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Defending the aesthetic: the conservation of an artist's book

*Gustavo Grandal Montero and Ana Paula Hirata Tanaka
in conversation with Erica Foden-Lenahan*

Modern and contemporary books, easily replaceable in the internet age, are weeded from collections and disposed of because of their poor quality materials and construction. For an art library, where obsolescence is rarely an issue, the 20th- and 21st-century book can be a problem. Rare and seminal works in our collections are crumbling because they are acidic or perhaps they just cannot withstand the handling (and photocopying). We have become alert to the conservation of books from the hand-press period, but do not always know what to do with recent publications, or we cannot afford to undertake the measures necessary. As the artist's book as an art form reaches its 50th birthday, we highlight the conservation of one such volume, in hopes of opening up discussion about the care of our contemporary treasures.

Conservation evokes images of old manuscripts and books with elegant leather bindings and gold tooling, but an art library has to deal with both the old and the new. Just as contemporary art challenges paintings, sculpture and new media conservators, the materials and structures of many contemporary books pose questions for their conservators. Artists' books are a good example, where the artist's intent needs to be preserved as does the book's individual history, and the book must be accessible to library readers. However, its structure may be inherently weak or the materials used may be of a poor quality, unable to withstand the rigours of handling in a teaching collection.

So how do we approach the conservation of modern books? Often the answer is to acquire another copy, but that is not always either desirable or possible, particularly in relation to artists' books. This article arose out of a Master's project undertaken by Ana Paula Hirata Tanaka (APHT) on behalf of the library at Chelsea College of Art & Design, University of the Arts London, and presentations Ana made of her work, followed by

conversations between her, the commissioning librarian, Gustavo Grandal Montero (GGM), and a special collections librarian, Erica Foden-Lenahan (EFL). Erica is interested in the dialogue between conservators and librarians and the criteria for decision-making that are applied to modern books in comparison to those of the hand-press period. The conversations took place in a Polish restaurant in London on 31 July and 14 August 2012, while the rest of the city was watching the Olympics.

Ana Paula studied at Camberwell College of Arts, also part of the University of the Arts London (the two colleges will be referred to as Chelsea and Camberwell from now on), during the academic year 2010-2011, for an MA in Conservation focusing on book conservation. She has been working in the field since 2000 and the MA was part of her continuing professional development. Her interest in artists' books began during her final project for a BA degree in architecture, when her focus was graphic design.

Gustavo, at that time Collection Development Librarian for Chelsea and Camberwell libraries, was

responsible for developing and promoting Special Collections of national importance, like the Artists' Books Collection (ABC) at Chelsea.

APHT: Following discussions with my tutor, and explaining my desire to work on 'something challenging', I met with Gustavo, who showed me some very interesting books needing interventive conservation work, and the *Xerox Book* was one of them. Immediately I felt that book could be the object I was looking for. It had a very interesting structural issue with regard to technical and ethical approaches in conservation. Moreover, it was the opportunity to research, discuss and work on a contemporary book (and an artwork!).

GGM: *Carl Andre, Robert Barry, Douglas Huebler, Joseph Kosuth, Sol Lewitt, Robert Morris, Lawrence Weiner*, commonly known as the *Xerox Book*, is both a catalogue and an editioned artwork, curated by Seth Siegelau, with Jack Wendler, in 1968. It was one of several important Conceptual art projects Siegelau organised in New York in 1968 and 1969.

Each of the artists produced 25 pages of original artwork using a Xerox photocopier, a relatively new technology at the time, to be presented in the form of a book. There was no exhibition in a gallery space, the book was both documentation and artwork realised in the form of a cheap paperback, with the artists engaging with the intellectual and material qualities of the book itself. However, it proved too expensive to produce in an edition of 1,000 copies using a photocopier, so the book was printed using standard offset lithography instead.

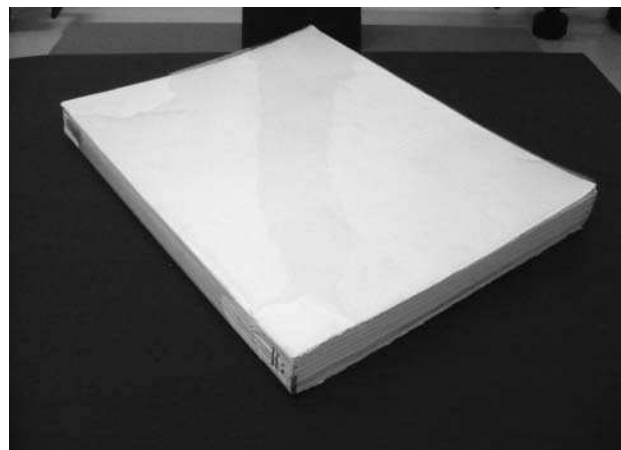
The *Xerox Book* is seen as a successful example of a 'democratic multiple', an artwork produced using technology in a large, cheap edition that could be distributed outside of traditional art market structures. This use of non-traditional or new media was characteristic of the diverse, radical practices of Conceptual, Minimalist, Fluxus, Arte Povera and other artists in the 1960s.

