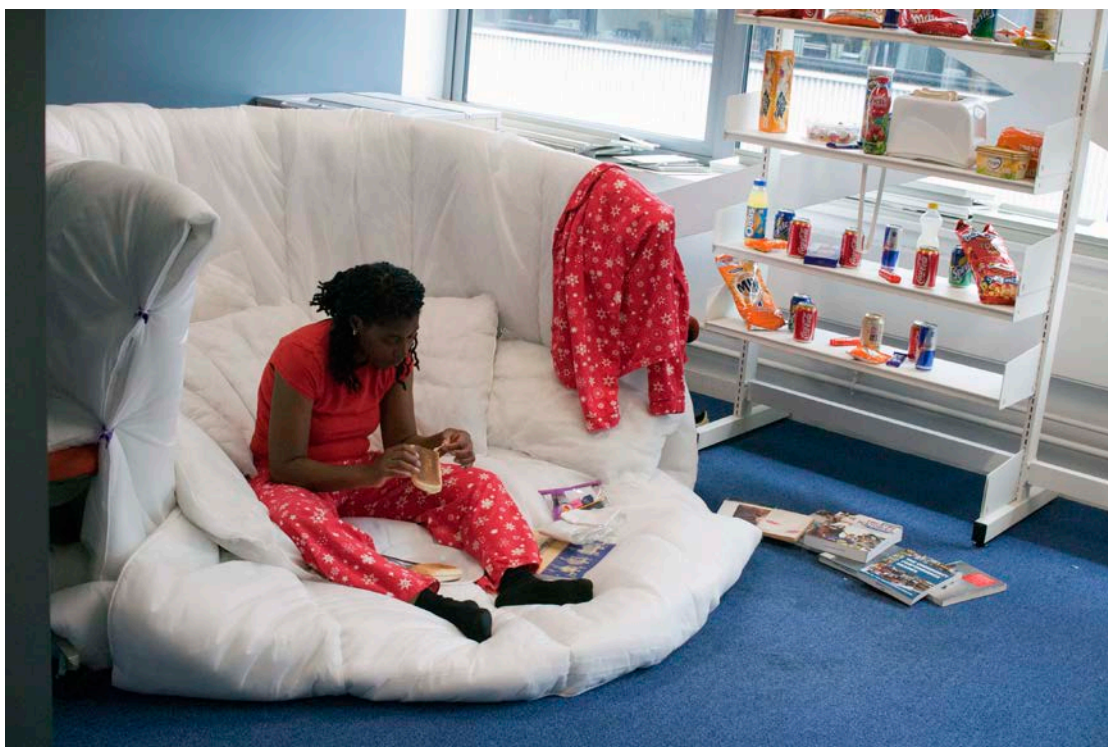
My fascination with Breakwell's image has prompted me to return to it over the last three years to gradually investigate its story. What was the performance that led to this photograph? Was it intended as a performance, or was it composed solely to be photographed? Even in the lattercase there would have been the happenstance performance -- the spectacle of Breakwell (or his model) preparing the chicken-wire covered headdress for wearing. Was it actually photographed in a library? Was the librarian consulted? Were permissions sought? Was it executed at a peak user time? Or was it tucked away on a quiet morning? What did 'The Public' think of it, coming across such a scene? Did it last just the time that it took for the photograph to be shot, or was it a longer performance, an episode that endured?

