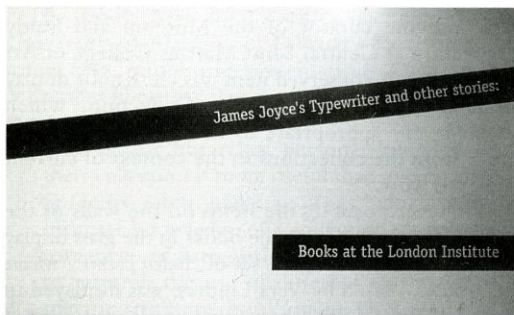


THE BIRTH OF AN EXHIBITION

by Sarah Mahurter and Susan Johanknecht

The recent exhibition *James Joyce's typewriter and other stories: books at the London Institute* was jointly curated by a librarian and an academic tutor. The aim was to demonstrate how six special collections in the London Institute's Libraries and Learning Resources were relevant to the courses the students follow. In parallel, students from the Institute's Book Arts MA created artists' books influenced by one of the collections, and these were displayed in the exhibition alongside work by bookbinding and print media students.



The title of the exhibition, designed by Trickett & Webb Ltd.

Introduction

'These books should be displayed. They should be seen, enjoyed, celebrated. Why should they hide their lights under bushels any longer?' After three years spent cataloguing, conserving and singing the praises of five special collections in three of the Colleges of the London Institute¹, I found these thoughts exercising my mind as preparations began for the exhibition *James Joyce's typewriter and other stories: books at the London Institute*.

The language of the book is visual. However, books are tactile, they smell, may not just *look* rough or smooth, they may *be* rough or smooth. They contain something as well as express something in their appearance. The integration of both content, surface design and function makes the book an object with its own special and symbolic form².

This quote defines the challenge which lay ahead of us when the exhibition was first conceived: how were we to show how items from five special collections, which had been the subject of a major award from the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), were relevant to the work of the current students?

The collections

The six collections represented in this exhibition were the Printing Historical Collection at the London College of Printing; the Walter Crane Collection, the Poster Literature Collection and the Thorold Dickinson Cinema Collection at Camberwell College of Arts; the Museum and Study Collection at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design; and the Artists' Books Collection at Chelsea College of Art and Design.

'The rich and varied histories of the Colleges which make up the London Institute are reflected in their special collections. These collections have been built to meet different needs and have developed accordingly; yet they all share a common aim in supporting staff and student work and research at the London Institute.' So wrote Jan Conway, previously Deputy Head of Library and Learning Resources at the London College of Printing. The special collections contain examples of printed books, from incunabula through to specimens from present day private presses such as the Whittington Press, which inspire students in the production of their work. Selected pieces by students and alumni are added to the collections on a regular basis, ensuring their role as both teaching examples and barometers of contemporary book art and design.



The book as object: examples of the display.

The librarian as curator

How were approximately one hundred and thirty items, from a total approaching twelve and a half thousand, chosen to fit into a gallery space in Mayfair measuring just over 3,000 sq. ft. while at the same time representing the breadth and accessibility of the collections?

I chose to display half a millennium of printed book production as a 'time-line', a chronology of the major social and technological developments in this period. Starting to tell the printer's story at the beginning meant displaying the oldest printed item in the collections: Thomas Aquinas *Summa theologiae secundus liber secunde partis* (Basle: [Michael Wenssler], 1485). Following this, a selection of work from the early printers was displayed, including Aldus Manutius, Froben, Pliny, Plantin and Sebastian Gryphius. The great typographers of the 18th century were represented by John Baskerville's great folio Bible and a manual of the ground-breaking typeface designs of Giambattista Bodoni. Lavish Victorian binding techniques were exemplified in the lozenge design on the front board of *The poetical works of John Milton with life* and the coloured titles, borders and ornamental letters and vignettes by Owen Jones which decorate *Ancient Spanish ballads: historical and romantic*. David Roberts' *Egypt and Nubia* was selected to illustrate splendid colour lithography, but alas, the gallery space did not permit me to show this due to its size. Kelmscott was the first of the modern private presses, so I chose as an example the last book printed at the press *A note by William Morris on his aims in founding the Kelmscott Press, together with a short description of the press by S C Cockerell and an annotated list of the books printed therat*. This was displayed close to the Ashendene Press, the Essex House Press and the Doves Press. Brian Webb, the designer, kindly arranged for us to borrow a press used by Doves, from its current owners, Shepherds Bookbinders. By now the exhibition was developing into the celebration of book production for which I was striving. Innovative work of the twentieth century was represented by modern presses such as Golden Cockerel, Gregynog, Rampant Lions, Circle, Tern and Whittington.

