

Means of Production:

Student Publications in the Albert Solheim Library at Pacific Northwest College of Art

by Serenity Ibsen
Director of Library Services,
Pacific Northwest College of Art
sibsen@pnca.edu



SERENITY IBSEN is the Director of Library Services at Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland, Oregon. She holds an MLS from Emporia State University and a BA in Art History from University of Oregon. She is the Chair of the Advocacy and Public Policy Committee of the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA). In her free time she is a budding gardener, amateur mycologist, and an experimental culinary artist.

The creation of books has long been a way for artists to explore different mediums and avenues for sharing their work, “getting art off the wall, out of the gallery, and into the hands of a wide, democratic, or populist audience” (White, 2012, p. 46). A book is generally cheap to design and produce, is relatively portable, and easy to interact with. Books offer both intimacy between creator and viewer and the feeling of sharing a wider experience with others.

According to Suzy Taraba (2019), “contemporary artist’s books evolved from two divergent strains of antecedents: the fine press book and the democratic multiple” (p. 86), the latter becoming the predominant artists’ publication type in the 1960s and ‘70s. The contemporary art student’s publication is somewhat of a hybrid of the two. Often created in small editions with inexpensive materials, these publications may also utilize multiple laborious printmaking techniques such as letterpress, woodcut, or screen printing, and include one-of-a-kind details such as paintings, pop-ups, drawings, inserts, or detailed bindings. Many students build intricate enclosures for their work.

White (2012) notes that democratic multiples may not “gain market penetration due to issues such as poor printing and/or amateur design” (p. 48), which may affect marketability and widespread distribution of student work. However, for art and design students, what is key in learning about the creation of a publication is the exploration of the intimacy between object and viewer in new mediums and forms. They also learn about process, from ideation to distribution, presentation, and, if intending to market their work, professional practice.

In “A Queer Community of Books,” Taraba discusses the ability of publications to foster communication between, and create community for, marginalized groups, specifically queer people. Because independent publishing has been a reaction to and subversion of mainstream publishing, it is especially important in this regard because mainstream publishing often excludes queer voices. Taraba (2019) asks, “What does it mean to cross boundaries that mainstream society accepts as fixed?” (p. 93). She specifically refers to queer life and publishing, but this can equally apply to artists’ publications.



The history of art mirrors the history of publishing in which dominant cultures (overwhelmingly white, eurocentric, colonial, and patriarchal societies) dictate value and determine what art, design, and writing is worthy of elevation and, ultimately, consumption. Artists may seek to question the canons of art history and literature by publishing in “an explicitly political act and the desire to challenge an art establishment” (Pichler, 2019, p. 15), turning to books for the “intrinsic subversive potential they can yield. For the way they create cracks in dominant narratives” (Archive Books, 2019).

As education and information professionals, librarians are also responsible for questioning these systems, continually asking which voices are missing, and seeking out publications that can attempt to fill this void. In “Dear Book Arts,” Tia Blassingame (2019) urges educators to consider their “prejudices and how they may be affecting ... critique of book and print work by students of color” (p. 7). Further, she reminds librarians that collections with diverse voices help users “make sense of current events and challenging topics such as institutional racism, voting rights, socio-economic inequalities” (p. 10) and offers ideas for outreach. Above all, Blassingame challenges us:

Make and keep your book arts collection as a relevant refuge and incubator of ideas for your users, particularly your younger patrons as they expand their comprehension of and begin to speak from a place of knowledge about the world, with its marvels and horrors (2019, p. 11).

Collecting Student Artists’ Publications

The collections of the Albert Solheim Library at Pacific Northwest College of Art (PNCA) are developed to support the curricular, creative, and research needs of the PNCA community, including 12 undergraduate, seven graduate, and myriad community education programs in art, craft, and design. The library has a very small Special Collections, including some rare books on art, history, the Pacific Northwest region, exhibition catalogs and monographs by and about the PNCA community, a selection of artists’ books, the annual PNCA Print Portfolios, and, increasingly, a collection of student publications.

Historically, the library accepted donations of artists’ publications by the PNCA community and added them to Special Collections. In 2016, we began to actively purchase artists’ books made by the artists and designers in the PNCA community—faculty, staff, students, and alumni—with special emphasis on works created by current students.