More detailed research into Breakwell's extensive archive held at Tate Britain did not provide answers in written form. Several versions of the image were published in journals including Fotovision (August 1971), Art and Artists (February 1971) and Stand Magazine (Winter 1997). The different paper stocks that they were printed on enable more detail to be seen than the digital version that I had looked at before – in Art and Artists the photograph was reproduced on a newsprint insert to the magazine that is very different from the glossy black and white of the others. In this version the chicken-wire frame underneath the newspaper is more visible, as are the titles on the bookshelf behind – Art and Civilization is clearly legible. The version published in Fotovision has a completely different feel – instead of The Guardian newspaper on the table the artist holds a copy of Typographica magazine in his hands. Although this dates from 1964 (the photograph is taken in 1970) its cover design (an assemblage of logos arranged in a dense slanting pattern across the cover) juxtaposes old and new – the 'timeless' look of the traditional library space with the contemporary graphic design of the journal, and the branding that it is presenting. The existence of multiple versions suggests time spent in the space. Time to shoot multiple images, test and trial different ideas and perform the image repeatedly (rather than a hit-and-run-undercover-quick-photo-before-anyone-notices).

Other unpublished notes in the archive give a clear sense of the artist's interest in performance captured or experienced as a still image:

I soon discovered that I was interested in the visual images of the theatre: scenery, backdrops and lighting, the raising and lowering of the curtain, the atmosphere. Specifically the proscenium arch fascinated me, as a frame for a landscape or interior with figures, whether it was the Royal Shakespeare Company or the local amateur dramatic society in the church hall, "Othello" or "Rookery Nook", it didn't make much difference, I saw them primarily as tableaux; the play was not the thing. (Breakwell, nd b)

As I got sucked in to Breakwell's image, my students quickly diverged from it – going on to develop their own projects that drew on their personal proclivities and points of interest in the library space. Their work was diverse, and exciting, and challenging (for them, for me, for the library) but the experience was overwhelmingly positive in terms of forging relationships, feeling a sense of ownership and belonging in the space, and simply getting to know how it works. They built nests to study in (fig. 5), devised treasure hunts through the stacks, and filmed the librarians discussing their favourite books.



[[figure5]]

Corrin Castell, Nest, 2011, installation of bedding, shelves, foodstuff, UEL Docklands Library, photographer Sarah Ainslie

Following this work, Judith Preece, the library manager, and I convened a symposium, *The Artist in the Library*, at the University of East London (3 June 2011) (Qualmann, 2011). This drew together artists who have worked in libraries, with librarians who have worked with artists: a space in which to share the student project and its outcomes, and open a dialogue that continued my inquiry into the connections between artists and libraries.

When I left the Commercial Road library job (but carried on working in the building) I had a collection of library stuff that I had accrued – date stamps that were no longer needed, a whole cupboard full of used envelopes, the envelopes that the trade literature for the Materials and Products Library arrived in. I used them in an installation (well some of them) once. Filling a glass case full to the brim with them. I couldn't take them with me (not all of them). I took a few, carefully chose a collection that had as many different interior patterns as possible (an homage perhaps to Erica van Horn's artist's book Envelope Interiors, 1994 - the library has a copy). But also a collection (they were all addressed to me) of envelopes where my name was spelt wrong. This happens a lot. I thought I'd make an artist's book from them (maybe I still will). It will be called My name is Clare Qualmann – C.L.A.R.E Q.U.A.L.M.A.N.N. **709.04082** Class here artists' books

Collecting, Organizing and the Language of Display: Rubbish Library/Library Rubbish

Whilst Ian Breakwell's work plays with creative chaos inserted into the order of the library environment, Joshua Sofaer's Rubbish Library/Library Rubbish activates the same aesthetic in reverse – applying the library's order to the otherwise chaotic matter that is refuse. Sofaer's project was the outcome of a three-month long residency at ARCUS, a gallery in Moriya, Japan (Sofaer, 2011). The artist collected books, magazines and other reading material that had been thrown out by citizens of the prefecture, organizing them thematically into a Rubbish Library in the gallery space. Sections as diverse as Men's Hairstyles, Religion and Spirituality and Adult Manga provided a very specific snapshot of reading material used and then discarded. This was presented on facing shelves with Library Rubbish -- a collection of everything thrown away in Moriya Library over the course of a week. The rubbish collection was equally carefully organized and labeled – pencil shavings for example were gathered together in a glass jar -- whilst takeaway food packaging was ordered and stacked, like with like, on shelves.

