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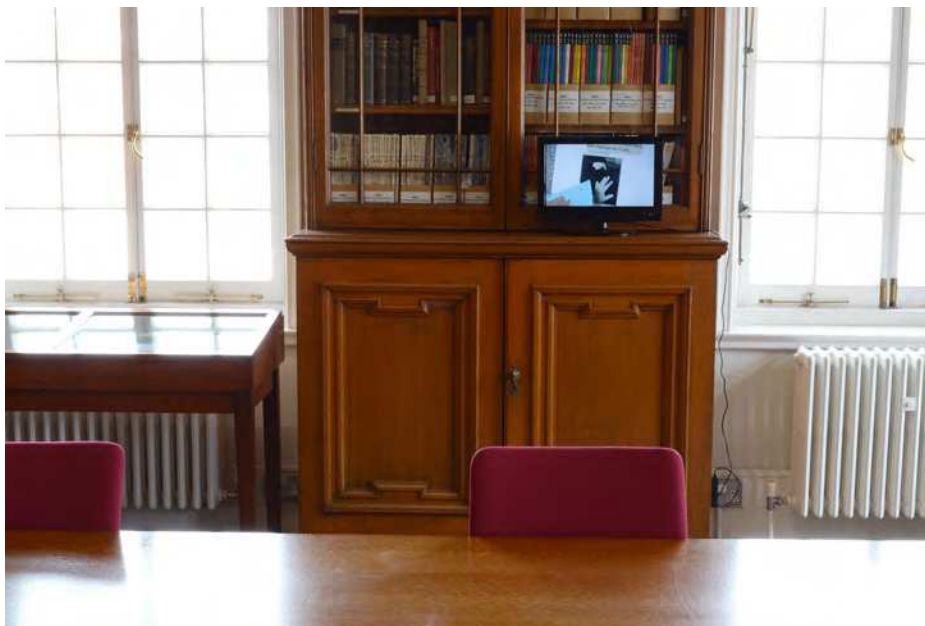
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Melanie Counsell, *recto/verso*, 2013



Joëlle Tuerlinckx, still from *LECTURE on Work, Word, World, Progress? 1032 pictures*, 2012



Joëlle Tuerlinckx, *LECTURE on Work, Word, World, Progress? 1032 pictures*, 2012

*'some undisclosed points of remove'*  
*Reflections on a library exhibition*

Vicky Falconer

The resurgence of interest in artists' publications over the last few years is now widely documented. One sign of this phenomenon is the increase in the number of exhibitions devoted to, or featuring, books by artists. The proliferation of such outcomes, not including the many book fairs that take place each year, extends not only to libraries or museums, as it might have done previously, but also to galleries and all manner of other art spaces. This article reflects on my own recent experience of putting on just one project within this growing and increasingly diverse field: *some undisclosed points of remove*, a site-responsive project at Chelsea College of Art & Design Library, showing publications as well as mixed-media artworks by Melanie Counsell, Sara MacKillop, Anne Tallentire, Sabine Tholen and Joëlle Tuerlinckx.<sup>1</sup>

The project took place in the Old College Library, a traditional wood-panelled, balconied room that adjoins the College's main 'new' library, and was originally the library of the Royal Army Medical College whose extended buildings Chelsea inhabits today.<sup>2</sup> Functioning primarily as a silent study space, with closed access storage on the upper level for collection items including rare books and the college archives, it is a large and atmospheric room with great potential for intervention. The library oversees a programme of exhibitions – showing everything from books and zines to sculpture and performance – and over the years there have been some extremely imaginative and exciting responses to the not insignificant challenges of the space.<sup>3</sup> Not designed for exhibitions (although adapted to include for instance vitrines and spotlights), the Old College Library has several practical limitations: lack of wall space is one, as well as the need for projects not to interfere with the day-to-day functioning of the space. But all of this just makes it more interesting to work with.

As a member of the Library's staff and a practicing artist, my original intention for the project was to bring together from the collections a selection of artists' books by five established artists whose work I admired. In doing so I hoped to introduce students, staff and other library users to artists whose practices they weren't previously aware of. The subsequent invitation to the artists to contribute an additional artwork was an opportunity to significantly extend the scope of the project, especially in regard to the potential for engagement with the context (physical, historical or other) of the Old College Library. The five artists share not only a certain sensibility in their individual approaches, marked by formal

precision and an economy of means, but an interest in the temporal dimensions, languages and politics of space, and the conditions and modes of viewing, display and dissemination. Very excitingly, three of the artists decided to make entirely new works for the show.

