

## In edition: artists' multiples in an academic collection

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The artist's multiple is difficult to define, but could be described as an original artwork produced in an edition of two or more. At Chelsea College of Art and Design, the artists' multiples collection was developed to give students first-hand experience of original work by artists, something that is rarely included in the special collections of art libraries. This article examines the history and development of this unique collection of objects, and how it has enabled the library to play an active part in the life and work of the academic community it serves.

At a time when archives and special collections in libraries are gaining wider attention due to an array of funding initiatives for retrospective cataloguing and digitisation, it may be worth reflecting on the development and function of one very special 'special collection'. The Artists' Multiples Collection in the library at the Chelsea College of Art and Design is particularly interesting because it is largely a collection of objects rather than print or media-based material. Initiated and developed by successive librarians at Chelsea, it is an integral part of the library's collections as a whole.

The artist's multiple is difficult to define; Stephen Bury, former librarian at Chelsea, suggested that it was a genre to typify 20th-century art:

the artists' multiple offered to the twentieth century an art form that like the products of consumer society is repeatable and denied the uniqueness of the traditional art object'.<sup>1</sup>

The majority of multiples are three dimensional objects, which can take the form of sculptures, prints, photographs, records, tapes, CDs, etc. What differentiates them from multiple works earlier in the 20th century is the intention to create an edition, the concept of multiplicity playing an important role. Another characteristic often associated with artists' multiples is a sense of playfulness, visual punning or joke, as seen, for example, in David Shrigley's *Heroin and cocaine* salt and pepper pots.

A distinctive feature of the Fluxus multiples of the 1960s was the packaging – wooden boxes, cartons, jars and clear plastic containers with hinged lids. Just as packaging was important to the concept of

consumerism, protecting and promoting goods for distribution, so the dissemination of ideas was a key feature of artworks for Fluxus. Joseph Beuys, who made over 520 multiples largely concentrated in the period 1965-1985, had similar intentions. Beuys highlighted two aspects of his interest in stating: 'I search for a suitable quality in an object, which permits multiplication of that object, for instance the quality implying series' and 'I'm interested in the distribution of physical vehicles in the form of editions because I'm interested in spreading ideas.'<sup>2</sup> Distribution or dispersal appear to have been common themes in the production of multiples for many artists.

During the 1980s the boundaries between artist's book, exhibition documentation, mail art and multiple became more blurred. In the 1990s in Britain there was a resurgence of interest, which was explored in the British Council touring exhibition *Multiplication* in 2001.<sup>3</sup> The multiple was also a format of distribution adopted by many 'Brit Art' artists seeking to avoid the gallery system, as typified by the work produced by Tracey Emin and Sarah Lucas in their shop.

### Chelsea's collection

The Artists' Multiples Collection at Chelsea College of Art and Design Library contains over 200 items accumulated over the past 20 to 25 years. The collection is wide-ranging, containing an edition of Marcel Duchamp's 'proto-multiple' *Rotoreliefs* (1964),



Peter Liversidge. *The perfect match*. July 1996.

work by contemporary artists such as David Batchelor, David Shrigley and Jeremy Deller, and some items by students working within the college. Fluxus multiples are well represented and add to the Library's holdings of other Fluxus documentation such as theoretical publications, artists' books, exhibition catalogues and ephemera. Multiples by specific artists are collected when possible. For example, there are 12 items by Lawrence Weiner that complement a substantial book and text collection in the Library.

'Brit Art' artists of the 1990s have a strong presence in the collection, with works by Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Anya Gallaccio and Sarah Staton. The majority of these works were acquired directly from galleries, publishers or artists' mailing lists, and a key aspect of the collection is the personal relationship which has been developed with some of the artists, such as Peter Liversidge, who began contributing to the Chelsea library collections shortly after graduating and continues to do so, as his exhibiting profile increases, with many of his mail art inspired multiples. There are also connections to the artistic life of the college through the work of artists like Cornelia Parker and Graham Gussin, who have both taught in the School of Art at Chelsea.

In addition to numbered editions, the collection contains a significant amount of ephemeral material, including badges and stickers, produced by artists like Bob and Roberta Smith in very large, unnumbered or unlimited editions. While this type of material may not adhere to the strict rules of the 'edition', the concepts of mass production and distribution remain the same and indeed are enhanced.