Chelsea has two copies of the *Xerox Book*, which are now part of the ABC. The Special Collections complement the main library collection and reflect its subject specialisms: modern and contemporary art, architecture and interior design, graphic design, and textile design. The origins of the ABC go back to 1970, when Clive Phillpot started to collect systematically, and it's now a resource of national and international importance, documenting the involvement of contemporary artists with the book as a form of artistic practice since the late 1950s. The majority of titles were acquired around the time of production, not retrospectively. Back then they were part of the main collection, integrated into

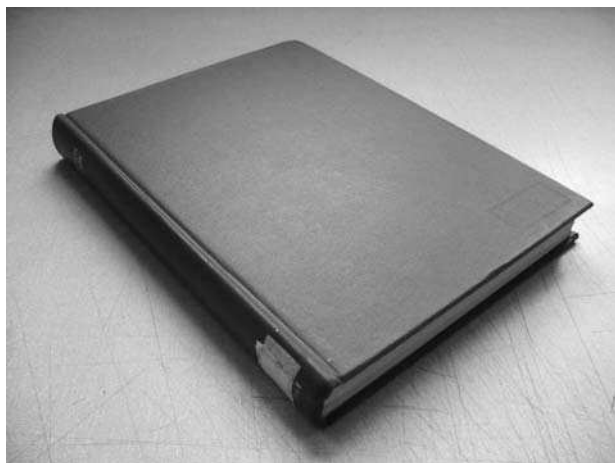
the open access stock, and interaction with them would have been the same as with any other book in the library. This reflected the philosophy of the library and the availability of inexpensive copies, but also the intentions of their makers, keen to circumvent the structures of the art system, and to produce a new type of work accessible to all.

The original book is a white paperback, with a flat-back adhesive binding, also known as a 'perfect binding', and covered in a thin, clear plastic jacket, with titling only on its spine ('Andre, Barry, Huebler, Kosuth, Lewitt, Morris, Weiner' at the top, 'Siegelau/Wendler, N.Y.' at the bottom). In the late 1970s or early 1980s our copies were re-bound in red buckram, hardback bindings, with gold titling on the spine 'Xerox Book, 1968', to protect them and extend their use. Both copies are in very good condition, despite the fact that they had been in the main collection for many years (one as a lending copy). There wasn't any significant damage to pages or cover, and their condition was stable.

The nature of the problem was different: this is an example of an historically- significant Conceptual, collaborative project. As such, it is heavily used in seminars and teaching sessions, but because of the drastic changes to its re-bound appearance, it was very difficult for students and others to understand and appreciate its conceptual and material qualities. Since we were in the fortunate position of having two copies, I had started to consider the idea of having one treated to reverse some of those changes, to make the way the book is experienced closer to the original. One copy would remain in its library binding, as an historical artefact recording in its own physical nature some of the changes that have taken place in its use, the art system, and the library. The copy could undergo further changes, in an attempt to reverse some of the effects of the previous intervention, aiming at approximating as much as



Original binding of Xerox Book. Photo©Ana Paula Hirata Tanaka, courtesy of Tate Library Collection.



Chelsea copy of *Xerox Book* before conservation.
Photo ©Ana Paula Hirata Tanaka, courtesy of Chelsea
College of Art & Design Library.



Chelsea copy of *Xerox Book* after conservation.
Photo ©Ana Paula Hirata Tanaka, courtesy of Chelsea
College of Art & Design Library.

possible the aesthetic and material qualities of the original.

APHT: I did have ethical considerations, as usual when we are assessing an object for any conservation treatment. In addition, the fact that the *Xerox Book* is an artwork raises some different concerns than those when we are dealing with a current book. But, reminding me of my answer to a question raised by Erica in my presentation at the symposium during the MA Conservation degree show – if there had been only one copy, I do not think I would have had the same interventive conservation approach, removing the red, hard cover.