Students from the HND Design (Bookbinding) and BA(hons) Print Media (Book arts and crafts) courses at the London College of Printing selected pieces of their own work to contribute to this exhibition. The students' books were displayed beyond the private presses, in tall, illuminated glass cases. A lot of their pieces are sculptural objects, particularly Lord of the Rings, re-bound by Anke Schmidts in black goatskin. It took her over one hundred hours to complete. These dedicated students continue the tradition of fine bookbinding and book arts; their work is influenced by the creators of five centuries of

printed book design: by the authors, illustrators, typographers, printers and binders who have created the content and form of the printed book object since Gutenberg's 'twenty six soldiers of lead' began to disseminate works previously only available as manuscripts.

Thorold Dickinson's collection of books and personal papers, including his membership card for the Association of Cinematograph and Allied Technicians and his Cinema 16 press pass, reflect his travels during his career as a film director and an educator. Today, they remind us of the breadth of study undertaken at the London Institute and offer the biographer of film a unique source of the facts and anecdotes about Dickinson's life and work.

A strong working relationship exists between the students of conservation at Camberwell College of Arts and the curator of the Museum and Study Collection at Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design. A conserved item was chosen for display from the Teaching Examples Collection, which seemed very appropriate to the aim of exhibiting work from the collections in the context of current students' work.

Wherever possible, the items on the walls of the gallery were linked with the books in the glass display cabinets. The two volume set of *Auden poems / Moore lithographs*, edited by Vera Lindsay, was displayed in this way. Two of the lithographic prints were framed and hung immediately above the case in which Auden's poems lay. Framed sheets of monotype printing samples created a fitting backdrop for a selection of three-dimensional books as objects, all of which were made by students or alumni of the Institute. In the early stages of planning the space in the gallery, I had expressed a deep dislike of 'books on stilts' as a form of display. My fears were soon overcome when I saw the elegance of the stands with their clear glass covers, providing an airy and spacious introduction to the exhibition at the entrance to the gallery. John Randle of the Whittington Press lent us a set of photographs taken by Ski Harrison, which were used to illustrate *A portrait of presses*, also on display in a case immediately below them. These contributed to the atmosphere which was being developed in the gallery: I wanted this to be an organic show, one which involved the visitor in the process of creating works of art in the form of finely printed books. One example was the hung piece by Karen Bleitz *Re-defining the process*. Karen was a student of MA Book Arts in 1997. She used a framed sheet of metal, measuring 160cm by 170cm, to create an interactive set of magnetic words and letters, engaging the viewers in developing their own textual image.

From Morrison's *Ode to a printing office* to Ron King's *Alphabet 1* the walls continued to tell the printer's story. This led into the area of the exhibition

which was developed by the students of MA Book Arts at Camberwell College of Arts, under the direction of Susan Johanknecht.

The course director as curator

A prior knowledge of Book Arts cannot be assumed, even at MA level. This may sound strange, yet someone with a background in ceramics or architecture, who has a passion for the book and evidence of sequential thinking, is often an appropriate candidate for the Camberwell MA Book Arts course. However, this does necessitate a close relationship between the course and the various special collections, to provide historical context and contemporary examples of work (bearing in mind that there are few galleries or bookshops providing regular access to artists' books).

The Book Arts 2000 Conference held at the University of Alabama in February 1999 included some very interesting presentations from special collections librarians. Two issues emerged that I'd like to mention here:

- One is that librarians' personal knowledge of their collection is more useful than any catalogue. Students often make requests which require intimate knowledge of a collection, crossing the categories of date/author/title. They may need to research the use of different materials, or a specific structure, books using photography, or books that are like diaries. These references would be difficult and slow for students to find on their own.
- Second is that the special collections librarian has the power to increase the overall audience for (and knowledge of) book arts through their own practice. They can make mini exhibitions in the library space. Or as Mindell Dubansky has been doing at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, they can curate/assemble library material which relates to an exhibition being held, and work to integrate the book material in a meaningful way into survey or thematic shows. ('Speed', held at the Whitechapel Gallery last year, included relevant selections of artists' books and manifestoes.)

These issues were uppermost in my mind when the MA Book Arts course was asked to participate in *James Joyce's typewriter and other stories: books from the London Institute*. I wanted to create a live and active example of our relationship to the special collections. In the first weeks of the MA course at Camberwell Dr Stephen Bury arrives with a suitcase of artists' books from the collection at the Chelsea College of Art and Design Library. He hands each student and member of staff a book. He gives us a little while to handle it and read it. Then we are asked, in turn, to talk about our book. In a sense, this is the moment when the course begins, sitting around a table,

handling and discussing books. The essence of what we talk about during this hour is carried forward in visits to the special collections at the National Art Library of the V&A Museum, to the Tate Library, and in seminar sessions looking at work in progress: in all these activities a language of critical viewing, reading and making is created. So it seemed appropriate for this exhibition that each member of the group should choose a book from the Chelsea collection to exhibit alongside their own work. Stephen Bury was in agreement with this idea and our group met at Chelsea to discuss the project.

