

## Cataloging Artists Books

<http://ninaschneider.com/presentation.html>

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### Seminar D: Cataloging Artists' Books: Challenges and Solutions

Collectors, critics, curators, and catalogers have been struggling with artists' books since at least the early 1970's. There is also a growing concern that these works have not been taken seriously by scholars and academicians. In the nearly forty years that artists' books have been on the cultural radar, there is no single agreed-upon definition<sup>[1]</sup>, although it is acknowledged that these works aren't simply the substrate for an artist's ideas, rather, they are the embodiment of the message and thought of their creator. By rights, these books should be collected as museum pieces and some do find a home there. For the most part though, the multiplicity, replication, and "bookness" of these works find a natural fit in library collections.

Describing and providing intellectual access to a work are the two common challenges that face every cataloger unfamiliar with the work in front of them. When librarians encounter artists' books, especially those books that don't fit neatly into defined categories they may have difficulty identifying them as such, which, in turn, leads to difficulty in describing them for the library's OPAC. Although steps have been taken within the arts and information communities to define these works, and compartmentalize them into styles, schools, and philosophies<sup>[2]</sup>, it is a massive task and well outside the scope of my presentation. For our purposes, we'll assume that your curator or acquisitions department has flagged the work as an artist book and your job is to catalog it.

Artists' books come *literally* in all shapes and sizes, many cross genres, others defy obvious categories. One man's artist book is another man's trade paperback. Before you begin cataloging you'll need to ask: Is it a monograph? graphic? realia? Not only does the cataloger need to decide which cataloging rules to use when describing artists' book, they have to decide which chapter within the rules to follow.

Since cataloging standards evolve over time reflecting the changing needs and scholarship within the information community, legacy records can be quite different from contemporary records. An observant searcher might wonder why one work is described more fully than another, but realistically, differences between records will not be realized and the searcher will assume that all relevant information is presented to them in the catalog record. They may just decide that the work isn't really what they're seeking if it's been cataloged following guidelines that are now outdated, if it suffers from glaring omissions or is a victim of just bad cataloging.

One example is Clifton Meador's *Book of Doom* from 1984 <sup>[3]</sup>.

OCLC Connexion - [Online WorldCat: Book of doom]

File Cataloging Authorities Edit Action Batch View Tools Window Help

OCLC 12743150 Held by NYP - 12 other holdings

300			[12] p. : ‡b all col. ill. ; ‡c 33 cm. (in solander case 35 cm.)
500			Title from case.
500			Limited edition of 50 copies.
500			Printed on fold-out leaves.

010 | | 94239332  
 040 | | [REDACTED]  
 019 | | 25610682  
 043 | | n-us—  
 050 0 0 | N7433.4M46 ‡b B66 198  
 090 | | ‡b  
 049 | | NYPP  
 100 1 | Meador, Clifton.  
 245 1 0 | Book of doom / ‡c Clifton.  
 246 1 | ‡i Title on container: ‡b Doom.  
 260 | | Rhinebeck, NY : ‡b Ph. Zimmermann Multiples, ‡c c1984.  
 300 | | [12] p. : ‡b all col. ill. ; ‡c 33 cm. (in solander case 35 cm.)  
 440 0 | Space heater editions  
 500 | | Title from case.  
 500 | | Limited edition of 50 copies.  
 500 | | Printed on fold-out leaves.  
 500 | | LC has copy no. 9, signed by the artist. ‡5 DLC  
 600 1 0 | Meador, Clifton.  
 650 0 | Artists' books ‡z United States.  
 710 2 | [REDACTED]

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RLIN21 Export - Microsoft Internet Explorer

RLG's RLIN21(TM) - bw book of doom and

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RLIN Record Type: c	RLIN Status	Record Status: c	Type of Rec	Type of Control: _	Descriptive
001	C				
008	941219s1984	nyua	000	p	
010	_	1a	94239332		
035	_				
040	_	1aDLC	1cDLC	1dOCLCQ	1dCSL
043	_	1a	n-us-		
050	00	1a	N7433.4.M46	1b	B96 1984
100	1_	1a	Meador, Clifton.		
245	10	1a	Book of doom	1c	Clifton Mead
246	14	1a	Doom		
260	_	1a	Rhinebeck, NY	1b	Ph. Zimmer
300	_	1a	[12] p.	1b	col. ill.
440	_0	1a	Space heater editions		
500	_	1a	An edition of 50, signed and numbered by the artist ... The book is coverless and comes in a clamshell case ...		
500	_	1a	Title from case.		
500	_	1a	Printed on fold-out leaves.		
600	10	1a	Meador, Clifton.		
650	_0	1a	Artists' books	1z	United States.
655	_7	1a	Artists' books (Genre)	1z	New York
655	_7	1a	Artists' autographs (Provenance)	1z	United States
				1y	20th century
				1z	rbprov