For this purpose, we define an artist’s publication as anything from a zine to a unique object, and the entire spectrum in between. Formats may vary from print to electronic. Items are made available for check-out in general collections or the zine library, or housed in our non-circulating Special Collections. The library collects these objects for teaching, learning, and sometimes preservation, so unique approaches, structures, and content are highly prized. While an artist’s book generally “refers to publications that have been conceived as artworks in their own right” (Printed Matter, 2020), the PNCA library holds an expansive view of an artist’s publication and collects items that could be considered monographs, chapbooks, zines, exhibition catalogs, or photobooks.

We recognize that many important voices and perspectives have historically been—and continue to be—omitted from the discourse of scholarship and strive to build our collection in ways that counteract the effect these omissions have on our community’s understanding of the world. (PNCA Albert Solheim Library Collection Development Policy, 2019)



This excerpt from our Collection Development Policy informs our practice of collecting student publications and weighs heavily on the choices made when selecting titles for acquisition.

Concurrent to the creation of this collection development project, PNCA began offering the course “Artist’s Publications, Multiples, + Distribution,” taught by book artist and printmaker Abra Ancliffe. Library staff collaborated with Ancliffe to develop an instruction session for this course that discusses many aspects of an artist’s publication, including design, creation, and distribution. Our collection of student publications is used in this and other courses to teach professional practice, forms and functions of artists’ publications, and that artists’ publications themselves are important opportunities for students to add their voices to artistic and scholarly discourse. In this way, depending on the nature of the publications, we are able to incorporate conversations that touch on several of the ACRL Frames, notably Authority is Constructed and Contextual, Information Creation as a Process, Information has Value, and Scholarship as Conversation (ACRL, 2015).

Professional practice is one of PNCA’s five core themes, so the library heavily emphasizes this area of learning when working with students on their publications. It is important to model professional and ethical acquisition practices, including compensating creators for their work.

In determining whether to purchase an artist’s publication, we take the following into consideration:

- Edition size
- Type of publication (zine, scroll, print portfolio, book, etc.)
- Materials (paper, vellum, gold leaf embossed, etc.)
- Printing method (photocopied, letterpressed, screen-printed, hand-drawn, etc.)
- Price
- Quality of craft
- Labor involved in designing, printing, and binding or containing the object
- Notability of artist

More established artists often benefit from economies of scale when producing publications and can price multiples accordingly. For example, a student creating an edition of 20 perfect-bound books will most likely design, print, and hand-bind each volume, which is a laborious and possibly expensive practice. Depending on the other noted aspects of the student publication, we might pay upwards of \$75 for a copy. An artist with more notability, and therefore resources, can create a publication with a larger edition size (100–200), publish and distribute through a small press, and charge about \$20–50 for a similar type of publication. Unique publications that are closer to the typical “artist’s book,” with smaller editions and more complicated design and materials, can fetch much higher prices for both the student and notable artist alike.

Since the PNCA library budget is relatively small, and the allocation for student publications even smaller (around \$2000 annually), many of the more rare and unique items are out of our price range, regardless of the notability of the artist. However, many student artists are willing to negotiate prices for their publications because they want to be included in a library collection and make money from their work.



Challenges in Collecting

There are several practical challenges to collecting the myriad forms of artists' publications, namely their cataloging, processing, and shelving. These publications require original cataloging, which presents a challenge for subject analysis and physical description. Often these publications are conceptual in content or form and require a more faceted description than the Library of Congress Subject Headings and Genre/Form Terms allow. Processing and shelving artists' publications can be challenging when their physical forms are extraordinarily small or large, contain loose or multiple pieces, or do not conform to a traditional book shape.

One such publication, *Hand to Hand*, by Ophir El-Boher, "addresses questions of value in fashion consumption" (El-Boher, personal communication, January 17, 2020). It is an edition of four screen-printed dresses, each of which includes a book in its pocket and tucks into a printed fabric envelope. The dresses were intended to be worn, the books annotated, and the entire ensemble passed to the next wearer. When reassembled, they form a rough book shape and size, but the overall form is very soft.



Ophir El-Boher, *Hand to Hand*, 2019. Screen-printed hand-sewn dress and envelope, hand-bound book. Images courtesy of the artist, photographed by Mario Gallucci, PNCA Documentation Studio.