By applying a library system of collection, organization, labeling and display to two groups of objects, both of which contained only material that had been discarded, Sofaer called on the power of those systems (the library aesthetic) to indicate value. This in turn prompted a reconsideration of rubbish, and allowed the libraries of discarded material to communicate about the society they reflected. This process connects in turn to the idea of a systems aesthetic that I will discuss further in the next section. Although the artwork manifests as a physical installation of objects in a gallery space, its underlying structure – the rules of its construction – are a system and could be implemented (for example in other locations) repeatedly.

Social Practice and Epistemic Frames: Martha Rosler Library

Martha Rosler Library (2005-2008) is an artwork that consisted of the personal library of the renowned American artist Martha Rosler, temporarily made public within gallery spaces across the US and Europe. Known for her long-term, in-depth and socially engaged art projects Rosler's gallery presentations, for example If You Lived Here (1989) (Rosler, 1991), have often included reading spaces, collections of pamphlets and books, as well as reading and discussion groups on topics related to the project. This work moved a step further, acting as an index to the background research and extensive reading that has supported more than four decades of the artist's practice (Filipovic, 2007).

The repeated installation of the library in different locations revealed the power that the physical arrangements of libraries hold. In its first location the shelving of the books mimicked as closely as possible the arrangement of books within the artist's home. As it moved to new locations different arrangements were necessary – with architectural restrictions at play. During the library's installation in the Museum for Contemporary Art in Antwerp (2006) it became apparent that books on Black History had been shelved in a corner location, low down and difficult to access. Rosler insisted that the shelving be reconfigured as 'Black History could not be marginalized further' (Roelstrate, cited by Filipovic, 2007 np). This highlights the power not only of

shelf arrangements but also of cataloguing keywords, meta data and library purchasing to impact the shape of the knowledge resources that are on offer within a library. It reveals the potential for marginalization by accident, by design and by bias both conscious and unconscious, as well as the power of artworks to make this visible.

The library also made a space in which its audience (who could read, make notes, take free photocopies, but not borrow) could forge their own connections, 'creating links between what appear to be entirely different worlds' (Stills Gallery, 2008, np) in order to generate new ideas. 'The Martha Rosler Library resist[ed] behaving like "art"' (Filipovic, 2007, np) and instead insisted on operating in the 'real' world. It was what the artist Hans Haacke has described as a double agent:

They might run under the heading 'art', but this culturization does not prevent them from operating as normal...[with] real socio-political energy, not awe-inspiring symbolism. (Haacke, 1971, p.122)

Discourse around conceptual and minimalist art practices of the 1960s and 1970s, including writing on Haacke's extensive 'real world' work, helpfully defines notions such as 'systems aesthetics' and asserts the possibility of the system as medium in its own right (Burnham, 1968, Halsall, 2008). This preempts more recent discussion around process and social interaction as art (e.g. Bourriaud, 2002, Kester, 2004). In contemporary live art, socially engaged and participatory art it is now taken as read that newly created objects are unnecessary outcomes of art projects. Many facets of the library aesthetic can be considered in this way – systems that artists have generated, adopted, co-opted. Several of the artworks within this essay speak to this aesthetic – their systems could have continued perpetually – Sofaer's Rubbish Library/Library Rubbish that I have already touched on, and as I will go on to describe, Serena Korda's The Library of Secrets, and Jennie Savage's Anecdotal City, as well as this example of the Martha Rosler Library.

The personal private library of Martha Rosler, made public as an artwork, brought with it the frame or narrative of the artist's radical activist practice. It used the library aesthetics, the library practices, of collecting, organizing, cataloguing and making books available for use, to construct a project within which the experience of the audience was uncertain or unpredictable -- open. Visitors viewing it sculpturally, browsing titles and making connections with specific works of the artist are as easy to imagine as those spending hours studying, reading and making notes within it.