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RLIN F Record Type of	300		
001	300		[7] fold. leaves : ‡b all col. ill. ; ‡c 36 cm.
008	500		Title from permanent cardboard insert in case.
035	500		Title on case: Doom.
040	500		"Space heater editions"—1 leaf inserted (4 x 18 cm.)
100 1_	500		One of 50 copies, signed by the artist.
245 10	500		Issued in case.
260	500		Leaves vary in size and have cutouts.
300			
500			
500			
500			
500			
500			
600	14	‡aMeador, Clifton‡xAutograph.	
650	_0	‡aArtists' books‡zUnited States.	
650	_4	‡aShaped books‡xSpecimens.	
710	2_	‡aPh. Zimmermann Multiples.	
740	0_	‡aDoom.	
740	2_	‡aSpace heater editions.	
852			

Although the descriptive note is not incorrect it gives no sense of the book. *Aura: a poem* written by Hayden Carruth and published by Janus Press in 1977<sup>[4]</sup> consists of a sheet of paper featuring a design meant to invoke the Vermont countryside and housed within a printed wrapper. Although the colophon clearly states that the "image was made directly of colored pulps", at least 5 records note that the plate is printed on both sides. Two records note that the plate is printed and then go on to note that the image was made directly of colored pulps.

RLIN21 Export - Microsoft Internet Explorer

RLG's RLIN21(TM) - tw aura and pn caruth

Go to the **File** menu on this page and click **Print** or **Save As** to download.

300			1 case (1 fold. sheet, 1 fold. leaf of plates) : ‡b col. ill. ; ‡c 40 cm.
500			Printed on a sheet folded like a book jacket to hold the plate.
500			The plate unfolds to 39 x 119 cm. and is printed on both sides.

**RLIN Record Type:** c    **RLIN**  
**Record Status:** c    **Type**  
**Type of Control:** \_    **Desc**

001 \_\_\_\_\_  
 008 770914s1977.....vtuaf.....  
 010 \_\_ ‡a 77369192 //r95  
 040 \_\_ ‡i \_\_\_\_\_  
 050 00 ‡aPSS3505.A77594‡bA9  
 082 00 ‡a811/.5/4  
 100 1\_ ‡aCaruth, Hayden,‡d1921  
 245 10 ‡aAura :‡ba poem /‡cby H  
       Clark.  
 260 \_\_ ‡aWest Burke, Vt. :‡bJanus Press,‡cc1977.  
 300 \_\_ ‡a1 case (1 fold. sheet, 1 fold. leaf of plates) :‡bcol. ill. ;‡c40 cm.  
 500 \_\_ ‡aPrinted on a sheet folded like a book jacket to hold the plate.  
 500 \_\_ ‡aThe plate unfolds to 39 x 119 cm. and is printed on both sides.  
 500 \_\_ ‡a"Fifty copies." No. 45.  
 700 1\_ ‡aVan Vliet, Claire.  
 710 2\_ ‡aJanus Press.  
 710 \_\_\_\_\_

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RLIN21 Export - Microsoft Internet Explorer

RLG's RLIN21(TM) - tw aura and pn carruth

Go to the **File** menu on this page and click **Print** or **Save As** to download.

RLIN Record Type: c    RLIN Status: e  
 Record Status: c    Type of Record: a    Bib Level: m    Encoding: \_  
 Type of Control: \_    Descriptive Form: i    Updated: 1979-04-17

001  
 008 **500**          **The plate unfolds to 39 x 119 cm.  
 010                   and is printed on both sides.**  
 040  
 050 0