The students were concerned about the notion of books in a gallery context. They wanted people to be able to handle their work, so we decided that our section of the gallery could be the 'reading room', with tables and chairs. They wanted to choose artists' books from Chelsea which dealt with content similar to their own work, and this required some research, drawing on Steve's knowledge of the collection. London itself often has the biggest impact on students arriving to do their MA and the content of their work reflects this. Claudia Schenk's fascination with street sign typography and found texts where she lives in Brixton fills her books, and led her to choose *Atlas*, a boxed set done by Jake Tilson in 1985, to display. Adriana Estivill had been looking at isolation in crowds on the London tube and chose *Travelling blind* (1996) by Helen Scalway, which has diagrammatic yet expressive drawings of underground maps. (Later, when screenprinting, Adriana noticed someone beside her printing similar drawings, and discovered it was Helen, who was doing the MA Printmaking course at Camberwell. She was very pleased and surprised to find herself part of the exhibition and to discover Adriana's work.)

Since our part of the exhibition was a live project, it was logical to consider our section of the catalogue³ as a project as well, not as documentation of work previously made. We proposed that each student have a double-page spread to treat as an 'artist's page'. Deadlines for catalogue material were tight, so the pages began as a one-day workshop with



James Joyce's typewriter, on loan from George Hoffman.



MA Book Arts students' display.

Les Bicknell and me. Questions were asked: how do we make a visual link between the pages? how do we maintain individuality? Discussion. Everyone went away for fifteen minutes coming back with an idea on paper. Ribbon bookmarks, boxes, frames – a solution was finally agreed upon: to have variable top and bottom borders with the group choosing a pantone colour. These borders had a filmic quality, influenced by the fact that several people were working with photographic imagery, building their books as visual sequences by editing and cropping. The borders would contain Stephen Bury's text, discussing the circumstances of how/why the books had originally been purchased for the collection, as a voice outside the image and on-going from page to page. Inside their borders, students used imagery from the Chelsea book, their own imagery, or a combination of both.

For the gallery, we had requested two long Donald Judd-style MDF tables and 12 chairs. But, arriving on installation day, we found three squarish tables. More discussion. As a group we started physically moving the tables and display cases around, and a solution evolved. The tables would be in a row with display cases wedged between, becoming a long functional/sculptural piece spanning the room. People could sit reading at a table and still peer into a neighbouring display case. The relationship between special collection and ongoing practice was clear, both physically and conceptually.

Stephen Bury's text on the last artist's page of the catalogue reads: 'Bruce Naumann, Ed Ruscha: Clive Phillpot bought the Ruscha and I bought its companion piece from Marcus Campbell whilst researching my book, *Artists' books*, in 1994. There is a future for a medium that can humorously reflect on itself: *Burning Small Fires* 1968 consists of burning pages from Ruscha's *Various Small Fires* 1964'.

Our project within *James Joyce's typewriter and other stories: books at the London Institute* affirmed links and dialogues between books, institutions, practitioners and librarians. We had a good time.

Afterword

No books were stolen (not even the 1" x 3" fold-out landscape book) but pages of a flipbook which fell apart did disappear and the pages of another book curled. The physical consequences to a book of public handling will always inform the making and designing of these students.

Conclusion: the typewriter

This belongs to Georges Hoffman who runs France's largest literacy agency from 'book infested offices in Saint Michel'. Michael Benson, Director of Communications and Marketing at the London Institute, arranged for us to borrow it for the exhibition. Michael wrote 'Sitting there quietly, observing the ebb and flow of contemporary literature, is an old Remington. James Joyce's typewriter sits there in a babel of books. How he would have enjoyed such a thing.' And so, after a challenging labour, we gave birth to a healthy, bouncy exhibition and named it *James Joyce's typewriter and other stories: books at the London Institute*.

References

1. The London Institute is made up of five constituent colleges: Camberwell College of Arts; Central Saint Martins College of Art and Design; Chelsea College of Art and Design; the London College of Fashion; London College of Printing.
2. Brunwin, Mike. *A conceptual analysis of art within the context of the book*. Dissertation, BA(Hons), Book Production, LCP, 1987, p.59.
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