The books at Commercial Road reveal their institutional histories, they tell a story of the foundations of the collection. Labels and date-stamp sheets come from the London College of Furniture, the City of London Polytechnic, London Guildhall University, The Sir John Cass School of Art and the Shoreditch branch of the London College for the Furnishing Trades. I hunted in vain for a book with my date of birth stamped on it until I realised that I was born on a Sunday – no library books due back then. It took me a long time, definitely more than a year, and a lot of searching to put this together. Some of the ephemera (the date stamp sheets) that I found during my search are included in [Library Book. 027.709](#) Class here college and university libraries: history and biography.

Creative Additions, Defacement and the Book as Conduit: [The Library of Secrets](#)

Serena Korda's project [The Library of Secrets](#) ran from 2007/9. It was inspired by her proclivity for filing things in her books at home – photographs, letters, notes and the like. These insertions became connected to the specific texts that they were housed within, so revisiting the book became a revisiting of the artefacts that it holds. When discussing the background of the project she also told me of her love of marginalia and of finding things that other people have left, by accident or on purpose, in books. The writer Ander Monson also leaves things in books:

Certainly many writers conceive of what we do as writing to the future— or writing to readers.... And what became clear to me, reading what



people wrote or left in books, was that a lot of readers use books—others' books, books they didn't write – as things to write to others in... So I started writing these little essays and publishing them back into the books and libraries where I found them, writing them explicitly for someone else to find, someone who found their way to this book or this shelf in this space in who knows how many years. It's a slow method of communication, but I believe it's an important one. (Monson, 2014, online, np)

The boundaries here between creative additions and defacement are blurry – and defined by the times. Joe Orton and Keith Halliwell were jailed in 1962 for their defacement of library books from Islington's Essex Road Library: collaging new covers in surreal scenarios (giant kittens on Agatha Christie's The Secret of Chimneys for example [Orton, nd]) and replacing blurbs with crude, and shocking (to 1960s Islington) language (Brown, 2011). Jonathan Jones comments on the contemporary sensibility and its ready acceptance of these works as subversive forms of art, in contrast with the 'Britain [that] was flat and grey and provoked colourful resistance' (Jones, 2011, np). This becomes another feature of the library aesthetic, which connects with the previous discussion of Breakwell's work – the creative dissonance between the order of the library and the chaotic insertion of the artist. Or, as in the case of Sofaer's work the artist using the order of the library to organize the chaos of other matter.



[[figure6]]

Serena Korda, The Library of Secrets, 2007, olive and teak cabinet, books, photographer Tai Shani

Korda's library came a long way from her starting point of 'things tucked in books'. A collection of around 500 titles was housed in a beautiful custom-built cabinet on wheels. She pushed it around in various locations, including Whitstable Biennale (2007/8), Andaz Hotel, London (2007), and The New Art Gallery (Walsall, 2009), stopped and opened out its 'winged' doors that constructed small private booths – perfect for her invitation to participants to come and write something secret, and to place it in a book. The books housed in the library were carefully chosen by Korda – particular titles that she was fond of, twentieth century classic fiction, along with a few that were more randomly selected – chosen for the look and feel of their bindings or their dust jackets.

As more people engaged with the project, the pages of the books started to become interspersed with secrets – funny, touching, alarming in turn. Korda herself played the role of the librarian; she was drawn to a perhaps slightly exaggerated aesthetic – pointy glasses and a cardigan, with very high heels.