082 \_ :\$11/5/4  
 100 \_ :aCarruth, Hayden, \$d1921-  
 245 10 :aAura :\$ba poem /\$cby Hayden Carruth ; with a paperwork by Claire Van Vliet and Kathryn and Howard Clark made at Twinrocker Handmade Paper Mill in Brookston, Indiana in December of 1976.  
 260 \_ :aWest Burke, Vt. :\$bJanus Press, \$cc1977.  
 300 \_ :a1 case (1 fold. sheet, 1 fold. leaf of plates) :\$col. ill. ;\$c40 cm.  
 500 \_ :aPrinted on a sheet folded like a book jacket to hold the plate.  
 500 \_ :aThe plate unfolds to 39 x 119 cm. and is printed on both sides.  
 500 \_ :aCOLOPHON: The image was made directly of colored pulps with the help of Susan Hostetter and Bill Hodson. The type is Gudrun Zapf's Diotima and the boxes were made by Jim Bicknell. The edition is of fifty copies and this is copy number 1.  
 500 \_ :aCase is covered with full modern canvas with title in red on white paper label mounted on spine.  
 700 1 \_ :aVan Vliet, Claire.  
 852 \_ :

**500**          **COLOPHON: The image was made  
 directly of colored pulps ...**

Done    Internet    3:51 PM

When volumes are unpaginated, especially if there are complicated folds or feature an unusual structure, then the extent statement and even the measurements can vary from record to record. Claire Van Vliet's 1988 Janus Press publication of *Aunt Sallie's Lament*<sup>[5]</sup> is a poem by Margaret Kaufman. There are 16 copies listed in RLIN, with four different physical descriptions.