*Readers: Chelsea library 40413*, by Anne Tallentire, was, as the title suggests, specific not only to Chelsea but to the workings of the Library on a specific date. Tallentire collected titles and single-line page extracts from each of some sixty items on a reshelving trolley – where books already consulted were waiting to be returned to the shelves. The compiled sets of texts were printed and gluebound in two A3 piles, both placed inside one of the wooden display vitrines situated in the Old College Library. Each day, a member of staff opened the vitrine and removed two sheets, one from each pile – adding them, rolled up, to an open box from which visitors were invited to take them away.<sup>4</sup> Embodying the suggestive potential of words untethered from their original context, each text also served as an 'index': to an anonymous but significant activity of selections, predilections and rejections. A book picked up for a cursory glance, a title coveted and returned to again, or another just left behind from the day before.

Sara MacKillop's site-specific installation, like many of her previous projects, used the paraphernalia of the workplace (or library) as her material, in this case two rolls of coloured circular sticky labels. *Orange labels*, with the top end of the strip wrapped around a corner baluster, fell insouciantly to the floor where it ribboned back on itself, occasionally moving with the draught from the nearby window. *Green labels*, wound between the balcony's upper and lower balustrades, forming a vertical stroke in the space, took on something of a different character. Together the pieces responded to the structural and material detailing of the space, making it more visible. Their slight but attuned presence in a room of substantial, polished wood surfaces drew attention to the lighter cast-iron forms of the balcony. The small dots of vivid orange and green brought out the colouring right around the space: edges of boxes and spines of books, whose own juxtapositions, in turn, mark, codify and enliven the space.

Melanie Counsell's *recto/verso* turned lens-based imagery into sculptural installation. At one end of a roll of white paper, running the length of one of three large study tables that intersect the space, a large-format colour print depicted an old school window with the words "This room is an" scrawled faintly onto the glass. Counsell was struck by the idea that a piece of graffiti could be directed at a space, intrigued by what that 'an' might have been. Situated within a library within an educational institution, the work highlights the role



Joëlle Tuerlinckx, *Lexicon: a compendium of terms for exhibition matters/materials*, 2012; Sara MacKillop, *Envelopes: midwinter 2010/11*, 2011; Melanie Counsell, *Annette*, 1998



Anne Tallentire, *Readers: Chelsea Library 040413*, 2013; Sara MacKillop, *Orange Labels*, 2013



Anne Tallentire, *Readers: Chelsea Library 040413*, 2013



of space as both subject and container – of structures, systems and rules (written and unwritten), and likewise of possibilities, exemptions and subversions. The view from the window, out of focus but delineating the saturated green of a lawn and the blue rectangles of painted balconies beyond, suggests a space that is open but bounded, in this sense not unlike the quadrangular parade ground which the windows of the Old College Library overlook. It is interesting to relate this work to Counsell's book, *Annette*, produced some years ago but engaged with many of the same concerns.<sup>5</sup> In nearly three hundred semi-transparent pages of inky black and white, it interweaves stills and documentation from film works and site-specific interventions made over a seven-year period. It is an extensive meditation on temporality and its resonances and the interrelation of image, material and space.



Sabine Tholen, *Ausserbinn*, 2011

Works by Joëlle Tuerlinckx and Sabine Tholen, whilst not produced specifically for the show, were selected so as to extend the site-responsive aspect of the project. Resonating with Chelsea's connection to military history, Sabine Tholen's book, *Toblerones*, documents a frontier of concrete World War II anti-tank defence structures in Switzerland.<sup>6</sup> So-called because of their triangular shape, these strange edifices appear on one page taken over by weeds, and on another with the walls of a house in perspectival range just behind. Such motifs and reference points, taken from the landscape, are central to Tholen's practice – addressing sculptural concerns around space and territory, and the dialectic between resistance and permeability. *Ausserbinn*, a photograph of a rock stabilising wall, also in Tholen's native Switzerland, is a further exploration of site as material strata. Backed up against a natural rock face are three abutting facades of white, sprayed concrete; in front is a differentiated ground surface of what appears to be worn artificial grass and grey asphalt.