Pushing the library around was hard work – it's heavy. Is there something to be read about old and new in the manual labour of this performance? The type of work that librarians do has shifted – as has work across many fields – away from the manual and towards the digital. The stereotype of the 'old school' librarian that Korda plays - physically pushing her wares, her case of books, along the street – represents the artist's resistance to changes that she sees as unnecessary. Korda confirms this to a degree:

it's like the word library's become a dirty word ... why does everything need to be all shiny/glitzy and touchscreen?... not that I'm a Luddite and not that I don't support development in technology, but I didn't understand why this thing needed to be modernised. (Korda, 2016, np)

Despite this resistance to modernisation, Korda's acts of outreach, and active facilitation, can also be read in relation to librarians' changing roles -- freed from the old forms of manual labour and enabled to spend more time with the public. The Library of Secrets employs the library aesthetic of shared use and the interactions that are enabled between people through the conduit of the book. Korda used her work to harness the potential of participatory live art and the library; getting out and engaging the public with books, with each other and with the shared space that she constructed.

The Aesthetics of Knowledge: A Walk from A-Z and Anecdotal City

Jennie Savage's project A Walk from A-Z (2010) was an audio tour commissioned by Loughborough University's RADAR project. The walk took listeners on a twenty-minute walk through the collections at Lancaster Library, 'tracing the history of the library movement .... From its roots in the Chartist rebellion through to the library's relationship to digital culture today' (Savage, 2010, online) and exploring some of these concerns – the emptying of meaning that she perceived in the conversion of libraries to 'community hubs' – as well as the inspiring potential of the library movement (and aligned radical social movements of the 1800s).

Savage echoes Korda's lament for the traditional library – reflecting on how the architectural language of Victorian libraries aspired to self-improvement and continued learning – whereas newer libraries feel (in their design) to be solely about social space and bringing communities together (Savage, 2016, np). Not that Savage thinks there's anything wrong with either of those goals, but she feels strongly that the first shouldn't be eradicated to serve the second; 'by choosing a route of plurality, spaces can actually just become drained of meaning, rather than becoming multifaceted' (Savage, 2010, online).

There are contradictions at play here – the first free public libraries in England established under the 1845 Museums act and the 1850 Libraries act were often co-housed with other amenities including museums, galleries, schools and public baths (Taylor et al, 2014) – 'places where informational and social infrastructures intersect' (Mattern, 2014, online). It was the private philanthropy of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, from Carnegie and Passmore Edwards for example, that supported the proliferation of building stand-alone libraries in the UK. The designers of these new buildings reflected

the idea that the concepts of wisdom and knowledge became an almost tangible mass, greater than the sum of their parts, when inanimate objects – books as the essence of learned civilization – were concentrated in one place, also had to be expressed in architecture (Taylor et al, 2014, p.5).

Although Victorian libraries may indeed have functioned as community hubs and places of learning and self-improvement, what Savage touches on is an acute sense of dismay at the dismantling of library infrastructures in the UK. This dismantling takes place through both the re-design of traditionally structured library spaces (or their disposal) and through the reduction in the number of professional librarians, with a subsequent undermining of their role. For example, current proposals in Lancashire include the closure of branch libraries with book stock being housed in multi-purpose spaces with self-issue and return machines. Contact with professional librarians, indeed any library employee, would only be available at a small number of core locations. These

changes, which have already seen the closure of 22 libraries in the county in September 2016, are described by the council as the creation of multi-purpose neighbourhood centres (Lancashire County Council, 2016, online). So there is a distinct concern that the rhetoric around the genuine benefits of enabling diverse activities to take place in libraries is being used to mask a reality of cuts and closures.

I went to sit in the empty reading room in the Women's Library. A friend who works in the building next door got me in. It is a beautifully designed space, that was open for just ten years (2002-2012). It speaks to the aesthetic of library architecture for the pursuit of learning. The shelves are bare now, the library closed in an earlier round of University cuts. The collections have gone to the London School of Economics -- yet the smell lingers slightly. This room is important, personally, as is the smell. I realised I was pregnant for the first time sitting here working in the reading room. I was looking at a book about hairdressing, including wig making. It was the smell, or the taste, or the desire to eat the smell that made me know it must be so. I wanted to eat the library.