Margaret Kaufman's Aunt Sallie's Lament  
West Burke, Vt. : Janus Press, 1988

**4 records:**

**[23] p. ; 29 cm. laid in box 30 x 25 cm.**

**5 records:**

**[12] leaves ; 29 cm.**

**6 records:**

**[13] leaves ; 29 cm., laid in box 31 x 25 cm.**

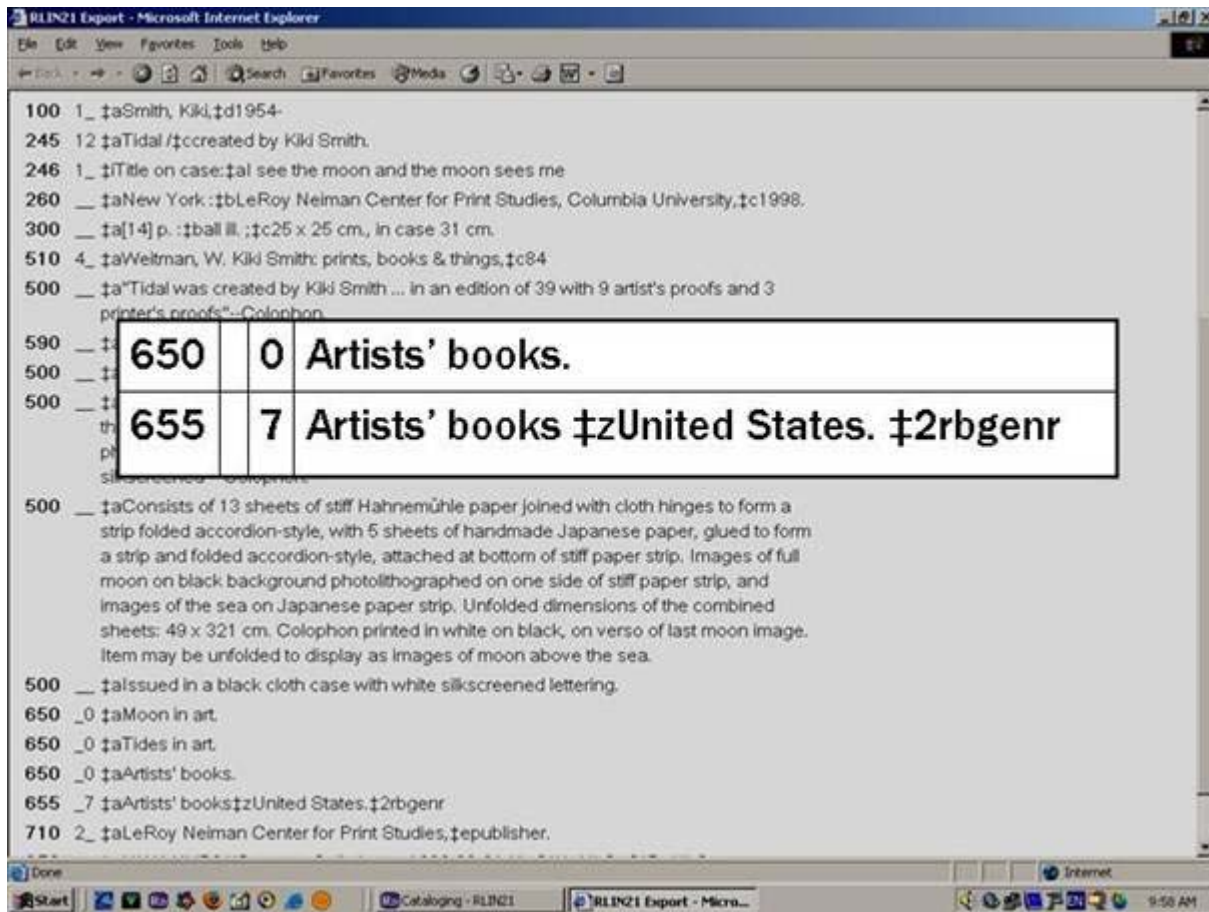
**1 record:**

**1 v. (unpaged) ; 29 cm.**

There are many inconsistencies when it comes to the physical description of artists' books and those are just a few examples of insufficient or inconsistent description of the physical item. However, a much bigger problem is one of access, both in subject and in choice of access points. For an individual wanting to look at artists' books, an inadequate description, if not completely wrong, will not necessarily be a turn-off. As any serious scholar knows a catalog record can only assist in finding the material, it is not a substitute even with title page transcription.

What happens when a person searching for artists' books enters the term "artists' books" in the subject search field? Depending on the extensiveness of the library's collection, the results can be daunting. Not only will books about artists' books be displayed, but works that fall into the genre of artists' books, no matter what the subject, will also be displayed on the same results screen. Someone with more experience may know to limit his or her search either by genre or by subject (if that option is available to them). However, artists' books and works about artists' books will continue to be found together in the subject search because in many instances, the term continues to be encoded as a subject rather than as a genre. There's a long and complex history behind the creation and development of the current 655 field<sup>[6]</sup>. Suffice it to say, that since the mid-1990's, the physical characteristics of the item, as well as the form and genre data of an object are displayed in the same field within the MARC record. Access to artists' books was (and still is) available by qualifying the subject term with the form subdivision "specimens". The problem is the continuing use of the 650 topical term "artists' books" without a form subdivision.

Kiki Smith's 1998 book *Tidal*<sup>[7]</sup> is a good example. Unless the copy that I looked at is missing a couple of pages, this book has absolutely nothing to do with artists' books as a subject. And I know that this book is not lacking any leaves.



You'll also notice that in this case, not only do we have "artists' books" as a subject, the record also includes "artists' books" as a genre. This phenomenon happens over and over and continues to this day because the LCSH scope note allocates the term for both the genre and the subject.

Another problem, which is often dictated by the design of the book, is the choice of main entry. It's easy to determine the author when only one person's name appears in the work. It is quite a different matter when an artist's book is a collaboration between two or more individuals, or if the work is a modification of other works. Since Chapter 21 of AACR2[8] takes into account both of these scenarios, we should take a quick look at the results.

First, in 2000 Red Angel Press published *Siena* by Henry James[9], which first appeared in an 1874 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*. The book's design is by Ronald Keller, as are the color woodcuts. The main entry is under Henry James, with an added entry for Keller and for the Red Angel Press. The choice here is fairly straight-forward since the title page is also straight-forward. Next we have Dobbin Books's 1994 publication of *Vorkuta poems, 1947-1954*[10] written by Sára Karig, translated from the Hungarian by László Baránszky-Jób, printed by Peter Kruty Editions, and conceptualized and designed by Louise McCagg. McCagg is the main entry although her name appears only on the colophon and her role in the production is not made clear. Third, we have *Sayings from Mark Twain's Puddin'head Wilson*, selected and drawn by Ed Ruscha and published by Greve/Hine in 1995[11]. The main entry is Ed Ruscha with an added name- title tracing for *Puddin'head Wilson* by Mark Twain.

I bring to your attention that although the main entry is obvious in some of these works, it is not so obvious in others. Why do authors appear as main entries in some of the records, whereas the artist



appears as the main entry in others? Even when the choice of main entry is obvious from the layout of the chief source of information, it all depends on how Chapter 21 is understood and interpreted by the cataloger.

### Short-term Solutions

So, what can we do about this? I can recommend three immediate things: fuller and more accurate descriptions, consistent vocabulary control, and a written in-house policy for cataloging artists' books.