GGM: I was concerned that by attempting to remove that (horrible!) red library binding, we could be erasing the history of the object and its use, and possibly compromising the intentions of the artists (having been removed from the main library

collection into a special collection, now it would be treated as a precious, almost auratic object).

EFL: With these ethical considerations in mind, what did both sides expect to get out of the project, aside from a conserved book?

GGM: We have had several years of collaboration with conservation courses at Camberwell, so when approached by Ana and her tutor looking for a suitable MA Conservation project for a student interested in artists' books, this was one among two or three I suggested. I was hoping that it would prove rich and rewarding from an academic point of view, ideally generating new interest from other students in working with contemporary materials, while technically it was of a scale that made it possible to achieve the stated objective (to reverse the effects of binding, getting one copy as close as possible to its original state) in the time frame available.

APHT: One of my expectations was to open a discussion about conservation of modern/contemporary books and the related approaches, techniques, materials and concepts. Obviously it is not a new subject within the field, but it is still at a disadvantage when compared with the body of research about conservation of mediaeval books, for example. Furthermore it seemed interesting given the collections of modern and artists' books spread throughout the University's libraries.

This conservation project would not have been possible without Gustavo's active participation during the whole process. I was expecting to develop exactly the complementary work partnership we managed to build, each professional exchanging their knowledge and experience; both working together to accomplish the best and the most appropriate treatments for the books and the collection.

EFL: As you were both on the same wavelength regarding your expectations of the project, what was the process you adopted?

APHT: As stressed above, the relationship between librarian/curator and conservator should be complementary in any conservation treatment. Since the beginning of the *Xerox Book* conservation project, this professional partnership was built with confidence, which helped to keep the discussions open in order to find the most suitable treatment and solution for that book. For the treatment proposal, firstly, I needed to contextualise the book, collecting all the information related to the collection and that book's history and its use within the institution.

GGM: We had a series of meetings to discuss the

project, and agreed a timetable and a plan of work (in addition to conservation of the *Xerox Book*, Ana also undertook a preservation assessment survey of the ABC), all documented in her formal project proposal. We had very detailed and productive discussions about objectives and the different options available. We also talked about the work, and artists' books in general, and conservation methods and ethics.

APHT: Secondly, that information was combined with my evaluation of the book's condition itself. It was a back and forth process until we found the most appropriate treatment proposal for that book. This open discussion was maintained throughout the whole conservation treatment as well, to ensure there was consistency in the process.

GGM: Ana started work on the book during May 2011, in the conservation studios at Camberwell, and carried out her survey visits during July and August. She had a thoroughly professional approach and kept me informed of developments on a regular basis, involving me in any decisions required, and was happy to discuss ideas at length and to explain the practical and ethical issues involved from a conservator's perspective. Most librarians haven't got access to in-house conservators, and although we may have some general training in this area, being able to get specialist advice in order to make informed decisions is extremely useful.

APHT: It was decided to remove the red, hard cover and the endpapers added at the time of the rebinding and replace it with a soft white paper cover, plus a polyester dust jacket finishing the book, trying to get aesthetically close to the original binding.

The original flat-back adhesive binding would not be restored. As the current sewing structure was to be preserved, it was decided to keep the rounding of the back, rather than attempting to flatten it, maintaining that intervention as part of the history of the book and the library as well.

The cover incorporated conservation materials, it had to be suitable to the current structure of the book and also be aesthetically coherent as regards its original concept. Otherwise there was a risk of putting another 'layer' on top of the book, interfering with its reading as an artwork as had been the case with the previous red, library binding.

Gustavo's brief explained that the book is heavily used in their classes, so for me it was an essential part of the project to provide a sound, safe and hassle-free conservation housing solution. A bespoke box of corrugated board was made to fit the book and its previous red cover, in order to keep them



Detail of the original flat-back adhesive binding.

Photo©Ana Paula Hirata Tanaka, courtesy of Tate Library Collection.



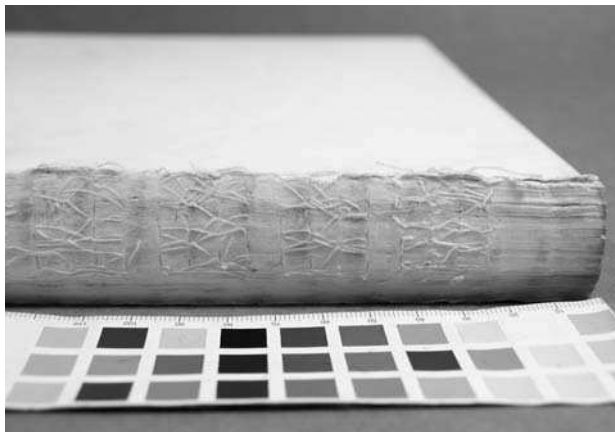
Detail of the rounded back after re-binding.