In Joëlle Tuerlinckx's digital slideshow, *LECTURE on Work, Word, World, Progress? 1032 pictures*, an expansive notion of institution and archive is enacted. Part of

Tuerlinckx's recent and first large-scale retrospective, the work was produced in parallel with a series of drawings.<sup>7</sup> Newspaper cuttings appear on different backgrounds, sometimes in tandem with other collage elements, and, in a humorous parody of a lecture, details in each image are pointed to – with a painty stick, a rubber-gloved finger, or a numbered wooden rod. Panning in and out, repeating and serialising in a mock gesture towards all-encompassing coverage, the work talks volubly about display and the conveyance and containment of information. The library or archive is invoked at both micro and macro scale, from the individual institution to linked up global systems of finance and news. On the other hand, Tuerlinckx's book, *Lexicon: a compendium of terms for exhibition matters/materials*, is a glossary whose terms are defined purely for the purposes of referring to and categorising the artist's own work. Not without a touch of wry humour Tuerlinckx points back to her own archive, its workings and its idiosyncrasies.

Like the other book works in the show, *Lexicon* [...] was shown inside one of the vitrines housed in the space. Items in the artists' books collection at Chelsea, as in many libraries with similar holdings, are subject to strict preservation procedures for handling and display. At the same time, of course, it is generally agreed that vitrines are not the most conducive way for viewers to encounter books in exhibitions.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, in a project also including other artworks, an uncomfortable hierarchy might be set up between book and 'work' – the former relegated to a closed container and the latter open to detailed interaction from any number of viewing points. However, perhaps these issues are particularly applicable in gallery contexts, and mitigated somewhat within the context of a library space. Provided that the library has effective methods in place to make users aware that they can access special collections material, and how to do it, then the library itself provides the tried and tested structure for engagement and interaction (post event).<sup>9</sup> The exhibition provides a snapshot view of the published work, and the practice of the artist who produced it – thereby providing new points of access into the collection.<sup>10</sup>

The vitrines also played a role within the site-responsive focus of the project. Made specifically for the space, and having displayed college items for years, the marks and imperfections of this time are visible on the glass. In a sense this is a highly appropriate location for Sara MacKillop's book, *Faded Paper*, which reproduces sugar paper backing sheets taken from institutional noticeboards. Where things had been pinned up on the boards, sunlight had faded the uncovered areas – the left-behind, overlaid shapes appearing not unlike abstract colour-field paintings.<sup>11</sup> The final publication in the exhibition, the catalogue to Tallentire's *This, and other*

*things*, 1999-2010, was displayed with its covers shut – an inaccessible container within a container and a stark contrast to *Readers: Chelsea library 040413* which was freely available. Visitors disseminated the work, taking pieces of it away to do what they liked with and to signify whatever they wanted. Perhaps this articulates something of the inherent paradox of ‘the library’: circumscription and enclosure concurrent with openness; order alongside chance; completeness at the same time as omission and exclusion.<sup>12</sup>

This recent project at Chelsea College of Art & Design – inhabiting an intermediary space between traditional library display and a more experimental and very much site-responsive initiative – is just one example of the ways in which artists and libraries can work together on creative projects. It is certainly an area of bilateral professional activity that has been expanding for some years, with many institutions having undertaken exemplary initiatives, leading the way for others.<sup>13</sup> But it seems that there is much more to harness from mutually productive collaborations. Artists often talk very positively about their relationship with libraries;<sup>14</sup> the scope of the fantastic and diverse library holdings across the country is enormous; and, with rising expectations of service provision and value for money in a pressurised environment, libraries increasingly need to promote their collections. Resources of course are extremely tight, but this is not an insurmountable barrier. Thoughtful and experimental projects can be achieved within all sorts of scales and parameters, can interact with the library and its collections from all manner of perspectives, and can take shape in any number of different forms and media. I found the curatorial and planning process to be challenging but extremely rewarding and would definitely encourage interested library staff, creative practitioners and curators to initiate similar projects. I was truly inspired by, and most grateful for, the enthusiasm and generosity of the artists, and their willingness to negotiate constraints to contribute intelligent, sensitive and highly engaging works. I hope that the project was well received, and of interest to students and other users of Chelsea College of Art & Design Library; how to measure the success of such ventures, however, is perhaps a subject for another essay.

*Vicky Falconer* is a Library Assistant at Chelsea College of Art & Design Library, and a practicing visual artist. She is currently undertaking a part time MA in Library and Information Studies at University College London.