First: fuller and more accurate descriptions. The perception is that detailed records usually translate into longer and more complex records, which in turn translate to more expensive and time-consuming cataloging. This, I have to argue, is not necessarily the case. As we all know, library budget constraints, the knowledge and expertise of the staff, and current cataloging standards are factors the cataloger should be aware of at all times and should help dictate the creation of the record[12]. DCRB developed from BDRB, which was created because of the need to accurately describe early imprints. There are two points that were made by Laura Stalker and Jackie Dooley in a 1992 article[13] justifying the need for specialized rare book rules that are especially applicable to artists' books. DCRB draws attention to the book as a physical object. When an artist book is placed in front of a cataloger it should be clear, either from the item itself or from information given to the cataloger, that the item is different than the typical monograph. This means that physical description becomes very important. The other point is that in many cases, these books are self-describing. Information that helps the cataloger in describing the item are found in the item's title page, colophon, and or accompanying material. Why spend time trying to decide how to edit the colophon for the note field when it's easier, faster, and more accurate to transcribe the whole? True, there are many artists' books that have no colophon, many don't have title pages either, but for those books that provide this information, the cataloger should take full advantage of including information that expands upon four previous elements of the bibliographic record. Rule 7B7 in the upcoming DCRM (B) states[14]:

"If the statement of limitation is accompanied by statements of responsibility or other information relating to the production of the edition, include as much of the additional information in the note as is desired.

And 7B10 states, "Make notes on important physical details that are not already included in the physical description area if desired."

For those artists' books that are more difficult to decipher, there are other tools available. First; the prospectus usually contains information that can be used for both description and access. If there is no prospectus, then the cataloger can search out book dealers' descriptions. Both of these are written to help sell the book so the descriptions contained therein may include helpful details such as the medium and technique. If a prospectus or a dealer description is unavailable, the next step is to speak with the curator or acquisitions librarian. Why did they buy it? Did they speak directly with the artist? What insights can they provide? Finally, when the cataloger exhausts these resources, contacting the artist is the next solution, provided, of course, that the artist is alive and can be identified. I've done this myself a couple of times and they prove to be very helpful. Not only are they excited that their book is getting the attention it deserves, but they can provide insights on many aspects of the work that may not be obvious even when there is a colophon and prospectus.

The next recommendation for improved cataloging is controlled vocabulary. When indexing artist's book, I recommend discontinuing the subject term "Artists' books" in the 650 field unless it is qualified by the form subdivision, "Specimens". Although the Library of Congress's scope-note clearly states, "here are entered books that are produced by artists and intended as visual art objects, and general works about such books,"[\[15\]](#) it is just this defined dichotomy that can lead to aggravation. For instance, entering the term "artists' books" in the subject field of CATNYP, the New York Public Library's OPAC [\[16\]](#) will return 160 faceted headings. By browsing through the headings it appears that the library only has 26 specimens of artists' books whereas there have been 2,389 books written about them. It's not until we look at the full record that it's understood that most of these 2,389 books are artists' books, not reference books about artists' books. This is either good or bad news depending on the nature of your research. If we search the term artists' books in CATNYP as a keyword, we'll get 3,515 results. The Genre Terms Thesaurus, created and maintained by RBMS[\[17\]](#), is another tool for controlling the indexing of these books. The genre term "artists' books" can be subdivided by year and geographic location and will be labeled as a form/genre term in the public display of most libraries' OPAC's. Whichever method – subdivided subject headings or form/genre headings -- you and your library choose to adopt, the most important thing is to be consistent. That may mean that it will be necessary to go through your records and modify previous work to standardize the headings.

The third recommendation that can be immediately instituted is that of an in-house written policy for cataloging artists' books based on current standards. There are two such policies that I'm aware of, although there may be many more. First is the University of Oregon's "Artists' Books Cataloging", created in 1988 and revised in 1991[\[18\]](#). This is not a step-by-step rulebook but rather notes and guidelines that help the librarian identify, handle, and classify these books according to University policy. ARLIS/UK published a pamphlet in 1988 entitled "Descriptive cataloging of artists' books"[\[19\]](#). These guidelines focus exclusively on the physical description of artists' books. With some modifications, these are the same guidelines that New York Public Library follows. Your institution could also create or modify pre-existing guidelines to standardize cataloging procedures.