## The 1970s

The multiples have their origins in Chelsea's Artists' Books Collection, which was developed by Clive Phillpot, librarian at Chelsea from 1970 to 1977, in an attempt to encourage students to take a more active interest in the Library and as a result to make use of other materials within the collections. When Clive Phillpot arrived at Chelsea a certain amount of material relating to artists' books (and multiples) already existed, such as Wolf Vostell's *Decollage/Happenings*, produced by Something Else Press (an off-shoot of Fluxus). This collection of text based items in a box together with a piece of matzoh shows how the multiples collection overlapped with that of the artists' books; it was initially part of the

latter, but is now housed with the former.

To some extent, format has determined how such ambiguous objects were categorised: artists' books sat on shelves and multiples were in display cases. In the 1970s many dealers in mainland Europe dealt with artists' books and multiples together, for example Daniel Spoerri's MAT press, and Editions Hundertmarkt. To some extent there was a natural crossover between artists' books and multiples, and dealers like Johan Deumens in the Netherlands and Printed Matter in New York continue this tradition today.

### The 1980s and 1990s

Stephen Bury took on the development of the multiples collection during his time at Chelsea (1978-2000) with the aim of acquiring important primary sources, not just about artists, but produced by them. He felt this to be complementary to the function of the Library's slide collection: small objects could be available for students to handle and consider to complement the slides which gave examples of an artist's work. The slide collection was significant to the multiples in another way: slides for the Contemporary Art Slide Scheme (providing a record of contemporary art exhibitions in London on a subscription basis to organisations and educational institutions) were photographed by

the Chelsea slide librarian, who was able to report back on multiples associated with contemporary exhibitions. This is a role continued by Donald Smith, the slide librarian, today.

As the collection grew Stephen Bury also sought to add examples to illustrate the historical development of multiples as a genre, such as the periodical *S.M.S. [Sbit Must Stop]*, 1968, edited by William Copley and bought in 1988/89; this contained work by artists working in New York at the time, including Roy Lichtenstein, Ray Johnson, Man Ray and John Cage. This art historical aspect of acquisition further enhanced the collection's importance as a scholarly teaching resource.

In the 1990s, he bought *Words and Pictures*, a periodical launched at the ICA, comprising a boxed series of small scale multiples by artists such as Martin Creed, Matthew Higgs and Bob and Roberta Smith. This overlap with the periodical format illustrates the flexibility and adaptability of the multiple as a form of artists' production, allowing a wider distribution of original artworks than ever seen before.

Other influences on the development of the collection during this time were the decline of printmaking as a course at Chelsea and the subsequent interest from students in combined media, conceptual art and found objects. Stephen Bury saw the Library's role as running alongside the taught elements, providing current awareness of



Luke Burton. *Appendage no. 1 (fragment)*. Silica gel and oil paint, 2004.

what was happening on the contemporary art scene, especially in London. He already ran an artists' books workshop for students at Chelsea, and planned to develop something similar with artists' multiples.

Works continued to be acquired largely from second hand dealers' catalogues of artists' books which contained the odd multiple, or from exhibitions at galleries such as the ICA and the Whitechapel Art Gallery. Multiples often accompanied exhibition documentation and were collected as part of the ephemera (private view cards, etc.) documenting the exhibition. (The Library also has an extensive collection of exhibition catalogues and ephemera dating back to the 1940s.<sup>4</sup>)

The first multiple purchased by Stephen Bury was *Cathedrals* by Cornelia Parker, originally sold as a supplement to an exhibition in 1982. From 1985, the pace of acquisition increased as more money became available from the general library funds for purchasing items for special collections. In the early 1990s, as the collection became established, more artists offered works for sale directly to the collection. The single biggest purchase for the collection from this era, in terms of number of items, was from Sarah Staton's *Supastore*, one of the last boxes sold before its closure in 1998.

In the late 1990s Stephen Bury undertook a research project which resulted in the publication of his book *Artists' multiples 1935-2000*.<sup>5</sup> Many of Chelsea's multiples featured in the book and the project funding enabled several new works to be added to the collection. These included Cornelia Parker's *Meteorite lands on . . . Buckingham Palace*, Simon Periton's *Barbiturate* and Graham Gussin's *Ghost*, all acquired from the Multiple Store. Since being established in 1998, the Multiple Store's function has been that of a dealer or publisher rather than exhibitor, with regularly commissioned editions being sold on that basis. Other Multiple Store commissions in Chelsea's collection are Keith Coventry's *Inbaler* and Dalziel and Scullion's *The idea of north*.