**709.2** Class here artists: biography.

A Walk from A–Z is not the first project that Savage made in a library; in 2003 she created Anecdotal City during a six-month long residency at Cardiff's Central Library. Whilst A Walk from A–Z drew on the inspiring history (and potential loss through contemporary funding cuts) of the library, Anecdotal City was concerned with library systems: collecting, organizing, cataloguing and retrieving information. Anecdotal City gathered together a collection of interconnected anecdotes, recording memories from Cardiff residents in audio files that were paired with images drawn from the Library's local history archive. The website (2002) that houses the collection (with around 4,000 entries) is indexed thematically – as Savage points out 'using the system of the library, the retrieval system, (and) mirroring that online using hyperlinks to navigate' (2016, np). The medium of the artwork was the system that Savage developed – a system akin to a library in that each user can navigate through it on an entirely unique path, each generating their own interlinked narrative from the materials therein.

Savage's work highlights both the library aesthetic of system and retrieval and the aesthetic of the pursuit of knowledge as embodied in architecture. Her walk through library history revisited the radical social movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and called for a return to the provision of libraries as routes to transformative learning, whilst her system of interconnected anecdotes and images constructs a digital archive-based narrative for a specific locale.

Meteorological Metaphors: In the Clouds

Conexiones Improbables (Improbable Connections) commissioned Madeleine Hodge and Leili Sreberny-Mohammadi's collaborative project In the Clouds, for a community centre in the small town of Penaranda in central Spain. The work had a library at its core. The artist/anthropologist duo spent a year travelling back and forth from their UK base, working with the library staff and people in the town on the idea of 'Fog' (La Niebla). They conceived this as a connective state between 'The Cloud' as digital realm, and the 'real' world of the physical space, collections and interactions of the library: 'a meteorological metaphor that would envelop both our physical and imaginative spaces' (Hodge, 2016, np).

Hodge has suggested that artists working with social practice are drawn to libraries because of the multitude of interactions and processes of exchange that they hold (Hodge, 2016, np). The borrowing, the lending, the companionable space of study/reading/resting/sitting/keeping warm/passing time are vital, yet difficult to quantify or represent qualitatively. Their work in Spain sought to bring these intangible aspects to the fore and resulted in a series of outcomes: an audio walk in which the town librarians recorded snippets from books that they felt resonated with particular locations; a human library of 'experts' who could be 'borrowed' for a conversation, a consultation, or advice; and a performance lecture version of Miguel de Unamuno's novel Niebla (translated as 'Mist' or 'Fog') produced in the library. The artists wanted to raise questions about the 'problem' of the library in the face of the

digital age, using art to untangle and re-present the roles of the library within the community, as well as proposing avenues for new use.

Hodge and Sreberny-Mohammadi's work reminds me of Trevor Paglen's photographic and mapping works that reveal the very physical, but removed and often hidden, reality of the internet -- the 'cloud' -- in the digital era. The 'problem' of the library in part stems from the idea that digital materials are available to everyone at all times of day and night, removing the need for access to printed books and other resources. It erroneously imagines an 'everyone' with access to the internet and a device sufficiently up to date to connect to it [3]. Paglen's images of the undersea cables -- the real net of the internet -- reveal again the myth of the meteorological metaphor. Shannon Mattern (2014, np) directs this straight at the library and asks:

Do patrons wonder where, exactly, all those books and periodicals and cloud-based materials live? .... Do they think about the algorithms that lead them to particular library materials, and the conduits and protocols through which they can access them? .... Do they think about the librarians negotiating access licenses and adding metadata to "digital assets", or the engineers maintaining the servers? With the increasing recession of these technical infrastructures -- and the human labor that supports them -- further offsite, behind the interface, deeper inside the black box, how can we understand the ways in which those structures structure our intellect and sociality?