There are a few other things to keep in mind when cataloging artists' books. Many of us have seen our share of artists' books throughout our careers and have become familiar with the personal and press names in our collections. Some of us even know the artists personally. Although this can be a great help in cataloging a work, it can also be dangerous. Just because we know that Jane Doe is the artist that conceptualized the book and it was printed at XYZ press of which John Smith is the sole proprietor, does not mean that we should ignore the three assistants named in the colophon. In many cases, this has been done to save time and space on the catalog record but one never knows when that assistant will go on to become a well known and respected book artist or bibliographic celebrity. When the decision is made to trace a printer or a publisher, the names should conform to the authority file and tracing should always be consistent. I recommend noting and tracing all personal and corporate names that appear in the work.

Chapter 7 of AACR2[\[20\]](#) states that the cataloger should note the nature of the work if not obvious from the title. The ARLIS/UK guidelines emphasize the physical characteristic of the item, such as "flip book" or "Xerox book". AACR2 on the other hand emphasizes the literary genre in its examples. I recommend noting both if necessary so that a record may describe a physical characteristic, such as a volvelle, and the genre, perhaps poetry. Once again, it is important to be consistent. If your institution considers this approach, it may be necessary to work with standardized vocabulary. Choosing terms from one of the RBMS thesauri[\[21\]](#), the Getty's Art and Architecture thesaurus[\[22\]](#), and the Library of Congress' Thesaurus for Graphic Materials[\[23\]](#) are all possibilities. You should also trace these terms so that the records will be found when searching by subject or genre.

Longer-term solutions:

There are at least three longer-term solutions, which could become essential tools for cataloging artists' books. One is to create a set of specific national cataloging rules for artists' books. This, of course, is a daunting prospect and would prove difficult due to the nature of artists' books combined with the current lack of definitions within the genre. When the decision to update DCRB was made, a number of issues were raised. How could a set of rules designed for early printed books be modified to accommodate machine-press period books or any other book that warrants extensive description? In the introduction of DCRB, and in its examples, the tendency to favor early printed books is apparent and acknowledged[24]. The Bibliographic Standards Committee decided that it was important to add a section on special circumstances when cataloging books from the machine-press period in the upcoming DCRM (B). These rules give specific instructions for common problems when cataloging these works. The same could be done for artists' books. For example, just as a specific rule was created in DCRM (B) to record the impression number as an edition statement, so could these artists' book rules give guidance on where to record the limitation statement. Should it be part of the edition statement when it appears in the colophon? Should it be in a note when it appears as 12/30? It's impossible to anticipate every artist's book that will cross a cataloger's desk and many won't fall neatly into a specific category, but a survey of your library's records may identify common problems and be a first step in creating national guidelines. Unlike DCRB and the soon to be released DCRM (B), this manual should also give guidance on choice of access points. With multiple authors and artists, these works challenge the cataloger to find the appropriate rule within AACR2 when so many exceptions within the artists' books genre abound.

The next project in aiding the cataloger would be a specific thesaurus for artist book terms allowing access to both their intellectual and physical characteristics. Steps were made a number of years ago to create just such a thesaurus as a collaborative project at UCLA's Department of Information Studies. Along with three classmates, I used the Getty's Art and Architecture thesaurus with examples culled from Judith Hoffberg's collection of artists' books housed at the UCLA Arts Library. The point was to create a simplified subset of the Art and Architecture Thesaurus to be used when cataloging and when searching for artists' books. We were able to identify seven facets for physical description in the Physical Attributes hierarchy and four facets for critical and conceptual description within the Intellectual Attributes hierarchy. We made a decision that artists' books were best represented by a language of structure, form, function, and criticism since providing complete subject access was both impossible -- given the nearly limitless array of topics addressed by artists -- and redundant -- as tools such as LCSH already exist. This thesaurus could be a basis of a larger effort.

The third and final long-term solution is a catalog that permits display of digital images in the library's OPAC. Many catalogs have this feature and a couple of examples include the University of Iowa's International Dada Archive[25] and the Artists' Book Collection at Otis[26]. The success of such an effort on a national scale, particularly given the financial commitment required, as well as issues of copyright and permissions, needs further study.

So, don't be afraid to catalog artists' books. Remember to be consistent. Transcribe them faithfully. Trace all names that appear in the publication. Please stop using the 650 without a subdivision. And write up a policy for your institution. When we consider it, perhaps the lack of substantive scholarship is not because critics and academicians dismiss the genre. Perhaps it's because they cannot find what they need when searching a library's catalog. It's our job to change that.

A hearty thanks to my colleagues at the New York Public Library, especially Virginia Bartow, Margaret Glover, Michael Inman, and Roberta Waddell, as well as to Heather Cleary of Otis College of Art and Design, and Richenda Brim of the Getty Research Institute.

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