The following is an excerpt from the book:

This is research
What brings value to clothes?
What brings value to objects?
What brings value to people?
What brings value to you?
What is value?
I hope to create clothes that people will cherish, take care of, love, keep, pass on.
I hope to include your ideas in my work. I hope you are excited



*I created this garment. It is made out of materials that someone else created. These materials have been used, I reclaimed them. I give this garment to you
you agreed to receive it, you agreed to engage with it.
This object has some value. You will add value to it. You will use whatever methods, tools, skills, concepts that you may think of, to expand and prolong the value of this object.
It is not mine any more than it is yours.*

Los susurros de mi ser, by Alejandra Arias Sevilla, is a collection of prints in a handmade box that evokes nostalgia for the artist’s childhood in Mexico and explores her identity as an immigrant to the United States. This publication utilizes different printmaking techniques—woodcut, letterpress, and screen printing on papers that alternate from semi-transparent to opaque and textured. The varied pages and printmaking techniques create a visually layered effect that represents Arias Sevilla’s multilayered identity. Although this publication is book-shaped, albeit slightly oversized, because of the delicacy of the papers, it must be stored flat.



Alejandra Arias Sevilla, *Los susurros de mi ser*, 2018. Ink on paper. Images courtesy of the artist.

Mustard Greens, an artist’s book in a handmade box by filmmaker Mikai Arion, “is a speculative fiction story about family lineage and confronting mysticism in context of environmental racism” (M. Arion, personal communication, January 16, 2020). The publication and accompanying box are book-shaped and sized, but they are small and the top of the box is not affixed. It will need an enclosure to safely sit on the shelves in Special Collections. Additionally, this book has a page with a pop-up shape and a sealed envelope on the back endpaper, so including these unusual features in the catalog record will be important for future use by researchers.





Mikai Arion, *Mustard Greens*, 2019. Mixed media.

Another challenge in adding student publications to closed stacks is the question of access. These publications are meant to be experienced—held, perused, and examined—and outside of word-of-mouth or in-class presentations, it is very difficult to bring awareness to these hidden collections. They can be found in the library’s OPACs, but a student might not know that they exist in our collections unless explicitly seeking an artist’s publication. Library staff regularly feature titles from Special Collections in a display case in a study room, but we are looking for more extensive ways for our community to interact with these materials.

Student Publications as Thesis Work

During their final year at PNCA, students focus on a thesis project with the support of a faculty mentor. Thesis students work on a project or body of work, culminating in an oral defense and exhibition of their work. The library collects digital portfolios for most student thesis projects that include documentation of their work. Students often create publications for their BFA thesis projects; these publications may be the entire project (in the case of graphic design and illustration students), a portion of the project, or as a supplement to the thesis. Readers may view images of the following publications via the links provided in the reference list.

One such work is *Sungazing*, the “subjective newspaper,” by Sammie Cetta, that accompanies her BFA Printmaking Thesis (Cetta, 2016). Cetta created an intentionally ephemeral poetic publication that contradicts the usual intended factual purpose of a newspaper.



In conversation with the other pieces in the thesis, the publications “illuminate a tension against two ways of learning: knowledge learned from others, and knowledge acquired from lived experience” (Cetta, 2016).

Rebecca Giordano’s book, *Confluence*, functioned as one piece in an installation of wall-hangings, a chair, a rug, and small objects “made using a repetitive mark, motion, and rhythm, with care, in the search to define the word *Home*” (Giordano, 2019). This book utilizes several printmaking techniques and is nestled in a clam-shell box made from embroidered and hand-printed book cloth.

Graphic Design student Marguerite Rischiotto created *Bair*, a “campaign that shines a light on the lack of representation of female body hair across the scope of advertising and media ... [and] celebrates femme body hair and raises awareness about the pressure on femmes to shave” (Rischiotto, 2019). The end result of the campaign was a full-bleed, full-color look book that joyfully exults in models and their body hair.

View more PNCA Thesis works here:

<https://mimi.pnca.edu/f/thesis>

Conclusion

The PNCA library’s collection of student publications is small, but growing, and we look forward to identifying more courses on campus that incorporate book creation in their curriculum. BFA courses on picture books and the graphic novel, the MA in Critical Studies, our new MFA in Creative Writing, and the MFA in Print Media programs will probably be good places for collaboration. This summer we are hoping to embark on a project to build enclosures for the books of unusual size, form, or shape. As this project grows, hopefully we will find ways to get the word out to students that we are actively seeking to collect their work as many have expressed discomfort in soliciting us for a sale. Additionally, the challenge of access presents an opportunity to explore unusual models of circulation and outreach.

As Riot Grrrl declared:

We must take over the means of production in order to create our own meanings ... Because doing/reading/seeing/hearing cool things that validate and challenge us can help us gain the strength and sense of community that we need in order to figure out how bullshit like racism, able-bodieism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, anti-semitism and heterossexism figures in our own lives. (Riot Grrrl, 1991, p. 83)



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