Photo©Ana Paula Hirata Tanaka, courtesy of Chelsea College of Art & Design Library.

together for reference as well.

GGM: A decision I was happy with, and where I followed Ana's advice, concerned the spine of the book. I had the general idea of reversing the changes previously made to take it back, as close as possible, to its original state. But when it was re-bound in boards, the pages had been sewn together in gatherings, and a rounded spine was created. Ana convinced me that removing the threads, let alone cutting the gutter margin, was a bad idea from a structural standpoint and also from a collection use perspective, as it would be an irreversible change that would compromise its historical integrity. In spite of the round back, it still looks quite similar to a paperback; it's not something that gets easily noticed, and it doesn't get in the way of teaching. No lettering was added to the new paperback spine

cover, also to try to retain its authenticity as an artefact.



Detail of the sewing after re-binding.

Photo©Ana Paula Hirata Tanaka, courtesy of Chelsea College of Art & Design Library.

EFL: A year on are you both still happy with the treatment or, with the benefit of hindsight, do you think you would have done the same thing?

APHT: I think the result achieved is appropriate to the book from a conservation point of view, and it is also aesthetically suitable. It preserved the content's accessibility, kept its structure (which was a key point at the beginning), and created a suitable cover.

So far, I do not think I would have done anything differently. As a conservator, I am pleased with the result as outlined above and, very importantly, so is the librarian/curator. I think we managed to find an appropriate response for the book regarding its conservation and curatorial contexts at that time and in those circumstances. It would be extremely useful to me and I would be very happy indeed to have their feedback regarding the use of the book after this time has passed.

GGM: I am very happy with the result. The book is used in seminars and other sessions and, almost a year after the conservation work, is still in perfect shape. Even more important from the perspective of my initial concerns, students and other users can now have a much fuller engagement with the book, and interact with it in a way that is almost exactly the same as before it was re-bound. As an art object, its material and aesthetic qualities are interrelated, and thanks to Ana's work users have a much better appreciation of both, without erasing its history, and that of its use within the library collection.

A user's experience of the book is now close to that of the original: the only physical differences are in the spine area, allowing for a much better appreciation of the concepts and techniques behind

it, while at the same time retaining its history in those physical changes that haven't been reversed. In a way, you could see this compromise as mirroring the original one regarding its production: the use of offset printing instead of a photocopier.

EFL: I have asked you both before whether you would do anything differently if Chelsea had only owned one copy and you both said you would not have attempted to return the book to its original look, because that would have destroyed the post-production history of the book and it still functioned well. Now that we have had all these discussions, and given that the book is an integral part of the object as an artwork, do you still feel you wouldn't remove the earlier re-binding?

GGM: You cannot avoid the aesthetic issues, it is not just the structural and technical issues. Aesthetics are essential to the discussion. We talked about the restoration of buildings, there is the engineering, the structural, and the aesthetics. And I think there is a parallel with artists' books.

APHT: Aesthetics can be seen as superficial in book conservation, important but not the main issue. We need to have this debate. We often think more about the content and as a book this was in perfect condition, but as an artwork, it was not.

GGM: I don't know, as I think more about it, if we had only had one copy, I'm not sure I want to revise my original reply but ... I'd like more time to think about it. It makes the decision more difficult to take, we would have to think harder about it; you would be losing the history of the binding and its place in the collection and that is a lot. But you are gaining an understanding of the original aesthetic and I think in the context of an academic, teaching collection, as a reversible intervention it is probably still a good idea to do it.

APHT: I have to think about it and it would depend on the collection. That solution was tailored to that specific case, collection, and context. Usually we have this approach when dealing with conservation treatments.

It is clear from the discussions that there are many considerations for both conservator and librarian/curator when undertaking conservation. It is also clear that the treatment of the book would not be acceptable in all situations. They had to make a decision about the trade-off of the authenticity of the original over its post-production history. Conservation, particularly in small collections, can be a hurried affair, perhaps in an end-of-year spend. This is not conducive to the considered decision-making and dialogue between conservator and

librarian/curator that many books require and deserve. In this particular situation, they favoured a defence of the original aesthetic, but in another

collection that simply would not be the primary nor the most appropriate concern.

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