Everyday labour already 'exists below the threshold of the noticed'. (Johnstone, 2008, p.13) When that labour is removed from view, is located behind the scenes, as Mattern describes, the transformative potential of noticing the everyday also moves further from reach. This is not to imply that such noticing is beyond the scope of artists -- since the 1960s the digital sphere, art as software, and electronic arts (Halsall, 2008) have grown to become significant areas of creative practice. Contemporary programmes such as Rhizome.org's Seven on Seven scheme continue to actively address this by pairing artists and technologists with the goal of interrogating and

revealing (as well as reimagining) digital infrastructures. These explorations become more vital than ever in relation to a new library aesthetic in which digital systems dominate the underlying structure of the knowledge resources around us.



[[figure7]]

Clare Qualmann, Empty Library, Commercial Road, 2016, Still from digital video, courtesy the artist.

There is something terrible and sad and distressing about a library emptied of its books. Commercial Road closed once before, temporarily, following a fire in 2008. The shelves stood bare, dust marks and soot showing where the books had been. The light was strange too. I was used to it being channelled through the stacks, bouncing softly off paper. I filmed a little. When I encounter them, I film other libraries that are emptied of their books. I am collecting this footage. Slowly. It might be a film one day or the base for something else. It is perhaps a project. **027.74215** class here specific college and university libraries in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets.

Artists and Libraries and Aesthetics: conclusions

Artists offer complex insights into how libraries work, why they are important, and what their particular aesthetics are. Some works, like Ruth Beale's The Library of Future Societies (2015a, fig. 8), comment on a particular moment in time, and the concerns that the political climate present for the future of



libraries (and society more widely). In the week following the UK's 2015 general election Beale gathered a collection of utopian and dystopian novels borrowed from London libraries in a gallery space, with space to sit and read, highlighting fictional attempts 'to predict the future of societies based on anxieties about the recent past and present' (Beale, 2015b, np).



[[figure8]]

Ruth Beale, *The Library of Future Societies*, 2015, installation of bookshelves, library books and seating, photograph courtesy the artist and Fig.2, photographer Sylvain Deleu.

Serena Korda compares libraries with artists commenting that both 'pull and weave things together that don't seem completely connected' (2016, np) and through this process both facilitate the creation of new, previously unthought of things and ideas. The draw of the library is also in the potentials that it represents – a place that holds knowledge, as Madeleine Hodge points out, makes the unknown more bearable (2016, np). The idea of the library as portal, as platform and as infrastructure all speak to the transformative possibilities that it offers.

In the examples of Joshua Sofaer's work the library form elevates the status of the collection, creating a way of seeing meaning in the ordinarily overlooked rubbish of a particular place. Serena Korda's work plays with the interactions that a library engenders between people and books, and with the book as conduit for messages passed from person to person. My own work, Library Book, celebrates the disappearing ephemera of manual library systems that made manifest the history of use, the way in which the resource had been shared. 'Double Agents' like the Martha Rosler Library and Ruth Beale's Library of Future Societies operate as real and usable libraries, but also exist as artworks making meaning in another frame, fulfilling Jack Burnham's demand that 'the revelation of social fact must have its own elegance' (1975, p.40).

Libraries, 'On a cold rainy island... are the only sheltered public spaces where you are not a consumer but a citizen' (Moran, 2012, p92). Libraries shape people -- including artists. They shape artworks, and sometimes the artworks shape them back. When artists work with the library, employing its systems and aesthetics; the conflict of order and chaos, the visual language of labeling and display; the everyday repetitive processes that construct it; the creative additions, marginalia and even defacement of books; as well as its social and transactional interactions, the results illuminate and extend our understanding of its possibilities.

#### Notes

1 From 2010 to 2016 313 UK Public Libraries closed, with a further 111 scheduled for closure in 2017. (BBC, 2016, np)

2 Evidence submitted to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee by The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) ran to 628 pages of individual testimonials and statements in support of libraries. (CILIP, 2012)

3 The Tinder Foundation estimates that 12.6 million people in the UK do not have online access or basic digital skills, some 25% of the population (Tinder Foundation, 2016).

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