## Present and future

The Artists' Multiples Collection is now an established special collection at Chelsea and its role is primarily as a teaching resource and an archive of contemporary practice. The Library staff have drawn up an acquisition policy for the selection of multiples, which states that

in terms of the artists, acquisition of multiples

reflects and complements the main book collection and, particularly, the Artists' Book Collection. [Also] multiples produced by current and past students are a priority.<sup>6</sup>

The guidelines also acknowledge budgeting restrictions in acquiring new works. The Library seeks to maintain contacts with dealers and galleries, as well as with certain artists, and items bought from organisations probably now account for around 80% of acquisitions. Recent acquisitions for the collection have been *Key to an abandoned airport* by Graham Gussin and Jeremy Millar, an edition of 100 exhibited as part of a show at the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham in 2002; in 2003, examples of larger, more ephemeral editions by Tracey Emin acquired from the White Cube Gallery and Modern Art Oxford; and in 2004 Gavin Turk's *Tea stain*, again from White Cube.

Currently, the collections of both multiples and artists' books are used for teaching purposes within the Library. Library staff run short introductory sessions to the collections in which students have an unparalleled opportunity to study and handle original works in a learning environment. Materials in several of the special collections combine to form an overview of an artist's work; an introductory session can feature work by an important and prolific artist, such as Lawrence Weiner, drawing on examples from collections of multiples, artists' books, archival material (such as letters and original sketches), ephemera, exhibition catalogues and monographs. The overriding ethos is that the purpose of the multiples collection is for teaching and that items can and should be handled by students as a part of their studies.

The special collections also seek to reflect the work of academic staff and visiting tutors and artists, so that students can pursue their interests after attending talks, workshops or seminars. Examples are the recent additions to the multiples collection by Gussin (as mentioned above) and Rose Finn-Kelcey. Cornelia Parker saw the role of her multiples in the Chelsea collection 'as a catalyst or encouragement to students that ideas can be small as well as big'.<sup>7</sup> In acquiring work from students (such as Luke Burton's Appendage No. 1 fragment) as well as established artists, the collection not only provides examples for future academic generations, but also goes some way towards archiving the practice being undertaken within the college. It could be said that the very existence of the collection, in this respect, means that the Library is fully integrated with the active life and work of the college.

In future the collection will continue to focus on

collecting artists' multiples that can inform the college's academic community about contemporary practice in a hands-on way. For art students, who, it could be said, use library materials in an extremely visual, referential manner, often to support their studio work or on the recommendation of a tutor, this experience can prove invaluable. However, this type of provision can only be achieved through adequate access arrangements. While pre-arranged user education sessions are currently possible on a small scale, more ad-hoc access is problematic owing to the special collections' remote location from the main library and the small number of staff running the library at any one time.

It is hoped that when the collection moves to a larger space in the College's new Library at Millbank, next door to Tate Britain, this will increase the potential for user education using non-traditional materials. It is also hoped that a larger display area in the Library will significantly increase awareness of special collections. Indeed over the past academic year a display case has been installed in the Library specifically to feature a series of small-scale exhibitions curated from the materials held in special collections – a facility which has proved popular with staff and students alike.

In addition, the prospect of digitisation is being

considered, specifically for the multiples collection, in order to facilitate immediate access by providing a visual reference tool for the collection; this also means that valuable or physically vulnerable items can be offered a greater level of protection.

Currently, many of the multiples are catalogued on the library OPAC, but this text-based catalogue record is of limited value to a student wishing to view an artist's work. A visual catalogue would increase the relevance of the items sought in the course of student research. There are, of course, serious copyright considerations in creating such a catalogue, particularly if it were to be made generally available on the internet.

This survey of the development of the Artists' Multiples Collection at Chelsea highlights some important issues regarding special collections generally. Firstly, special collections, especially in academic art libraries rarely exist in isolation. They tend to be integrated into the wider collections of the library, including the bookstock and others such as artists' books and slides, all reflecting the interests and needs of teaching, learning, and research in their institution. Secondly, the history of the multiples collection demonstrates the vital role of successive librarians at Chelsea. They have been able to take the initiative in creating new collections that meet



Jon Smith. *Desert storm*. 2000.

the changing needs of teaching and student interests, and to use their expertise and knowledge to identify sources and suitable items for acquisition. Given restrictions on funding and resources, and the increasing emphasis on electronic resources, it seems less likely that such a unique collection could be created today. However, current initiatives such as digitisation and retrospective cataloguing can offer a new lease of life to special collections. Finally, this case study demonstrates that special collections need not be seldom-used materials relegated to remote stacks. Their content can reflect the varied activities of an art school, where the librarians take an active role in collection acquisition and development, and in promoting their use to the academic community through training, presentations, and improved access facilities such as display facilities and visual catalogues.

## References

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