

The Big Picture: Artists on the Library

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Purpose:

This research examines the perception of the library as it has been manifested in the visual arts of the past five decades.

Approach

A surprising number of works of art have offered “institutional critiques” of libraries. For the first time this group of works has been examined as a body of cultural evidence about the perception of libraries. Over a period of several years a list was built of more than 100 of these works created by an international array of significant artists. During 9 months of sabbatical work including bibliographic research, interviews with artists and librarians who were involved with the creation of these art works, and direct experience of many of the works, common themes quickly emerged. To those of us in the library field, the themes may seem surprisingly philosophical and idealistic.

Selected Findings

A small group of the most interesting themes and works have been selected for this illustrated talk. A number of artists, such as Buzz Spector or Martha Rosler, reflect upon the personal collection of books as a projection of individual identity. Even these small, personal collections raise questions such as “Who is the author in a library?” – questions about authorship and readership that have been central to post-modern production in both the verbal and visual arts. The situation is amplified when the institutional collection is considered. A large group of art works (by Mel Chin, Rachel Whiteread, and others) recognize that public collections are projections of the communities they serve. Yet this role becomes problematic both by conflicting definitions of community and by the desire of libraries to collect authoritative works.

The artists’ group Temporary Services raised questions about how democratically a collection can be built – by smuggling 100 unusual books into the stacks of Chicago’s Harold Washington Library. Before the popularity of Wikis, community-built collections of user-contributed content were manifested in art projects such as the Open Libraries by Michael Clegg and Martin Guttmann – who argued that their casual book exchange kiosks provided a better portrait of a community than could a public library. British artist John Latham organized the mastication of an authoritative volume of essays on art as a rejection of the status quo and the library’s role in maintaining it.

Other values of the library profession have sometimes been deconstructed. For example, protection of patron confidentiality comes to mind when viewing works by George Legrady (who wrote software to display circulation transactions for the public) and Kathy Slade (who published a book recording her weekly borrowing transactions.)

Classification schedules may seem to us a simple approach to making books retrievable and sometimes browseable. But the ordered interiors of libraries can emit many other signals to

some patrons. Probably influenced by the writings of Luis Borges and Umberto Eco, where rigid library architecture is associated with comprehensive approaches to the organization of information, the photos of Andreas Gursky or Candida Höfer focus on overwhelming and inaccessible spaces. In some works, library classification is portrayed as a sinister force. In others, such as works by Edgar Arceneaux and David Bunn, the apparent rectitude of cataloging and classification simply serves as a foil for the chaos that is often key to discovery and creativity. The distribution of these art works across the last five decades clusters heavily in the most recent twenty years – the period when the role of the library and the future of books have been most radically altered.

Practical Implications/Value

Like the works themselves, the impact of this research is largely visual, highly subjective, usually thought provoking, and sometimes entertaining. Let's see how we have been seen.