She has exhibited her work nationally and internationally over the last several years, including recent projects at Parallel, Oaxaca, Mexico (July - August 2013); Platform

Gallery, Kingston University, London (September - October 2012); and Concrete, Hayward Gallery, London (January - February 2012). More images of *some undisclosed points of remove* can be seen on the artist’s website at: [www.vickyfalconer.co.uk](http://www.vickyfalconer.co.uk)

#### Notes

1. *some undisclosed points of remove*, 19 April – 15 May 2013.
2. Royal Army Medical College and Regimental Mess. Construction began in 1904, with the building opened in 1907. The site was occupied by the armed forces until 1999.
3. Chelsea College of Art & Design Library operates an open exhibition proposal system, to which students and staff are able to apply at any time of year. For further details on some of the projects that have taken place (also in the libraries of Camberwell College of Art and Wimbledon College of Art) see *The show must go on, exhibitions in Chelsea Camberwell and Wimbledon Libraries*. (Chelsea, Camberwell and Wimbledon Libraries, 2010).
4. The project was a variation on Tallentire’s *Readers*, made for her solo exhibition *This, and other things, 1999-2010*, at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, 17 February – 3 May, 2010. Texts were taken from books that gallery invigilators were reading; ten compiled and bound text piles were displayed on a table from which visitors could choose the texts they wanted to take.
5. *Annette* (Matt’s Gallery, 1998)
6. *Toblerones* (Sabine Tholen, 2008)
7. The retrospective exhibition is in three parts, presented in different forms at three international institutions. It was shown at WIELS, Brussels, 22 September 2012 – 6 January 2013, and Haus der Kunst, Munich, 9 June 2013 – 29 September 2013. It will be shown at the Arnolfini, Bristol, 7 December 2013 – 9 February 2014.
8. Janet Zweig, a book artist and writer in the US, has argued persuasively and amusingly against the still pervading practice of exhibiting books in vitrines: “It’s certainly time to rethink the contemporary book exhibition; one good rule of thumb is if it’s in a vitrine and you can’t read it, it’s dead. The only thing that keeps me from being frustrated when I look at an overproduced

book lying in a glass case like a dressed up corpse is the feeling that, if it were brought out of its coffin, it might not be too lively anyway.” *Journal of Artists’ Books* (JAB), Fall 1995. No doubt similar sentiments have been expressed since then. Perhaps in a bid to circumvent some of these issues, several exhibitions in recent years have operated as a completely different kind of space: a library of freely browseable copies, a bookshop, or even a temporary publishing unit. For instance, Arnaud Desjardin’s commission for the Bloomberg space, *Comma* 38, 14 July – 27 September 2011: books were displayed in cases, alongside other titles laid out at tables for visitors to browse, and at the same time Desjardin ran an active printing press in the space.

9. Chelsea Library is proactive in embedding awareness of, and interaction with, the artists’ books collection at all levels of student experience; for a detailed overview of these strategies see Gustavo Grandal Montero, ‘Artists’ Books in Teaching and Learning’, in *The Blue Notebook* (vol.7 no.1), pp. 36-43.

10. See *Displays and Exhibitions in Art Libraries* (ARLIS, 2009); Chapter 1 ‘Why create an exhibition?’ A survey found that the promotion of collections is the main reason cited by staff for holding a library exhibition.

11. *Faded Paper* (Spike Island, 2011), produced to accompany MacKillop’s *Faded Paper* solo exhibition at Spike Island, 9 July – 4 September 2011.

12. Argentine-born bibliophile Alberto Manguel writes in *The Library at Night* (Yale University Press, 2006): “If every library is in some sense a reflection of its readers, it is also an image of that which we are not, and cannot be. [...] Every library both embraces and rejects. Every library is by definition the result of choice, and necessarily limited in its scope.” pp. 107-108.

13. One of the best known of these was the fantastic *Library Relocations* project, instigated by Book Works in 1997, with projects by selected artists including Pavel Büchler and Mel Jackson. Since then there have been many more, from both small and local contexts to projects that are more high profile. A symposium run by the University of East London on 3 June 2011, *The Artist in the Library*, introduced several such projects, initiated both by artists and libraries – including for example Uriel Orlow’s work with the Wiener Library and Jennie Savage’s work at the Lancaster Library. Glasgow School of Art has very recently launched its excellent *Hatchery* website, documenting previous projects relating to the library as well linking to information about other initiatives. [http://www2.gsa.ac.uk/library/hatchery/the-hatchery\\_01.htm](http://www2.gsa.ac.uk/library/hatchery/the-hatchery_01.htm) retrieved 5 August 2013.

14. Examples of artists talking about their formative relationships with libraries are numerous. Elizabeth Price talks effusively about her fascination with libraries and archives, her love of reading and her work post-graduation as a book fetcher at the Bodleian Library. *Research Narratives* conference, 29 October 2008, Chelsea College of Art & Design.

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